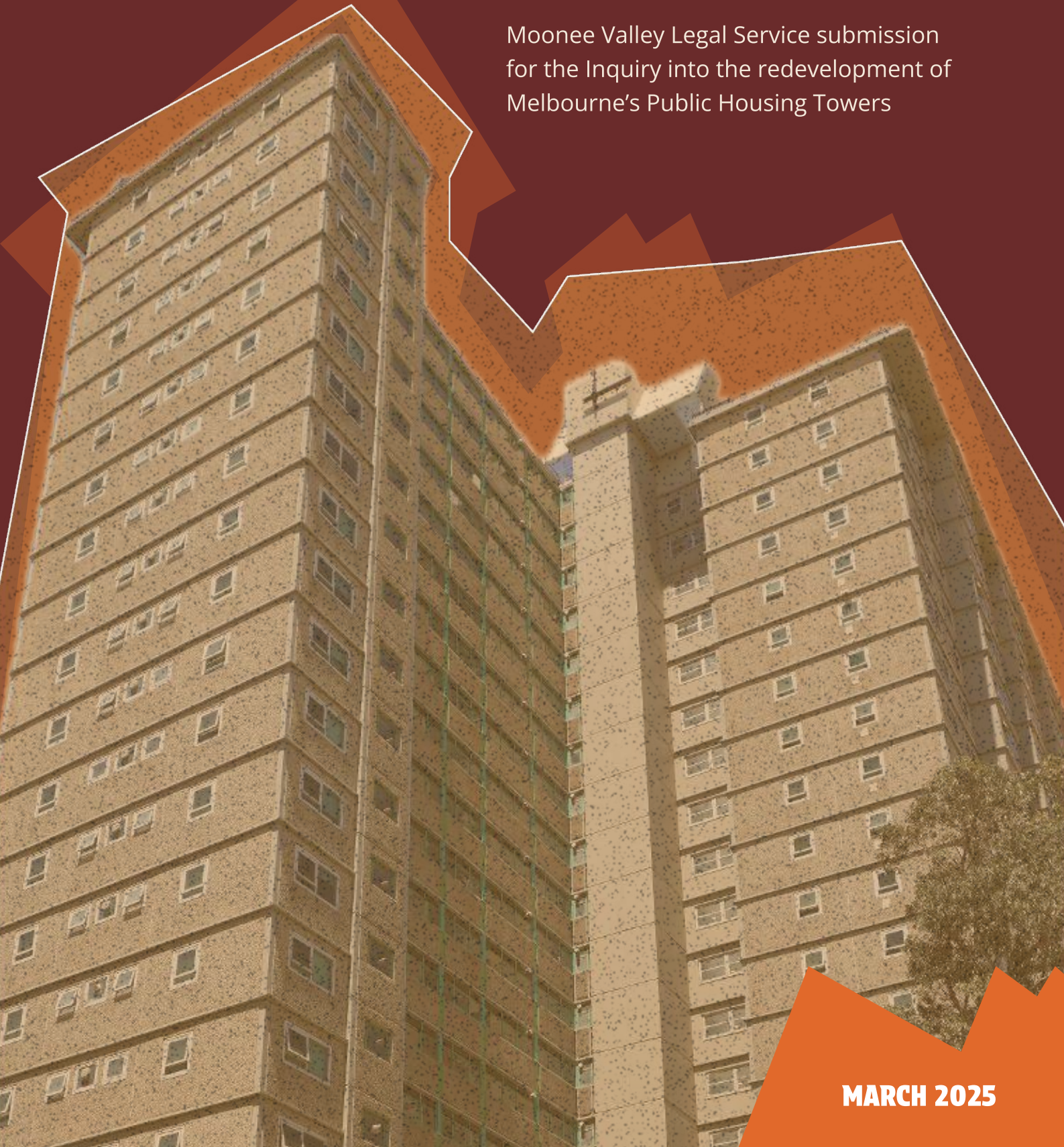


# **“I feel safe here. This is my home.”**

Moonee Valley Legal Service submission  
for the Inquiry into the redevelopment of  
Melbourne's Public Housing Towers



**MARCH 2025**

MVLS would like to acknowledge the authors of this report:

**The Bicultural Workers**  
**Ilo Diaz**  
**Kowthar Yussuf**  
**Meron Tesfaye**  
**Priya Kunjan**



This report seeks to amplify the voices and lived experiences of residents of the Flemington Towers Public Housing Estate. It would not have been possible without their generosity in sharing their stories and community with us. Moonee Valley Legal Service (MVLS) extends its thanks to the residents and acknowledges the strength and vibrancy of the Flemington Towers community.

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Report layout by: Marisa Watson [marisa.a.watson@gmail.com](mailto:marisa.a.watson@gmail.com)

Drawings of the flats provided by: Kate Parker

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This report acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation, the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we serve. We pay our respects to Elders, past and present.



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About

# Moonee Valley Legal Service

Moonee Valley Legal Service (MVLS) is a community legal centre situated in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne, in the City of Moonee Valley. Established in 1985, MVLS operates as an independent, community managed, non-profit organisation. As part of our commitment to social justice and equality, MVLS works to empower vulnerable members of our community and assist them in navigating complex systems. A key part of this work is amplifying the voices of local residents and providing legal assistance on a range of matters including family law, housing problems, fines and infringements and criminal law. MVLS also runs outreach services in the City of Melbourne, covering the suburbs of Flemington and North Melbourne where the public housing estates including the 33 Alfred Street, 12 Holland Court, and 120 Racecourse Road high-rise buildings are located.

In 2021 MVLS launched the Bicultural Worker Program (BWP), a program for the local community with a focus on the Flemington and Ascot Vale public housing estates. The Bicultural Workers are key resources for these public housing estate communities due to their lived experiencing of living and working in the local community. They speak the same languages as residents and have cultural expertise relevant to the community. The Bicultural Workers function as an access point for legal and social support and engage in advocacy on residents' behalf.





# Introduction

The planned demolition of public housing towers in Flemington and North Melbourne has sparked significant concern among estate residents, who feel that their voices are not being heard in decision-making about their homes. These residents' concerns have directly driven the production of this submission. Six months after the Victorian Government's release of Victoria's Housing Statement in September of 2023, it was announced that a parliamentary inquiry would be held to investigate the decision to demolish and redevelop Melbourne's public housing towers. Since the announcement, the BWP has become increasingly aware of

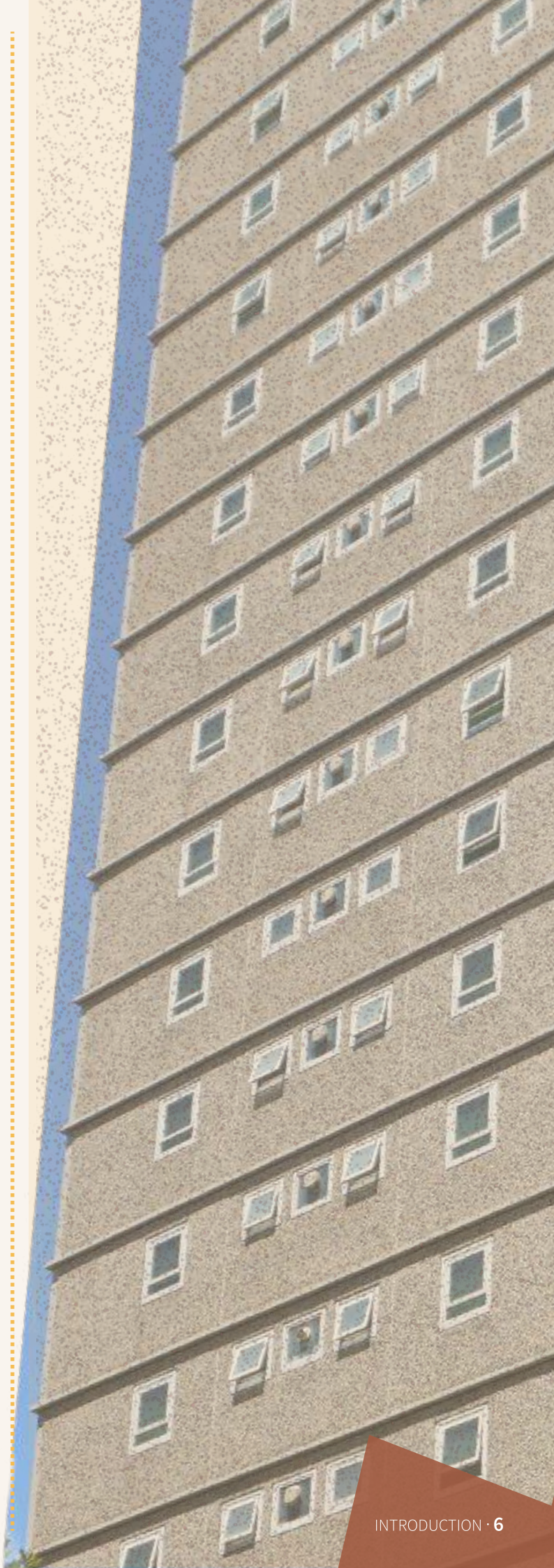
the fact that residents of the Flemington and North Melbourne public housing estates hold concerns relevant to the inquiry. Because of this, MVLS initiated a project to capture residents' voices to present to the parliamentary inquiry into the redevelopment of the towers.

Residents' stories were captured by MVLS' team of Bicultural Workers. The initial aim of this project was to facilitate residents' participation in the parliamentary inquiry by assisting them to submit their personal stories directly to the committee. The parliamentary inquiry process as it was initially structured

presented significant barriers to resident participation, particularly for those with limited English proficiency, technological access, or prior experience with formal submissions. Concerned that a failure to cater to these needs would effectively silence many residents' voices, MVLS shifted its approach towards collating residents' stories and submitting this report directly to the Committee to ensure that their voices are heard.

This submission addresses Terms of Reference (ToR) c(i), the findings and adequacy of consultations with public housing tower residents and their representatives; c(ii), the findings and adequacy of consultations with relevant local stakeholders (with a focus on local community service workers); g(i), the likely impacts of the plan on the number of bedrooms currently at each location versus the proposed number of new bedrooms per site, and; g(ii) the likely impacts of the plan on the number of public and community housing homes at each location. We have chosen to present responses to the ToR in the form of direct quotes from residents and/or community workers at the Flemington and North Melbourne public housing estates, acknowledging the importance of the Committee being able to hear from residents in their own words about the impacts of the high-rise redevelopment decision.

This submission is a platform for the residents to express their views and concerns to the committee, it does not necessarily reflect the position of MVLS.



# METHODOLOGY

## Identifying Barriers

Residents faced significant barriers in making submissions directly to the parliamentary inquiry website. An initial lack of translations on the website created a significant barrier, particularly for residents with limited English proficiency or those more comfortable expressing themselves in their native language. Even after the parliamentary website was updated to include translations of the ToR several months after it went live, the rest of the page remained only in English.

Similarly, the Committee's preference for submissions to be made in English limited residents' capacity to contribute. While many residents can speak English, they may not be fluent, or may not be comfortable using written English, and may additionally prefer to speak about their personal circumstances in a language that is more comfortable for them. In our attempts to seek clarification from the Committee about accommodations that would be made on this matter, there was uncertainty about whether submissions made in languages other than English would ultimately be considered for the inquiry.

Another barrier identified by our team was the use of technology. Many residents are either unable to access the technology required to make submissions or are unable to navigate these technologies to submit. The submission procedure also required residents to stipulate and specify their email address, which was a barrier as many residents, especially older residents, either do not have email addresses or do

not know their email address. This was further compounded by the barriers discussed above, such as being unable to understand, read or write in English and not having the technological means to do this in the first place.

Additionally, distrust of governmental authority due to their experiences of the COVID-19 hard lockdowns and a lack of awareness regarding their ability to submit anonymously meant that many residents feared repercussions for speaking up and detailing their experiences. As a result, they were hesitant to partake in the inquiry process. Residents were concerned that Homes Victoria could identify them through this process and feared retribution for voicing their concerns publicly.

We are concerned that these barriers have collectively resulted in the underrepresentation of residents' voices and perspectives in the parliamentary inquiry, despite efforts by our Bicultural Workers and analogous initiatives by other community organisations and grassroots groups.

## Interview Process and Structure

Guided by the ToR, MVLS's Community Lead designed questions (see Appendix A) to guide semi-structured interviews with residents (see Appendix C). These questions were asked to all the residents interviewed by MVLS' Bicultural Workers and Community Lead between July 2024 and March 2025. The semi-structured interview format allowed residents to respond flexibly and elaborate on topics beyond the initial scope of the questions.

Interviews were mostly conducted in English, with one being conducted in Arabic, and another in Oromo. In two interviews, a mix of Amharic and English was used to capture the stories. Our Bicultural Worker then wrote the interview down in English. Interviewers often had pre-existing established relationships with residents through the BWP, fostering trust and enabling more direct questioning to elicit deeper responses.

Interviews were conducted in three ways. Initially, the Community Lead and Bicultural Workers interviewed residents, documenting their stories, asking for clarifications, and obtaining consent for written summaries that were then shared with residents for review and approval (Method A). Later, Bicultural Workers began voice recording interviews (with consent) and transcribing them, a method that allowed for capturing more nuanced responses and more efficiency (Method B). The third method involved speaking to residents about the inquiry process, after

which they provided us with their own handwritten submission (Method C). Approximately half of the interviews were captured using Method A and the other half with Method B. One submission was captured using Method C.



## Translations

For submissions captured in community languages, MVLS was fortunate enough to have Bicultural Workers who speak, read and write in 7 different languages. The Bicultural Workers were not only able to conduct interviews in community languages, but to transcribe and translate these interviews into English. This process was undertaken for the submissions captured in Arabic and Oromo.

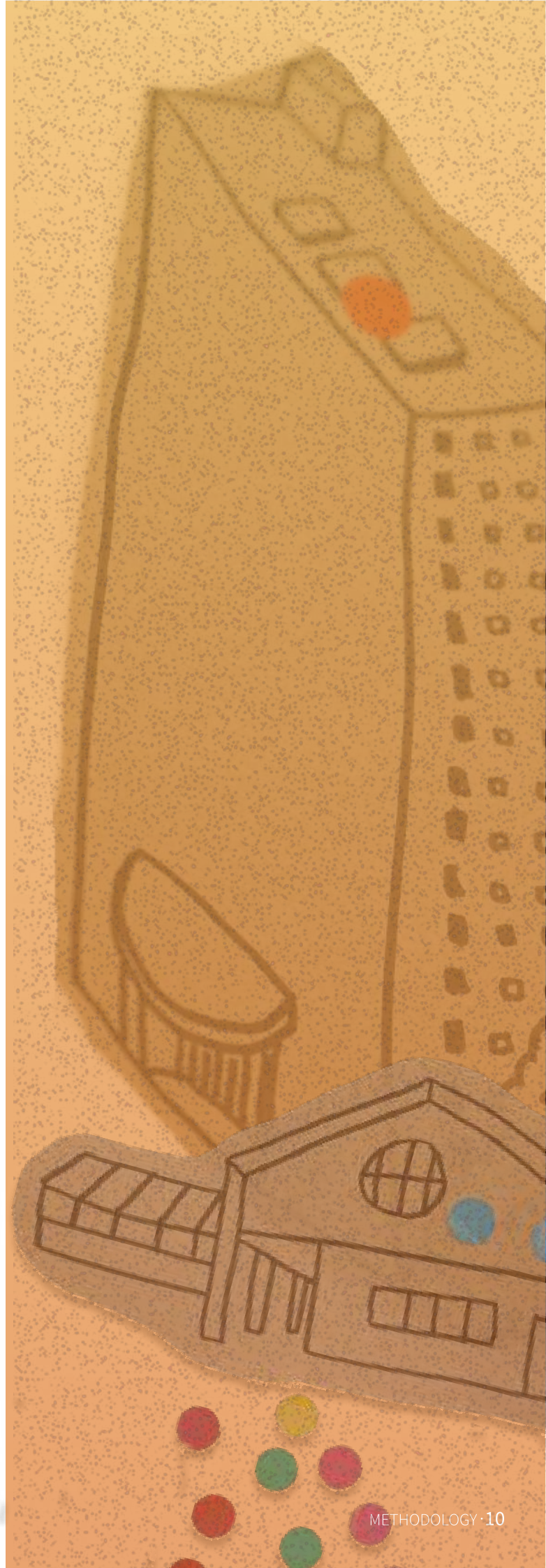
## Community Engagement and Promotion

Promotional materials in a range of languages were created to inform residents of a weekly outreach presence in the Flemington area to collect stories for the parliamentary inquiry.

The promotional materials were translated into English, Somali, Amharic, Arabic, Turkish, Harari and Oromo. Stories were collected at different outreach locations frequented by residents and community members. Alongside the weekly Djerring Hub outreach presence, stories were also collected at locations such as North Melbourne Community Centre and at the public housing towers themselves. One interview was conducted over the phone.

## Consent

All community members who were interviewed consented to the interviews either by signing consent forms or verbally consenting before recording of the interview began.



## Anonymity

All stories and submissions included to develop this report have been anonymised to alleviate residents' fears of retribution. As noted above, the sense of retribution was a barrier to engagement, and residents were relieved by the opportunity to make a submission while remaining anonymous to the committee. All residents have been allocated pseudonyms for the purpose of this report.

Despite our attempt to capture stories in a way that mitigated barriers, we still faced some limitations:

- a. Conducting the interviews during the workday acted as a barrier, as many residents are occupied with work and/or studies at this time.
- b. Constricting outreach to one day a week to collect stories limited the amount of foot-traffic that this submission could have otherwise reached. This was slightly mitigated by attending community events, and gatherings to capture stories.
- c. The sense of fatigue that residents had about the relocation process was the hardest barrier to overcome. As the months have gone by, residents have been rightly worried about moving homes and have seemed less engaged in the inquiry process.

Interviewees were broadly grouped across three categories: current residents (9), current residents who also worked in the area/with their own high rise estate communities (6), and former residents who worked with affected high rise estate

communities (3). Of those interviewed who still lived in the high-rise buildings, 7 out of 10 had children attending school or kindergarten near their homes. Most of the people interviewed were women.

MVLS's primary service area covers the Debney Meadows/Debney Park estate in Flemington, which includes two of the towers designated in the first tranche of buildings for redevelopment. We were able to interview residents from 12 Holland Court (1) and 120 Racecourse Road (3). This estate is also home to the 126 (2) and 130 Racecourse Road (2) high rises. The Debney estate community is closely connected to North Melbourne's Hotham estate community, which also includes one of the towers slated for demolition in the first tranche, 33 Alfred Street (4). The Hotham estate is additionally comprised of the 159 Melrose Street (1) and 12 Sutton Street (1) high rises. The Hotham estate community is, in turn, connected to residents at 76 Canning Street (1), North Melbourne. Important nodes for community connection sit between and adjacent to these estates, including the Djerring Flemington Hub community centre on the Debney estate, the Australian Muslim Social Services Agency and mosque next to 33 Alfred Street, and the North Melbourne Community Centre between the Hotham estate and 76 Canning Street. The high-rise public housing estates in North Melbourne fall outside MVLS' outreach service area but have been included in this project because of the tight community connections between North Melbourne, Flemington and Ascot Vale.



# FINDINGS

# TOR c(i) Resident Consultation

## Lack of prior consultation

Regardless of their perspective on estate redevelopment, none of the current residents or local community workers we spoke with stated that they had been consulted about the Victorian Government's plans in advance of the Victoria's Housing Statement announcement on 20 September 2023.

Jamila, a resident of the 33 Alfred Street building, described her shock at finding out about the Government's decision on the news:

*"I was shocked, sad, nervous, mad and upset when I heard about the demolition of the high rise. The way it was announced was terrible. I only heard it on the news and through the community WhatsApp groups. There was no consultation, no heads up, there was no warming up to it, no one knew it was coming."*

For some residents, the suddenness of the announcement echoed traumatic memories of the Government's hard lockdown of the Flemington and North Melbourne estates during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Leila, who has lived on the Flemington estate for over 25 years, said:

*"They didn't consult us before the announcement. There was no*

*consultation. It felt like the COVID hard lockdown. We were shocked on the day of the announcement, Homes Victoria came all of a sudden and knocked on our doors. It scared me. The information was not clear."*

Sarah, a former resident of the Flemington estate with family still living at the site, noted how the abrupt decision by Government made residents feel devalued:

*"I thought the government would have learnt their lesson after the hard lockdowns of North Melbourne and Flemington during COVID. I didn't think they would put this community through something like this again. It really feels like they don't care about this community."*

Some residents expressed concern about the vagueness of the announcement, noting that a lack of clarity around the timing of the planned redevelopment compounded the uncertainty that they felt in the absence of prior consultation. Hamdi, who lives at the North Melbourne estate, said:

*"They sent us a letter, but the letter doesn't specify the exact date of the demolish and we asked them when the demolition day is. They said that they don't know."*

When asked whether the community meeting Homes Victoria held with residents after the announcement were useful, Yusuf noted the lack of answers provided to residents:

*"Yes and no, kind of thing. Yes, we're able to ask questions, but no, they didn't actually answer them properly for us. Didn't give us a proper answer."*

## Lack of institutional learning

Several interviewees identified that the Government's decision to announce its renewal plan before consulting residents demonstrated a lack of institutional learning within Homes Victoria and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing from prior engagements with estate communities.

Ali, a resident of 33 Alfred Street and local community worker, referred to the genuine consultation undertaken through the Paving the Way Forward framework established by DFFH in the wake of the hard lockdowns, underscoring how what emerged from these engagements did not relate to the redevelopment announcement. Under Paving the Way Forward,

*"Action plans were made, and things were done, work plans were done, and none of that was, was anything about redevelopment or demolishing buildings. It was not a need of the community. And so, they didn't, I don't know where this whole idea of 'this is what the community wants' idea came from. And so, definitely no consultation was ever done with the community before the redevelopment at all. And after it, it was just information sessions."*

Ileni, a former resident of the Flemington estate still working with the estate community, explained that even when 'consultation' had occurred for past projects, it was challenging to identify whether and how these engagements informed Government's actions. She described a confusing mix of under and over-engagement with Government regarding housing conditions on the estate, both with negative outcomes for residents.

*"The government always say they consult but they never do. I was never consulted before the announcement. No one knew. Even when they were building the Victoria Street community housing, we asked the builders what they were building. It was them who told us what was happening. I remember that many years ago, they spoke about demolishing 120 Racecourse Road because of a bridge they wanted to build. I was consulted for that project, but after a while that went quiet."*

*I have been over-consulted by the government, and I feel like they never do what we say. For example, my mum was in surgery with walking complications and the Department of Housing gave her a home with stairs. They don't listen. It's taken many years to get Housing to listen to us. My mum fell over one night because of a leak in the roof. She fell and cut her ear. After the fall, I looked after her, as she couldn't go back to her home. Another time, there was a fire in the apartment above my mothers, and her house had some damage. It took 6 weeks for just a carpet change."*

## Engagement with Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) and Homes Victoria

Residents described not feeling a sense of choice over their own housing circumstances and feeling forced to leave their homes. Jamila said that she was *“told that [she] would not have a choice,”* making her feel *“like the decision was made on our behalf.”*

Similarly, Ali described community members feeling like their only option was to *“either move or get evicted.”* As Alem put it:

*“We did not choose to move. We are being moved by others. They are choosing for us to move. It also seems like they are not really willing to help. It looks like their focus is on, doing what they want, and getting rid of residents from their own places, without checking in with the residents first and properly helping them.”*

Despite the significant disruption caused by the announcement to residents’ experiences of housing security, Jamila expressed her perception that Homes Victoria only undertook delayed engagement with estate communities because residents demanded answers:

*“After the announcement was made, I felt that because of the pressure from residents to Homes Victoria, they started to do consultations.”*

Jamila also identified that the pace at which Homes Victoria were attempting to have relocation agreements signed in the first few months after the announcement put pressure on residents. She, like other residents we spoke with, felt forced to select community rather than public housing when completing her relocation paperwork. Jamila said:

*“Even in the meeting with the relocation officer I felt a bit pressured. I felt like I had to choose community housing. I would give her options on where I would like to move to, and she would persuade me that these locations would be too expensive. She gave me the option to move to another high-rise tower as the only public housing option, but why would I move to a tower that will be slated from demolition in a few years? It felt like the only choice I had was community housing.”*

Melthem described how her household composition and bedroom requirements affected her ability to relocate within the area while retaining her rights as a public tenant:

*“In my home, I currently sleep on the couch, my little brother shares a room with my mother, and my older brother has a room to himself. We are eligible for a four-bedroom house. Homes Victoria told us that in the local area, there are no four bedrooms home in the public housing system, and that we would need to move to a rural area to find one. We were told about a four-bedroom place in the community housing estate, but we do not want to*

*give up our public housing rights.”*

While some residents did not feel like they knew enough about the differences between public and community housing to make a choice while filling out their relocation paperwork, they also noted that clear and comprehensive information about this difference was not provided to them. Melthem was also invited by Homes Victoria to translate for fellow residents during an information session and noted that the sessions *“were not enough for the community to understand what the difference between public and community housing is.”*

Multiple residents raised concerns about having confusing, partial or inconsistent information conveyed to them via Homes Victoria staff and CEO of Homes Victoria Simon Newport. Reflecting on these issues, Zara said:

*“You know you’ve got the CEO coming in here saying... Like over promising, you know.. ‘Nothing’s going to change. Everything’s going to stay the same,’ but then at the same time no one’s really telling them what they’re going come back to. So, if there was clear communication and everything was in writing, fair enough. But I feel like the fact that nothing is in writing and then fact that nothing is in writing and then they go to meetings and one person says this and then next week somebody*

*else says something different, yeah... It’s not... Yeah, so it hasn’t been fairly communicated...”*

Jamila noted that the communication by Homes Victoria and DFFH made her *“very anxious”*: *“Because of the lack of information, and no clear timeline, there was a lot of fear and misinformation. It was like Chinese whisper.”*

Sarah, whose elderly parents live at the Flemington estate, described how poor communication undermined residents’ trust in government:

*“People are still unsure why this decision was made. There seems to be no clear plan. When we ask Home Victoria where people will go and what people will come back to, we get no clear answers. There is no clear information. There is lack of transparency, so I don’t trust the information the government provides. They say one thing and do another.”*

Mistrust and suspicion were also expressed by residents who had been waiting for many years to transfer to another public housing property with no result. Leila opined on the sudden availability of properties for resident transfer:

*“I was previously on the transfer list for 14 years, and now that they want to*

**“I was previously on the transfer list for 14 years, and now that they want to move us, they can make the process very quick.”**

*move us, they can make the process very quick."*

Finally, Alem noted that the future provision of better information from Homes Victoria and DFFH would likely not improve the current situation for estate residents, as it would not change the Government's decision. She stated:

*"As I said... there is not enough clarification or information, and I have difficulty with the English language. And even if they do in the future... What is their info going to do for us? They will still continue with their plan."*

## Impacts on residents

Many of the people we spoke to identified that the redevelopment announcement had significantly impacted residents of the Flemington and North Melbourne estates, even though notices to vacate had not yet been issued.

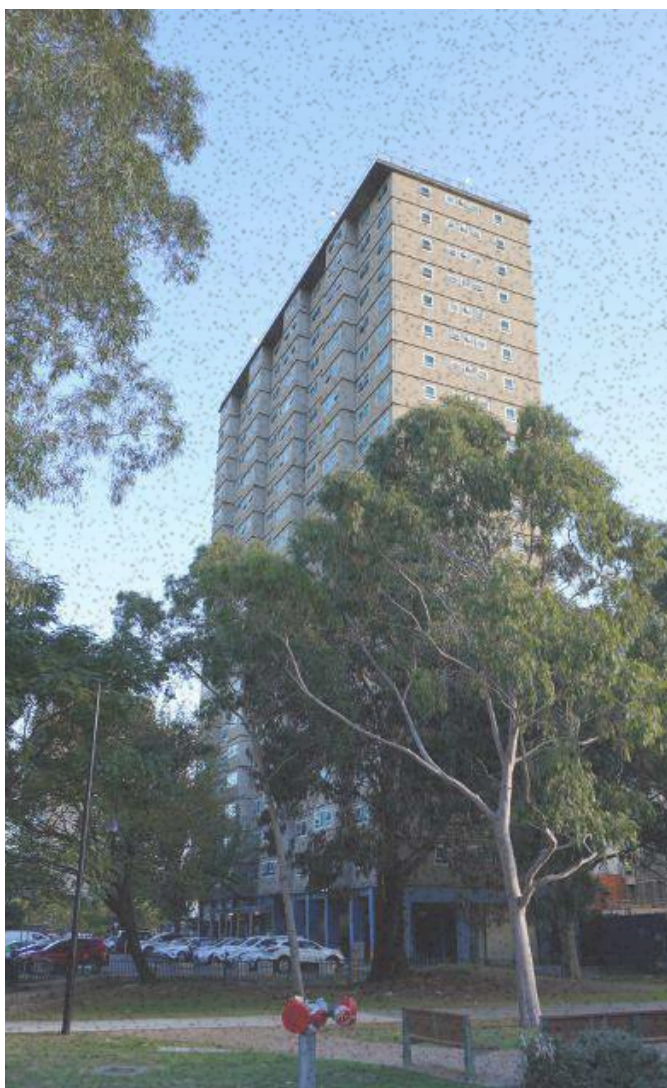
Leila described a rising sense of anxiety since the announcement, saying:

*"If the buildings are knocked down, I'm scared that I will lose my connection to this community, that I will lose my community, and my connection to my children. I'm scared that I will not be able to get to see my friends, but also my medical appointments because I may be moved far away. We are already anxious about being moved. I have had some sleepless nights since we heard the announcement."*

Zara emphasised the mental health impacts of the announcement within the Flemington estate community members she works with, stating: "

*"There's a lot of mental health issues that have come out of this, a lot of people are stressed, they're anxious. So I'm seeing a lot of anxiety and people's stress level[s are] really high."*

Sofia, a resident of the Flemington estate, mentioned that the tower redevelopment plans had heightened her family's distress about safety and security of tenure that had already been caused by earlier redevelopment of another part of the estate (Victoria Street). She said:



**“If the buildings are knocked down, I’m scared that I will lose my connection to this community, that I will lose my community, and my connection to my children.”**

*“The demolition has had a significant impact on us. Especially on my family. My son, who was 4 when the construction began has been affected by the constant noise from the workers and seeing them beneath the buildings. He became scared that the buildings might collapse which led to him having nightmares.”*

Zara also identified a connection between the anxiety residents on the Flemington estate were feeling and their experiences having a front-row seat to the Victoria Street redevelopment. On top of people’s uncertainty about what will happen to them, when they will have to move out, and whether they will be able to come back, Zara spoke about residents’ concerns about how long the redevelopment will take and what, if return is possible, residents will be coming back to:

*“And when they do come back. How's it gonna look like? You know? Even the sizes? It's a bit of a concern because obviously a lot of them have already gone and seen the new Holland court buildings and yeah, sorry Victoria Street. And yeah, the design of that is not something that fits their needs. As you know, there's a lot of people who live in Flemington that have big families. So yeah, those new homes are not designed for that.”*

In addition to impacting residents’

perceptions of the security of their tenure, some interviewees expressed concern about the planned redevelopment’s detrimental impacts on community connections to place and to each other. Sarah shared her worries for the community as follows:

*“The decision to relocate has had a huge impact within the community. Our community accesses many services and has deep community connections here. If they move from here, how will they access them? If they have issues about housing, they know who to call here, but wherever they are moved to, they won’t know where to go.*

*If our community moves out, we will not have the place that connects us all. We will be all over Melbourne and be displaced. It will be hard to come together. We will lose the relationships and what we created here.”*

Ali identified the redevelopment announcement as an attack not just on the physical infrastructure of the towers, but on the community itself. He said:

*“It's not about the coming back aspect. There's a community being demolished now. It's not just a house being, or a building getting demolished. They're demolishing our community. And to get the community to come back is a long-*

*term thing. What is the actual, with a whole different community coming in, things will change. And that change is not being dictated by the community, it's being forced on them. So if change can happen organically, it will be okay. And people will understand that.*

*But being forced to move and leave a space that you call home is really difficult for people. So I doubt most majority of people will try to come back because this is a traumatic experience for them. So you're trying to come back to a place that caused you a bit of trauma, and then trust the government that's going to do right by you, even though they demolished your home, and your community, and your livelihood.*

*I think people see it as a building, but it's not a building. It's not just a building. It's a community. It's a way of life. And you're destroying that way of life."*



**"I think people see it as a building, but... It's not just a building. It's a community. It's a way of life. And you're destroying that way of life."**

"My father is 86 years old... He is mostly self-sufficient around this area, but if you move him from here, he will get lost and lose his community. He has so many connections here."

## Concern for vulnerable groups

In addition to reflecting on their own circumstances and the impact of the proposed redevelopment on estate communities, interviewees also expressed specific concern for vulnerable groups of estate residents. These included elderly people, children, people with disabilities and chronic health issues, and people who do not speak or are not proficient users of English.

### *Elderly people*

Ileni outlined her concerns about the potential for elderly peoples' rights to be eroded in the redevelopment process:

*"It will also impact the elderly people. The elderly people will not have a voice in this. They need advocates, and the department will take advantage of them."*

Ali poignantly described his concern about the uprooting elderly people who have been in the towers for many years:

*"I can already see a lot of livelihood has been given away from some people, they feel – there's a lot more people who are lost especially the older generation and people who – I'm still young, I can learn, I can adapt, I can move and I can figure that out even though it might still be difficult for me. But the older generation being here for 20 years and that's all they've known and how are they going to adapt and try to integrate into a different area. And so, and that causes a lot of uneasiness for us and*



*extra-extra worry that their mental health might be affected. Their way of life might be affected. Since they won't know where the doctors are, they have to reintegrate into a whole different area. What are those neighbours like?"*

Another concern was the disruption of elderly people's connection to services and to their social circles, and the impact this would have on them. Sarah described the issue with reference to her father:

*"My father is 86 years old. He often walks to Newmarket to meet his friends and have coffee; he also goes to AMSSA to pray and attends the elderly men's group in North Melbourne. He is mostly self-sufficient around this area, but if you move him from here, he will get lost and lose his community. He has so many connections here."*

*"The elderly people will be most impacted by the relocation. They have spent so much time here. They know how to navigate all the services here. This place is safe for them, and they help each other. If they move out, they will lose these connections. When I think of my mum leaving this area, I fear she will get ill. I'm afraid for my parents' health. I'm afraid they will lose their safety net."*

## Children

Residents also voiced concerns about the emotional and practical effect of the redevelopment plan on the lives of children in the community. Ileni said:

*"I think mentally it will impact everyone."*

*The young people will feel disconnected. My son, who now wants to move out of home, doesn't want to live in the Flemington area because of the hard lockdown. We lived in Flemington during the hard lockdown and that impacted him in ways I didn't know. This demolition will impact the generation that is living through this. This will affect these kids over many years. They are unsure how long they will be here for. This decision has turned what was safe into something unsafe."*

Amina highlighted the challenges relocation would cause for children's access to schooling, and the need to be mindful of the potential negative impacts of the constant stress associated with redevelopment.

*"I would have liked to see more consultation for people and prepare houses or units for people to move in once they are told that they are being moved because many people under stress because they don't know where they are going. They are just told they are moving but they don't know where they are going and they have their children who go to school in the area. The child's school will be interrupted. They needed more consultation. 3,000 people in 33 Alfred Street and its creating issue, people don't know where they are going."*

## People with disabilities and chronic illnesses

Melthem stated her concern that people with disabilities and chronic illness would face specific challenges in light of the plan:

*"I felt so helpless and powerless. I know that my older brother, who has a disability, needs to be close to the hospital. I fear that my mother will not be close to a hospital as well. I feel responsible for them, and this announcement has had a big impact and shocked our family."*

As was the case for people with mobility issues, people with chronic conditions were also concerned about being moved further away from essential medical services. Salma said:

*"Of course, because I love this place and it is a suitable place for me and my studies are here and my school is here, and it is also suitable because I am sick, and I cannot afford to rent [privately]."*

## ***People who don't speak or are not proficient in English***

Residents highlighted the impact of the announcement on community members who were not confident English-speakers. Alem, for example, was worried about being dislocated from her language community:

*"...I am very much connected with a lot of people here and to the area, and it's very dear to me. It's very important to me and because of that I don't feel alone, and I have people I can reach out to, and I can get help or support from my people when needed and vice versa, and just that I have people around me in the same area is so great. It's not easy to be moved from such a place where all*



**"I know this area and this community I'm close to my family and friends and to the services I use."**

*different people have built such relationships in the area with each other. I also have a language barrier with English. So, it's nice to have people around you who can speak your language."*

## Tenancy concerns

Many of the people we spoke with drew attention to the actual and perceived impacts that the high-rise redevelopment plan would have on the tenancy rights of estate residents. Reflecting on the impact of the announcement, Rahmah expressed frustration with the Victorian Government, stating *"I feel like they are not respecting our rights."*

Melthem identified specific concerns about a change in tenancy rights between public and community housing, saying:

*"I am also concerned about how our rights will be diminished under community housing. We are concerned that our rent will increase. There is no guarantee that the government will pay the difference in rent in the long term. The housing officer told me that they will not put in writing that they will pay the difference in rent, we only got verbal confirmation. We are also very concerned about our tenure rights under community housing. My brother waited 15 years to be in public housing, and he doesn't want to lose that right."*

Amina described the security of tenure public housing provided people who were newcomers to the country, and expressed concern about the impact that displacement would have on these residents. She indicated that *"many people will be homeless if they are evicted from here [the North Melbourne estate]."* The sentiment that public housing was the only viable option for many estate residents was echoed across the responses of several interviewees, with its significance as a form of affordable tenure linked to the wellbeing benefits of being co-located with residents' own cultural, linguistic and religious communities.

## Interruption of access to services and supports

Almost all residents highlighted how important the services they access in the area are to them and their families. Concern about losing access to these services was a major consideration in residents' decisions about whether to move out of the area. As Leila put it:

*"I have many health concerns that need monitoring. I access my doctor near the McDonalds on racecourse and my other doctor is on Union Road in Ascot Vale. Both are close to me. I often access the Royal Melbourne hospital because of my health issues. I also visit Cohealth in Kensington for dentist appointments"*

**"I'm also concerned about how our rights will be diminished under community housing."**

## **"I don't drive so being so close to everything is really helpful. Public transport is also very good in Flemington."**

*and physio appointments. For my back, I have rehab visits at a physio in Parkville. They are all close to 120 racecourse road, and I can access some of these services by foot. I don't drive so being close to everything is really helpful. Public transport is also very good in Flemington. I can go to all my doctor's appointments easily."*

Jamila also reflected on the services and social groups she engages in in the community:

*"I don't want to move out of the flats, not now at least. I know this area and this community. I'm close to my family and friends and to the services I use. I know the local playgroups where I take my children and what I can access when I need support."*

Leila described how she was not only able to access formal support services where she lived, but that she was also able to exchange care and support with her family members living in the same building. She said:

*"I arrived in Flemington in 1999 with my two children and my husband. My son still lives with us, and my daughter lives a few floors above me. I have 3 grandchildren who I look after when my daughter works. My grandsons go to Mount Alexander*

*College, and Ascot Vale Primary School. My granddaughter goes to St Aloysius in North Melbourne. I often pick up my grandchildren from school and drop them off in the mornings. My daughter visits me, and we eat together as a family. She looks after me when I'm sick. When I look after my grandchildren, I give them cultural education, to keep them connected to their culture."*

The informal support residents and families provide to each other was a thread weaved through many stories. The strong sense of community, and community identity, was what Alem was concerned about losing in the relocation process.

*"It will have a lot of impact on myself and the community, as not only me but others from the community also say the same and go through pretty much the same. I had my son here, and he grew up in this area, used to go to school in this area. I have been living here for so many years. Everything is so easy to reach in the area. I have my people around me. I am so used to the area and the community, that it will be very tough to suddenly move to somewhere else and then start all over again and maybe not even have all of the community and the things that I can reach out to and the services and the*

**"I know this area and this community I'm close to my family and friends and to the services I use."**

**"I have neighbours who I have known for 20 years, from different cultures, and we are all connected, we are one family. My community is here... I know if I'm sick, I have someone to help me. We are there for each other as a community."**

*things that I have around me. I might not have that anymore once I move from this area or once I move out of this area."*

Leila similarly commented on the importance of community participation:

*"I have many friends here. I use the community centre (Djerring hub) very often, and I volunteer at the Somali Women's Association. This is a very important part of my social life for me. Flemington is our home. I have Neighbours who I have known for 20 years, from different cultures, and we are all connected, we are one family and community."*

*It feels like I was born here. It feels like my family. My community is here. Many of the elderly people here know each other. I know that if I'm sick, I have someone to help me, we are there for each other as a community. When people don't have enough, we help each other. My neighbour knows that they can ask me for help, for food and I will help them. We have worked so hard to build this community, I feel safe here. It's my home."*

The local mosque plays a vital role in in the community's sense of identity, serving as a place to find support and link into services. Jamila said:

*"This place feels like family. Lots of people know each other, there is a strong sense of belonging, there are lots of informal community supports. The community knows where to get support here in North Melbourne and Flemington."*



**“It feels like I was born here. It feels like my family. My community is here... I know if I’m sick, I have someone to help, we are there for each other as a community.”**

*We have a mosque in North Melbourne, and everyone accesses that, once we are moved, it will be hard for people to pray there. For Eid and other religious events, we will find it hard to organise our community and celebrate together. Most events are held in Flemington or North Melbourne because we are all so close together. It will be the same with funerals, it will be hard to get the community together as Flemington has been a bit of a hub for the community. Our elderly, children, people with a disability and new migrants, will find the relocation the hardest.”*

Ali described how his life was embedded in the place where he lived:

*“So...my closest doctors are obviously. My close doctors are obviously the ones close to me and I’ve used the Royal Melbourne Hospital religiously and also my connections, my social life is all based in that area. I go to the mosque, which is very important to me, having that connection with the mosque and so, I’ve worked there, I play there and I learn there. I go to uni, one of the closer areas, Melbourne uni. So everything is based around my area there, I live in there and yeah.”*

## **Fear of displacement**

Many residents expressed their fear of losing a community that had been built over many years. Melthem pointed to the need for public housing for low-income families in the inner city.

*“These public housing buildings are helping low-income families in urban areas. Just because we are low income and vulnerable peoples, doesn’t mean we have to be kicked out to rural or suburban areas. I want to see low-income families be able to live in public housing in the inner city.”*

Sofia also emphasised the importance of centring the dignity and agency of low-income residents.

*“It’s unfair for low-income families and residents to be suddenly displaced from the area they have lived in for many years.”*

Leila commented on the sense that Homes Victoria were separating her community:

*“Home Victoria come to my home and asked me to choose between public housing or community housing. I chose*

*public housing and there are no options for me. I need to be close to services, and close to my community but Homes Victoria are making me feel forced to move far and are separating us."*

Another sentiment that residents raised was fear about losing a sense of belonging that they had developed in their communities. Ali gestured to the loss of what his community has built over many years, and fears of a future unknown.

*"And not only will it impact us, we don't know the systems out there, those systems how targeted are they for our community and a lot of people moving out to the West or to a whole different neighbourhood that the majority there are not Muslims or are not African. So its like, what do I do there? There's alot of small things that people don't understand, around Ramadan time just seeing each other, running around and people just being happy and being together. And that togetherness is not going to be there anymore."*

Sarah also identified how being dispersed through the relocation process would undermine their ability to maintain vital networks of support, care and friendship.

*"If our community moves out, we will not have the place that connects us all. We will be all over Melbourne and be displaced. It will be hard to come together. We will lose*

*the relationships and what we created here."*

## Perceptions of government's intentions

With the shadow of the COVID-19 hard lockdowns looming in many residents' recent memories, people we spoke with questioned the intention underpinning the government's the decision to demolish the towers. Several residents expressed a deep suspicion about the announcement, with Sarah saying that the government didn't care about them.

*"I thought the government would have learnt their lesson after the hard lockdowns of North Melbourne and Flemington during COVID. I didn't think they would put this community through something like this again. It really feels like they don't care about this community."*

Jamila went further and suggested that the targeting of North Melbourne and Flemington was intentional.

*"It will be very hard for the community to stay the same. Some individuals may, but as a community it will be broken. They say they will keep us connected, but how will they do that? I feel like they want to break the community, they don't like us. When they locked us up during COVID, the government didn't*

**"I chose public housing and there are no options for me."**

*help us, the community here helped each other. And now with this announcement it feels very targeted towards North Melbourne and Flemington because we are such a strong community.”*

Ultimately, Ileni said that she felt that the government’s decision was evidence of its intent to sell the public housing estate sites to investors.

*“The buildings are old, but I think they need to do better consultation, really listen to the community here, and act on it. This is an opportunity for people to build better homes, and address overcrowding, for people but the government needs to do what the community wants. I feel like they want to sell Flemington to investors.”*

**“The buildings are old, but I think they need to do better consultation, really listen to the community here, and act on it.**

“

**“It's unfair for low-income families and residents to be suddenly displaced from the area they have lived in for many years.”**



## Perspectives on redevelopment plans

Interviewees were asked about their perspective on the redevelopment plan overall. Some of the residents had a negative view of demolition and rebuild, while others acknowledged that there may be a need for significant upgrading of the buildings – albeit with proper tenant engagement. One resident expressed a positive view about the redevelopment plan, centred on hopes for relocation to a better property due to government neglect of her home.

### Negative

Leila told us:

*"I want the buildings to be fixed. We want better maintenance. When we call them, they never come. When we want something painted, they never come. These buildings are fine for us, they just need some maintenance. I want to the flats to be renovated and for the community to stay together, I don't want to lose the community. We are a family, we help each other. My neighbours help me, and I help them."*

Jamila echoed similar feelings.

*"I would like to see the towers upgraded and kept as public housing. Let people come back to what they had. I want to come back to the same house, or at least to the same building. I would like to see everyone come back and not be worse off, both financially, and in the size of their homes."*

*"...The root cause of many of these issues is how the government manages these buildings, not the buildings themselves, and it's not fair for the residents to bear the brunt of these deficiencies. They didn't play their part in keeping the buildings in good condition."*

From Amina's perspective, the building just needed to be fixed.

*"Some parts of the building need to be renovated, and the building itself can stay longer as long as it is services people's needs. It is just how the newcomers want it, to put their stuff and be relaxed. It just needs to be fixed instead of demolished."*

### Positive

Louisa was positive about the redevelopment of her building, pointing to the issues of recurring pest infestations that DFFH had failed to remedy.

*"(If) they can move me to a place that is a bit better than this building... then I'll be more than happy because the building we are currently in, there's too many cockroach issues... Yeah, there's a lot of cockroach infestation... And, I reported to housing many times that there's an issue. They keep doing the same treatments over again and there's no improvement. They keep telling me clean my house, I clean my house still they not going."*

### Mixed

Some residents had mixed feelings on the redevelopment of the buildings. Ali commented on the needs of the elders of

the community, and the importance of taking this into account when thinking about redevelopment.

*"I don't mind. Either way for me, I'm still young, so moving around and stuff is not an issue for me. But I think putting myself in the position of my family and the elder community, they really want to stay. They really want to continue living the life they were living until they passed on and not make these big life changes and stuff like that. So I would have been in whatever camp they were in. If most of them wanted to keep the building as it was and refurbish it, I think I would have supported that a lot more. Not for my own benefit, but for the benefit of my parents and my family and all the community elders."*

Zara was conscious of not having enough information or expertise to make a qualified opinion about the state of the safety of the buildings.

*"I'm not qualified to say, they need to be demolished or not. But if they have come and assessed and said these buildings are not safe for people to live here. Fair enough. Nobody is going to disagree when it comes to safety. So I can't say they are, you know, safe or not safe or do they need to be demolished or not? It's not. I'm not qualified."*

In Sarah's view, residents coming back to new buildings that remained public housing was the ideal outcome.

*"I would like to see these buildings demolished and rebuilt with residents having the choice to move back to with rooms of the same size, with the same residential rights and without the need to have to choose between community or public housing. I would like to see the same structures, but nicer, newer, and safer, built without hidden agendas. If they cannot promise this, then leave the buildings the way they are."*

**"I think people see it as a building, but it's not a building. It's not just a building. It's a community. It's a way of life. And you're destroying that way of life."**

## TOR c(ii) consultation with relevant local stakeholders

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Several interviewees worked in community organisations that predominantly service high-rise estate residents in North Melbourne and Flemington. They stated that a lack of prior consultation with their employers and sufficient notice about the government's plans had an impact on their current work duties, as well as their future employment prospects.

Zara identified the impact of the redevelopment announcement on residents and how it affected her ability to conduct her duties as a community development worker:

*"I'm not able to kind of do my job. Because the uncertainty of what is happening in Flemington is the top priority, which means everything else is, has to be... It does impact the work that we are trying to do, because everybody's worried about their home security, I guess."*

Amina noted that her workplace, a community organisation at the base of one of the high-rise towers, would have to move elsewhere if the redevelopment went ahead. This posed concerns about the significant increase in rental cost that the organisation would have to shoulder if they moved to a privately-owned space. Amina also stated that she was not sure whether she would continue to be employed at the organisation once the redevelopment had commenced, and so she would have appreciated advance warning to prepare to secure alternative employment.



## TOR g(ii) number of bedrooms

Ali, in the context of discussing a lack of consultation and listening from government, noted that in previous redevelopment initiatives there had not been accounting for residents' household compositions in new builds:

*"... a lot of the buildings are three-bedroom buildings, family buildings, but what happened in Victoria Street was they made all one-bedroom, two-bedroom buildings. So, it's like, even though they apparently consulted the community and they knew what the community said, so, it's like, they have their own agenda, type of thing, and they just have to go with their agenda."*

Speaking to the size of the new community housing builds on Victoria street, Leila said:

*"I'm also afraid that community housing is not good enough for us. The rooms are small, I think I will have to throw away my furniture, because it will not fit, and need to buy new ones."*

Hamdi was concerned about the reduction of the size of the rooms alongside an increase in rent.

*"Of course, we don't want community housing to replace the public housing, we just want the public housing as it is. We don't want them to change and build flats with small bedrooms and increase the rent; we can't afford that."*

**"We don't want them to change and build flats with small bedrooms and increase the rent; we can't afford that."**

## TOR g(ii) number of public and community housing homes

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A constant theme from residents was the uncertainty about being moved into community housing, and a desire to maintain public housing tenancies in North Melbourne and Flemington. Jamila expressed this as follows:

*"I personally don't want to change to community housing. I don't think it is fair to make people give up their public housing when they are forced to move out of their homes for the demolition."*

*"I would like to see better playgrounds, and more family friendly areas, more green areas. The buildings need better ventilation and better cooling and heating."*

Jada had this to say:

*"All I can say is that, I really hope, that they are not going to move us into community housing. It is not fare. It is not what most of us can afford and it is not the right kind of housing for many people who already have been living in public housing for so long. For many many years. I just let the government do whatever they want. I don't care if they want to move us. I just don't want to lose public housing."*

A significant concern was the potential for an increase in rent if residents moved to community housing. Alem said:

*"All I can say is that I just want to come back and others who want their place back to come back as well. And no Community housing. It still needs to be public housing. Housing commission. I want to come back and be back in public housing. No community housing, no affordable housing, no social housing, please. I cannot afford that, and I just cannot get used to how much change that will cause in my living situation."*



**"I personally don't want to change to community housing. I don't think it is fair to make people give up their public housing when they are forced to move out of their homes for the demolition."**

**“How I see it is, is government is just, it's passing on, it's giving up on saying, “we don't want this responsibility, we don't want the risk and the headache that comes with this. We're going to outsource to a private organization that's going to do some benefits.”**

Sofia was adamant about keeping the estates as public housing.

*“If the buildings get demolished, they should stay as public housing, not become community housing or another kind of housing.”*

Rahmah, when asked whether she knew the difference between public and community housing, said:

*“Yes, yes. Public housing. You'll get more support. And you know with community housing it is more expensive... And you know, I feel like as a single mom, I can't afford Community Housing.”*

Ali described the stated intent to convert the estate from 100% public housing into a mix of community and other non-public tenure types as an abdication of government responsibility. He said:

*“How I see it is, is government is just, it's passing on, it's giving up on saying, “we don't want this responsibility, we don't want the risk and the headache that comes with this. We're going to outsource to a private organization that's going to do some benefits.” But we all know, you know, service providers do think a lot about themselves. And so they don't, even*

*if they say “we put community in front,” they really don't. It's all about themselves, and especially when it comes to paying rent and paying money to them. They're going to think about that.*

*And so the government has put their foot down saying, “we can't deal with this situation,” even though it's not even that big of a deal. And it's small investments, small things that they need to do that. So they've given up and say let community housing. And I think a lot of people who I've spoken to about community housing before, there's that risk of being kicked out, that risk of things not working out, a risk of not being understood and whatnot. So it even puts people in a more uneasy mental situation.”*

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**“If the buildings get demolished, they should stay as public housing, not become community housing or another kind of housing.”**



# Conclusion

The Victorian Government's decision to demolish and redevelop Melbourne's 44 tenanted high-rise public housing towers has been the subject of significant public discussion, but these conversations have often omitted or sidelined the lived experiences and analyses of the situation by public tenants who have been directly affected. MVLS appreciates the opportunity to present the Committee with the perspective of public housing residents in Flemington and North Melbourne and share their views on the impact of the redevelopment plan, as well as the insights of local community workers who have established strong relationships with these estates. Based on our BWP workers' established relationships with estate communities, we were able to facilitate a level of resident

participation in the inquiry process that would not have otherwise been possible. Because of this, we were able to collect in-depth resident and/or worker reflections on the impacts of the Victorian Government's plan for the towers.

The most significant takeaway from our conversations with residents has been a resounding lack of prior consultation or good faith engagement by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and Homes Victoria related to the redevelopment decision. Regardless of interviewees' perspectives on the necessity of redevelopment, not a single person we spoke with stated that they had heard from Government about its plans prior to the public announcement on 20th of September 2023. This led to

widespread distress among estate residents, a sentiment which was not limited to just those residents who live in towers that have been designated within the first tranche of planned redevelopment.

Residents' concerns about DFFH and Homes Victoria's engagement with high-rise estate communities extended to the clarity and type of information provided to them about the government's redevelopment plan post-announcement. There is a notable trend across the interviews regarding experiences of confusing interactions with DFFH and Homes Victoria representatives, which often left residents uncertain about their

ability to exercise their rights as public tenants. Residents also pointed to contradictory information received from government at different points in time, as well as in different formats (e.g. oral reassurances at community meetings contradicted by written information provided in flyers or by the Relocations Team).

We encourage Committee members to sit with the testimonies of current and former residents of the Flemington and North Melbourne estates presented in this submission, and to develop a schedule for robust estate community engagement during the inquiry's hearings.



