

ECCV submission to the Pathways to a fair and sustainable social housing system July 2012

Feedback form

This is another version of the survey questions which were released on 30 April 2012. This has been drawn up in response to requests from the community. These questions cover those that were asked in the original feedback form. You can use this form to provide your response to the Victorian Government's **'Pathways to a fair and sustainable social housing system' – Public consultation discussion paper.**

You can mail your feedback form to:

Department of Human Services
Housing Framework Consultation
GPO Box 4057
Melbourne VIC 3001

If you have internet access, you can provide your feedback on-line through the DHS website at www.dhs.vic.gov.au.

The Department intends to produce a summary report of the submissions received. This is expected to bundle up data so that you will not be identifiable. Any data collected will be treated in line with the Department's privacy policy which is available at www.dhs.vic.gov.au/privacy-statement

Your details

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Which group do you identify yourself as belonging to?

- I am a public housing tenant
- I am a person who is on the public housing waiting list
- I am a member of the general public
- I am employed with the housing or homelessness sector
- I am employed with a community group (specifically Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria)
- Other/none of the above

Do you identify as belonging to one or more of the following groups?

- Aboriginal
- I use a language other than English (and represent those who use a language other than English)
- I am a person with a disability
- I am an older person (over 65 years)
- I do not wish to identify as any one of these groups

Your feedback

A note on terms used in these questions: 'Social housing' includes both 'Public' and 'Community' housing. Public housing is housing owned and managed by the State Government, while Community housing is managed by not-for-profit registered housing agencies and housing providers for affordable housing purposes.

1. What is the role of government?

a. What should the future of social housing look like (note that social housing includes public housing and community housing)?

This submission is made by the New and Emerging Communities Policy Sub-Committee of Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV), a peak organisation with about 200 members representing Victoria's culturally diverse and non-English speaking population.

ECCV advocates and lobbies all levels of government on behalf of Victoria's multicultural communities in areas such as human rights, access and equity, improving services, racism and discrimination, community harmony, employment, education and training, health and community services, disability, child protection law and justice, and arts and culture.

Our New and Emerging Communities' Policy Sub-Committee acts as an advocacy body for people from new and emerging communities and refugee backgrounds. It provides a voice for people from new and emerging communities to communicate with government and decision-makers on issues that assist with their successful settlement and quality of life.

ECCV appreciates the Victorian Government's consultation on public housing reforms and welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the public consultation on *Pathways to a Fair and Sustainable Social Housing System* by the Department of Human Services.

ECCV would like to see Victoria's future public housing sector respond appropriately to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse groups within the Victorian population and especially:

- people with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds
- community members living on the fringe of society, particularly youth from non-English speaking backgrounds
- older people from non-English speaking backgrounds

ECCV notes that low income and socially disadvantaged communities such as refugees are among the most disadvantaged when it comes to access to safe and affordable accommodation that meets their needs.

ECCV is aware that young unaccompanied males from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, especially those in their late teens, experience difficulties obtaining foster care and require affordable housing combined with support to find education, employment and adapt to life in Australia.

ECCV points out that the majority of full aged pensioners in Victoria are from a non-English speaking background. They are finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet due to the rising cost of food, utilities and essential services. This puts some older people from non-English speaking backgrounds who are renting at risk of homelessness.

b. The Victorian Government owns and manages 65,000 properties. Should the Government own and manage such a large number of homes if other organisations could provide better services to tenants?

ECCV believes the government has a key role to play in facilitating housing resources, partnerships and regulation compliance that are specifically targeted at supporting disadvantaged people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Social housing projects that would benefit people in Victoria's multicultural community are in the three areas of:

- Public housing managed by the government in partnership with ethnic and multicultural welfare organisations
- Community housing managed by not-for-profit ethnic, multicultural and multifaith community organisations
- Transitional housing owned by the State and managed by multicultural and refugee welfare organisations

ECCV believes that the community-based housing sector is well placed to develop more flexible options for on-arrival housing and can play a greater role in providing longer-term housing. This would facilitate the development of local support partnerships and more culturally responsive services tailored to tenant needs and assisting refugees and newly arrived migrants to adjust to life in Victoria.

ECCV advocates for long-term housing opportunities for people from refugee backgrounds.

ECCV advocates that the government plays a stronger role in improving the financial viability of community housing providers. The Government should also have an overarching role in responsibility for regulating housing associations, and especially for setting minimum housing standards.

ECCV recommends an increase in transitional residential cluster housing for people with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, in partnership with English language services and migrant resource centres as they have the expertise to respond to their broader culturally diverse needs.

c. Should community housing take on a greater ownership or management role?

ECCV believes that people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds require time to adjust and absorb information about living in Australia. In their initial years of arrival they receive settlement support, after which they need to rely on their own resources.

ECCV feedback indicates that some recent refugees from the Middle East and Africa regions experience discrimination in the private rental market. Many are victims of unscrupulous landlord behaviour regarding unfair housing repairs, unwarranted evictions as well as home ownership scams. They are severely disadvantaged in finding suitable housing. Obtaining safe and secure long-term accommodation is important to enable them to find work education and adjust to living in Australia.

ECCV emphasises that adequate resources should be made available to assist community housing to play a greater management role in affordable housing provision for people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

ECCV advocates a community-based cluster model of residential accommodation for refugee and new migrant entrants during both an initial and extended settlement period. This would facilitate the provision of settlement services and information.

ECCV believes that people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds would benefit from an increase in transitional housing that is linked to multicultural welfare organisations with increased opportunities for extended stay as well as advocacy support to find affordable independent housing of adequate standards.

d. How can we be sure that public housing is provided to those with the highest priorities and that it meets their needs?

Australia via its humanitarian entrance program receives large numbers of people from African and war-torn countries. Many of these people have experienced displacement, emotional abuse, trauma and grief which severely impacted on their ability and eligibility to obtain and retain adequate housing. ECCV believes it is important that social housing provides an important safety net to meet their needs.

ECCV receives community feedback that additional targeted support is needed to complement and go beyond the designated HSS (Humanitarian Settlement Strategy) and SGP (Settlement Grant Program) 'settlement support' provided by the Australian Government in the first five years of settlement in Australia. ECCV notes that asylum seekers are not eligible for such support whilst their visa application is being determined. Many refugee entrants received limited housing support from the SGP providers.

ECCV family violence research indicates that women and children from non-English speaking backgrounds are at risk of homelessness and require access to crisis accommodation support and culturally responsive services.

ECCV recommends that the Victorian Government ensures easier access to crisis housing that is safe and secure for culturally diverse individuals and families with urgent needs.

ECCV recommends that the Victorian Government's public housing sector work in partnership with ethnic and multicultural community housing and not-for-profit groups to provide social housing targeted at people from refugee backgrounds.

e. How can the public housing sector work more effectively with other groups, such as community organisations, to better meet the needs of tenants and the community?

Ethnic, refugee and multicultural community organisations are in touch with the needs of disadvantaged people from refugee and culturally diverse backgrounds. They understand the complexity of health, welfare and settlement support required by such clients. These organisations have the skills and expertise to deliver culturally responsive programs.

ECCV recommends that the Victorian Government public housing sector to work closely with such community agencies to provide secure and affordable housing as well culturally responsive advocacy support to eventually move into the private housing market.

2. How could the allocation of public housing be made fairer?

a. How can the allocation of limited public housing stock be made fairer?

ECCV highlights relevant housing issues in the evidence-based report: *Making it Home – Refugee Housing in Melbourne's West* (Berta 2012, Footscray Community Legal Centre). Its findings indicate that people from non-English speaking backgrounds in public and social housing experience considerable difficulties in finding and transitioning to affordable rental properties.

ECCV believes community housing would provide better and more tailored support for people from non-English speaking backgrounds to enable them to transition to independent housing.

ECCV recommends that people from refugee backgrounds receive one-to-one advocacy support to assist them to find private rental properties that are of a minimum acceptable living standard.

b. Should public housing tenancies be reviewed from time to time (such as eligibility and length of stay)?

When considering eligibility and length of stay in public housing of people from refugee backgrounds, ECCV notes that the report *Making it Home: Refugee Housing in Melbourne's West (Berta 2012)* highlights extreme difficulties and disadvantage that they face in the open rental market. That report provides examples of the impact on refugees of unethical and unlawful behaviour of landlords regarding repairs, unfair eviction, withholding bonds and increased vulnerability to home ownership scams.

ECCV recommends that public housing authorities provide tenancy rights education and advocacy support to tenants from refugee backgrounds to assist their transition to safe and secure private rental housing and affordable home ownership.

c. If public housing tenancies are reviewed, how often should this happen?

ECCV community feedback indicates that housing tenants often do not have a good understanding of their legal rights and responsibilities concerning, tenure, repairs, and bonds.

ECCV recommends that public housing tenants from non-English speaking backgrounds receive information about their legal rights and housing review procedures in languages other than English and in a variety of appropriate media so that they are well prepared for reviews.

d. How can Government support tenants to make the move from public housing into community housing or into the private rental market? (For example bond assistance, rental brokerage?)

People from refugee backgrounds, especially those who experienced trauma and hardship prior to arriving in Australia; require advocacy support to find secure housing beyond their public housing tenure as they are often victims of unethical landlords. Many tenants from culturally diverse backgrounds are seriously financially disadvantaged and require free assistance and support regarding housing rights education.

ECCV supports and proposes the recommendations of the Making it Home report (Berta 2012), as follows, to facilitate the move to private rental housing for people from culturally diverse backgrounds:

That the State Government provides "a bond loan policy that allows more flexible repayment arrangements of bond loan debts which do not automatically disentitle an applicant to a new bond loan" (Berta 2012:4, Recommendation 1b).

That a greater allocation of Housing Establishment Fund grants be must made available to assist individuals and families at risk of homelessness" (Berta 2101:4 Recommendation 1d).

3. How could the public housing system be made more flexible?

a. How can we encourage tenants who are ready to become independent to move into the private housing market?

ECCV is aware that tenants from culturally diverse backgrounds and from refugee backgrounds sometimes have large families and live in extended families. Many refugees have experienced extreme hardship in their countries of origin and are trying to cope with mental illness. They would therefore be further disadvantaged if they were required to vacate their public housing in the short-term.

In addition ECCV is aware that older people from non-English speaking backgrounds are often familiar with a local area and would be more disadvantaged and socially isolated if they were to move into a different geographical locality.

ECCV recommends that the public housing system provides culturally responsive and flexible support to enable these tenants to adapt to living in Victoria and access the appropriate health, employment and aged care services.

4. How could tenure be made fairer?

ECCV notes that the *National Anti-Racism Strategy Consultation Report* (July 2012) identifies housing as one of its four key priorities. As part of its strategies it proposes to take on the recommendations of the Footscray Community Legal Centre in its 'Making It Home' report (Berta 2012, accessible at http://www.footscrayclc.org.au/images/stories/Tenancy_Report.pdf).

ECCV further notes "refugees experience homelessness and rental market difficulties at alarming rates" (Berta 2012:3).

ECCV supports the Making it Home (Berta 2012) recommendations:

That funding is provided for specialist housing assistance that meets the needs of refugees in areas of higher density refugee settlement.

a. Should tenants who have the potential to become self-sufficient, through training or employment for example, be offered a more limited tenancy arrangement (length of stay)?

ECCV advocates public housing takes into account complex cases of hardship and disadvantage of people from new and emerging communities and provide a more flexible approach to long-term tenure.

ECCV believes social housing should be available to former refugees who are moving beyond their initial settlement support eligibility. Without adequate housing they will be disadvantaged in their ability to obtain employment, enrol in education and training and in their attempts to access health and aged care support.

ECCV notes that refugees face significant disadvantage in the housing market due to language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, lack of access to housing and tenancy information and sometime suffer various forms of discrimination. To assist them to find suitable private housing they would benefit from advocacy that is:

- Face-to-face
- Physically accessible
- Able to provide case work and VCAT representation
- Culturally appropriate, responsive and trusted by refugee communities
- Engaged with local settlement service and relevant community agencies

ECCV recommends that the public housing sector establishes tenancy advocacy services that are appropriately tailored to the needs of refugees (Berta 2012:5, recommendation 3).

b. If more limited tenancy arrangements were introduced for tenants who had the potential to move into other forms of housing, what length of stay should be offered?

ECCV is aware that housing assistance for people from refugee backgrounds is grossly inadequate in Victoria therefore flexible arrangement should allow people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds to live in public housing arrangements for extended periods of time.

5. How can public housing be made fairer for tenants?

a. What measures could Government take to ensure that tenant's involvement in work, education or training is encouraged?

ECCV is aware that people from new and emerging communities with refugee backgrounds often have complex case needs.

ECCV recommends that tenancy education to refugee communities is developed via partnerships between legal community-based service providers, Australian Government settlement services and the Victorian Government public housing sector.

b. Should the allocation of a public housing tenancy recognise a tenant's short term needs, such as education and training?

ECCV has feedback that it is not humane to separate housing issues from the work, health and education needs of people from culturally diverse backgrounds. In most cases safe and secure housing impacts on all other aspects of a person's life, therefore it makes sense for the public housing sector to facilitate general support to assist refugees to adapt to their new lifestyle.

ECCV recommends that the public housing sector should facilitate partnerships with multicultural, ethnic and welfare organisations to provide education, training and information about services, and tenancy rights to assist the long-term settlement of people who came to Victoria as humanitarian arrivals.

6. How can public housing be made fairer for the Victorian community?

a. What obligations should we expect tenants to meet in return for living in public housing?

ECCV emphasises that housing clients from non-English speaking backgrounds require culturally appropriate and timely tenancy education if they are expected to meet their tenancy obligations.

b. Are there any issues in the public housing system that would be a barrier for tenants to participate in education and training?

ECCV notes that barriers limiting the participation of former refugees in education and training are varying levels of English language proficiency, lack of access to information about services and rights, lack of culturally responsive service provision and negative attitudes of discrimination.

ECCV recommends that the public housing system facilitate and resource the development of culturally responsive housing support and tenancy information provision for tenants and clients from non-English speaking backgrounds.

7. What could be done to encourage tenants' good behaviour?

a. What could be introduced to encourage public housing tenants to keep their properties at an acceptable standard and act as a 'good neighbour'?

ECCV would like to see the provision of culturally responsive tenancy education targeted at refugee communities and developed in partnership with community legal services and refugee welfare groups.

People from refugee backgrounds sometimes resist contact with government authorities due negative experiences with authorities prior to and during their migration journeys. They would benefit from projects that develop their trust in Victorian Government housing authorities.

ECCV recommends that the development of community education resources about tenancy rights and refugee home ownership be facilitated by the Victorian Government and that these be available in a variety of media formats and feature culturally responsive approaches.

b. How can the good behaviour of tenants, maintenance of property and participation in the community be rewarded?

ECCV is aware that former refugees and asylum seekers are often financially disadvantaged.

ECCV recommends monetary rewards, such as timely bond refunds, for good property maintenance would be appropriate as would be extensions of tenure in public housing.

8. How can the supply of quality social housing be improved?

a. How can issues relating to the supply of quality social housing be addressed?

ECCV agrees with the discussion papers related to this submission that public housing has long waiting lists and has difficulty adequately meeting the public demand. Nevertheless, ECCV emphasises that people from refugee backgrounds have a high risk of homelessness and often find themselves living in unacceptable housing conditions that are not hygienic, safe or secure.

ECCV recommends that the public housing sector explore ways to facilitate partnerships with community housing to improve availability and access to housing for those in need.

b. How can the supply of social housing be made more sustainable?

ECCV recommends partnerships between public and community housing sectors to improve housing arrangements in Victoria.

c. What can the Government and the community housing sector do to attract investment in community housing?

ECCV encourages the Victorian Government to explore innovative models that would increase the supply of community housing for people from non-English speaking backgrounds and especially those with refugee backgrounds.

ECCV recommends that older people from non-English speaking backgrounds who find themselves in need of public and social housing be able to remain living in their familiar local areas.

d. What are the different types of properties that should be offered to meet the demand and needs of tenants?

Some families from new and emerging communities live in large extended families and require adequate housing.

ECCV recommends that minimum standards be maintained in public housing properties and that housing of varying sizes is available to larger families.

e. How can the community housing sector improve the way that it operates to ensure that it can provide housing over the long term?

ECCV acknowledges that public housing in Victoria is ageing and often in a poor state of repair. ECCV also acknowledges the valuable contribution of public housing to Victorians, including for those from culturally diverse backgrounds. There is however evidence that the Office of Housing does not consistently maintain its image as a 'model landlord'. ECCV is aware of evidence where the Government Departments did not take complaints of culturally diverse residents seriously, did not adequately explain complaints processes and nor did they provide timely repairs and maintenance.

ECCV is concerned that whilst only a limited numbers of people from refugee backgrounds are in public housing in the western suburbs of Melbourne, there is a disproportionate number of VTAC hearings related to public housing tenancy disputes (Berta 2012:60). In some cases the Office of Housing and the Department of Human Services did not provide adequate information to tenants from non-English speaking backgrounds about arrears, compensation and eviction.

In addition ECCV is aware that many people from non-English speaking backgrounds and especially those from refugee backgrounds fall into loan debts due to inappropriate loan assessments and a lack of financial literacy (Berta 2012:65).

ECCV supports the recommendations of the Making it Home report regarding public housing keeping up high standards of maintenance and timely repairs.

ECCV recommends that "DHS needs to implement procedures to ensure housing officers are acting in accordance with their obligations as 'model litigants' including fairly and promptly, avoiding legal proceedings and resolving matters by agreement where possible" (Making it Home report Berta 2012:7 Recommendation 9a)

ECCV recommends that DHS improves its "procedures for dealing with requests for repairs (from culturally diverse tenants) in particular urgent repairs posing a risk to health and safety." (Making it Home report Berta 2012:7 Recommendation 9b)

General response

If you wish to provide any further feedback about public housing eligibility, allocation, tenure or rent policies or make a submission about how the financial sustainability of the social housing system can be improved, please include it here.