

21 March 2022



Romlie Mokak and Malcolm Roberts
Commissioners, Productivity Commission

Dear Commissioners,

Re: Housing and Homelessness Agreement Review

Further to your recent consultations with Tenants Victoria, on behalf of our organisation, I wanted to share some useful information we have gathered on the ground that lends itself to one of your lines of inquiry, that is, are the priority homelessness cohorts and homelessness priority policy areas in the NHHA the right priorities? If not, what should the priority homelessness cohorts and homelessness priority policy areas be?

With the onset of the pandemic and compounding financial impacts for many people, Tenants Victoria has identified culturally and linguistically diverse renters from multiple communities as having high unmet need in terms of access to safe, secure, and affordable housing. While this is a notably under-researched area of housing policy, our anecdotal evidence is further informed by the Consumer Policy Research Centre (CPRC), which found in November 2020 that “CALD renters were about four times as (more) likely to report negative experiences with landlords”.

Since October 2020, Tenants Victoria have consulted with 118 CALD groups in Victoria as part of our slate of community engagement activities which includes offering training on rental rights for multicultural community workers, specialist housing workers, lawyers, and others. We are also undertaking a small ongoing pilot to address what has been identified as ‘rental racism’ as a barrier to entry into the private rental market among Victorian South Sudanese community members residing in Melbourne’s outer western suburbs. One renter, a community worker herself, sums up the everyday struggles in Melbourne's West among this cultural cohort thus: “You have to change your name to even view the rental house. I work full time; I have income and yet I have to change my name... We need help for our housing”.

Another community member told us: “Real estate agents will not speak to an African girl who dresses well, will not even give her the application form even when she has a full-time job...”

The community organisations we have consulted with include the South Sudanese Mothers Coalition of Victoria, CSG - Community Support Group Wyndham Vale and Melton (auspiced by Centre for



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Safe, secure, and affordable homes

Multicultural Youth), the Edmund Rice Foundation, the Sudd Foundation, the Society of South Sudanese Professionals, Foundation House Sudanese Mamas Group, the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, and the Victorian Multicultural Commission.

Tenants Victoria has a small team of community workers who are currently engaged in direct liaison with multicultural communities experiencing rental stress, our approach is grassroots-based. The following anonymised case studies that have come to our attention from speaking directly to a range of community workers in western Melbourne engaging with South Sudanese background renters and may be of further interest to the Commission's inquiry:

South Sudanese renters' experiences of housing in Melbourne

Story 1

- 'Grace' is in her late 40s, a single mother with five children and a victim-survivor family violence.
- After separating from her husband, she had been initially renting with all her children. Reliant on income support payments, Grace and her family have had to often choose between food and paying the rent. She was subsequently evicted from the family home they had rented for 5 years. She states she was evicted because the landlord accused her of damaging the rented home. Grace disagrees with the landlord's claims, but she has minimal rental education or means to justify her objections to the landlord's claims.
- In 2021, Grace was then able to secure another rented home from her real estate agent. This property included a defective toilet and other substandard which precipitated two of her older teenage children leaving the house to live with family friends. She subsequently could not afford to pay the rent on this home because she had not been regularly working. She was evicted again, and the family became homeless. The family are now 'couch surfing' in Melbourne, and unable so far to secure another home.

Story 2

- 'Betty' is a single mother with seven children, ranging from high school to preschool age. The family rent a public housing high-rise flat with three bedrooms.
- Recently, a large water leak spurted from the flat upstairs and the rented home became uninhabitable. The family was relocated to a hotel while repairs were to be undertaken, however Betty says no action has been taken to return the family to the home even after three months. She says authorities have responded to the crisis by moving the family from one hotel to another hotel, yet she wants to return to the home.
- Betty says she is under significant stress. She seeks a stable home for her family and the highly disruptive hotel arrangements are not conducive to family life or schooling. She is also looking for paid work but her living situation is adversely affecting her job prospects.

Story 3

- 'Asunta' has lived with her elderly mother and five children in a rented home in the private rental market for the past four years. Some five months ago, the landlord informed the family that they wanted the house back, offering them 3-months' notice. No reason was offered. He has served them with two notice to vacate letters and many verbal warnings.
- Asunta and her family have since been actively searching for a rental property, but the family have been rejected for more than 15 properties applied for over the course of five months of searching in a highly competitive housing market in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. The family is facing housing precarity as Asunta has also lost her job and struggling to secure shift work which suit the care needs for the family.

I hope this supplementary information will be of assistance to your inquiry.

Your sincerely,

Farah Farouque
Director of Community Engagement
Tenants Victoria