



Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation. We work with the most disadvantaged members of the community, providing services and advocacy in the areas of justice and crime prevention; mental health and well-being; settlement and community building; education, training and employment; gender and ecological justice.

Mr Darren Cheeseman (Chair)
Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

8 October 2020

Dear Mr Cheeseman,

Investment in our environmental infrastructure is a crucial element of building more equitable, sustainable, and resilient communities. Jesuit Social Services therefore commends the initiation of this *Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations*, and welcomes the opportunity to respond.

The need to safeguard and develop green and open spaces is ever more important in an increasingly complex time of climate and public health crises, environmental degradation and economic inequality. In addition, as the Committee notes, Victoria's rate of population growth, which was the highest in the country prior to COVID-19,¹ places additional pressures on our environmental infrastructure that will require careful planning. With the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic likely to be severe, there is also an opportunity to create employment opportunities tied to the enhancement of our vital green infrastructure, as part of a socially and ecologically just recovery.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF GREEN & OPEN PUBLIC SPACES

Jesuit Social Services works with people on the margins of society. They are the least responsible for climate impacts, but are the most affected by their emergence. Recognising this, since 2012, we have sought to bring the perspective of ecological justice to all our operations.² Ecological justice is a holistic paradigm, inclusive of social and environmental justice, that rests on the principle that *everything is interrelated*. Ethical action in the environmental sphere is, therefore, central to advancing equity at a social level. This lens informs our approach to thinking about access to green spaces as a matter of ecological, and therefore social, justice.

Infrastructure investment that increases the realisation of ecological justice, including enhancing the availability of and access to green and public spaces, is particularly important for marginalised communities. Green and public spaces are sites where communities come together, where they connect not only person to person, but also with their shared habitat and locale. Shared green and open spaces which are free to all play an important role in building community connectedness, engagement and empowerment. At the individual level, green and open public spaces are important for a host of reasons, for socialising, physical activity, reading, and countless other forms of rest, fitness and recreation that promote health and well-being. Green spaces also help protect biodiversity, keep cities cool in an era of intensifying heat,³ and reduce environmental risks, such as air pollution.

¹ The State of Victoria, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Victoria in future 2019*, https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0032/332996/Victoria_in_Future_2019.pdf

² Jesuit Social Services (2018) *Ecological justice: Expanding the Conversation* <http://jss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Ecological-Justice-Expanding-the-Conversation.pdf>

³ ABC (2019) *Australia's capital cities are getting hotter—but there are ways to cool them down*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-09/how-to-cool-down-your-capital-city-amid-rising-temperatures/11779722>; Jonathan Arundel, Melanie Lowe, Paula Hooper, Rebecca Roberts, Julianna Rozek, Carl Higgs, Billie Giles-Corti (2017)

Importantly, environmental infrastructure planning is critical to ensuring Victoria’s future climate resilience, and should be tied to adaptation planning processes taking place under the *Victorian Climate Change Act*.

For many people living in densely populated areas or in apartments with no outside space, the local park, for example, is a sanctuary for fresh air, sunshine or shade – for just getting out of the house. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of open public spaces has been reinforced. In Victoria, now emerging from a second large-scale lockdown, many know this first-hand. Under Government restrictions necessary to reduce the spread of the virus and safeguard public health, Victorians at the time of writing are permitted to exercise within a 5km radius of their home. However, access to safe and appropriate open space, within local neighbourhoods, may be variable. According to one recent study, around 135,000 homes (or 340,000 people) in metropolitan Melbourne have little or no access to parks within their 5km area.⁴

One of 17 Sustainable Development Goals, agreed upon by UN member states in 2015, is to make cities more “inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable,” including by providing universal access to safe green and public spaces.⁵ According to the United Nations’ *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020*, only 47 per cent of the population live within 400 metres walking distance to open public spaces.⁶ The report also found that on average, only 16 per cent of urban land is allocated to streets and open spaces in 610 cities of 95 countries around the world, of which streets accounted for about three times as much land as open public spaces, such as parks and riverfronts.⁷

Australian cities are generally regarded as among the world’s most liveable. According to an RMIT-led study, 82 per cent of dwellings in metropolitan Melbourne have access to a public open space within 400 metres (similar to Sydney, and slightly ahead of Brisbane and Perth).⁸ While this is a positive metric, other indicators in the study suggest more can be done. For example, fewer residents in Melbourne had close access to a large open space than in Perth and Brisbane, an important indicator given evidence that access to larger open spaces was associated with recreational walking.⁹ Melbourne also had less allocated parkland than several other cities. According to the report, only 20 per cent of metropolitan Melbourne was allocated to parkland, behind Sydney (57 per cent), Perth (40 per cent) and Hobart (22 per cent).¹⁰

As new development projects take shape across metropolitan Melbourne, and land use changes as housing density expands outwards and populations increase, the enhancement of existing green and open spaces, and the establishment of new ones, should be a priority. As one example, the Victorian

Creating liveable cities in Australia: Mapping urban policy implementation and evidence-based national liveability indicators, RMIT University, <https://cloudstor.aarnet.edu.au/plus/index.php/s/CJ4t5N3SFCOZTWP>

⁴ The Conversation (2029) 340,000 Melburnians have little or no parkland within 5km of their home <https://theconversation.com/340-000-melburnians-have-little-or-no-parkland-within-5km-of-their-home-144069>

⁵ UN Sustainable Development Goals, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/cities/>

⁶ United Nations (2020) *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020*, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jonathan Arundel, Melanie Lowe, Paula Hooper, Rebecca Roberts, Julianna Rozek, Carl Higgs, Billie Giles-Corti (2017) *Creating liveable cities in Australia: Mapping urban policy implementation and evidence-based national liveability indicators*, RMIT University, <https://cloudstor.aarnet.edu.au/plus/index.php/s/CJ4t5N3SFCOZTWP>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Government's Pocket Parks program¹¹ is a welcome initiative to create new green spaces in some of our built-up urban areas.

Informed, consultative long-term planning across government

Jesuit Social Services supports the objectives of the Victorian Government's plan, *Protecting Victoria's Environment - Biodiversity 2037*. This plan recognises that there is continued decline in the quality and extent of habitat of native species. Threats to biodiversity include habitat loss, weeds, pest animals and changed fire and water regimes – all of which will be exacerbated by the effects of climate change. Biodiversity has been historically undervalued and is not accounted for in the economy, yet it provides enormous benefits to society.

As the plan recognises, healthy biodiversity is fundamental to the health, wellbeing and prosperity of current and future generations; reduces the impacts of climate change; is vital to tourism; is fundamental to the cultural practices of First Nations Victorians; and has intrinsic value and a right to exist, regardless of human considerations. Jesuit Social Services commends the Victorian Government's commitment to the implementation of Biodiversity 2037 and looks forward to further developments in this area. It remains that healthy biodiversity is the ultimate safety net for all communities but is under threat due to the overwhelming impact of human activity.

The Biodiversity 2037 plan also recognises that “there is no clear ‘ownership’ of green infrastructure” and that green infrastructure projects have “historically been conducted opportunistically, rather than strategically.”¹² The plan acknowledges the need for a whole-of-government approach in this area. **We recommend that this Inquiry informs the development of a long-term plan to securing and enhancing our environmental infrastructure that is informed by local communities, community organisations, and local governments.**

2. GREEN SPACE AND DISADVANTAGE

Jesuit Social Services' research into locational disadvantage over the past 20 years has shown the stubborn and entrenched nature of disadvantage in a small number of communities across Australia. Our *Dropping off the Edge 2015* report found that, in Victoria, only 27 postcodes (4 per cent of total) accounted for 28.2 per cent of the highest rank positions across 22 indicators of social, economic, health and educational disadvantage.¹³ Such factors are also strongly associated with environmental risks and vulnerabilities. In other words, the same small number of postcodes are also likely to experience disproportionate environmental injustice, represented by factors such as fewer green open spaces, greater site contamination (e.g. soil contamination through siting of toxic waste dumps, air pollution through industrial activity etc.) and higher density resulting in fewer natural features such as trees, flora and fauna.¹⁴ Overseas studies have also indicated that environmental infrastructure

¹¹ The State of Victoria, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Local Parks Program Guidelines*, https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0023/430718/Local-Parks-Program-Guidelines-New-Pocket-Parks-Round-2-FINAL.pdf

¹² The State of Victoria, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (2017) *Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037*, https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0022/51259/Protecting-Victorias-Environment-Biodiversity-2037.pdf

¹³ Jesuit Social Services, *Dropping off the Edge 2015*, <https://dote.org.au/findings/victoria/>

¹⁴ Jesuit Social Services (2018) *Ecological justice: Expanding the Conversation* <http://jss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Ecological-Justice-Expanding-the-Conversation.pdf>

such as parks and other green areas may be either rare or of low quality in socially disadvantaged residential areas.¹⁵

Better understanding locational disadvantage, and its interconnection with ecological injustice, will assist urban planners to make environmentally sound and socially just policy decisions, in collaboration with communities. In 2018, Jesuit Social Services began exploring how its *Dropping off the Edge* (DOTE) research could review environmental risks and threats that impact communities. While more research needs to be done, preliminary findings suggested that social disadvantage and environmental risks consistently overlapped. This exploratory research indicated that more policy attention needs to be paid to improving both social and environmental outcomes for those populations and communities already experiencing persistent, overlapping and complex disadvantage.¹⁶

Jesuit Social Services' next iteration of DOTE, begun in 2020, is investigating the presence and setting of local environmental risks and threats that impact communities, supplementing pre-existing indicators of social disadvantage. The study covers indicators including the presence of green and public space, proximity to toxic lands, infrastructure and industry, exposure to climate risk, air quality, and waste management operations in the locality. This report will be released in early 2021.

3. COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT OF INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SPACES

Our open public spaces need to be safe, inclusive and enjoyable for everyone. A range of factors, from disability or chronic ill-health, to availability of transport and financial costs, can impact people's ability to access green or open public spaces. Poorly planned open spaces that don't adequately account for people's diverse needs can perpetuate exclusion. For example, spaces that are only available on a fee-paying or membership basis, hostile architecture or poor design that impedes access or safety, or a lack of adequate lighting.

Public spaces should be designed in such a way that they offer a variety of safe, accessible, free and open places, well distributed throughout and connected to communities. A well-designed open public space has the potential to foster greater inclusion and enhance social cohesion. When people love where they live, communities do better. Research has shown, for example, a strong link between living near nature or green space and measures of mental health among people living in cities.¹⁷ For children, inclusive public spaces such as playgrounds are particularly important. These are spaces that help them see the world, make friends and connections, and appreciate the similarities and differences of others, imbuing tolerance and understanding of diversity at a young age.

In order to develop welcoming and inclusive open public spaces, communities should be resourced to lead the planning, establishment and enhancement of these sites, in recognition that it is local communities themselves that are best placed to understand local needs. This is representative of a place-based approach to policy-making that empowers local communities to design and deliver solutions to the problems that impact them. Recognising the growing efficacy of this approach, Jesuit

¹⁵ World Health Organisation (2010) *Environment and health risks: a review of the influence and effects of social inequalities*, https://www.apug.de/archiv/pdf/WHO-Umweltbedingte_Gesundheitsrisiken_Soziale_Ungleichheit.pdf

¹⁶ Nicer, Stefi Dianne (2018) *Jesuit Social Services, Ecological Justice: DOTE and Environmental Indicators, Final Report* (unpublished)

¹⁷ The Nature Conservancy (2016) *Outside our Doors* https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/Outside_Our_Doors_report.pdf

Social Services is establishing a new national research, advocacy and capacity building centre into place-based approaches to strengthening communities.

4. BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE, CREATING JOBS

Proactively building the capacity of communities to withstand shocks and to learn, adapt and recover is essential, particularly in light of increasingly frequent disasters and emergencies in Australia that will continue to disproportionately affect people who are already marginalised. As seen during last summer's bushfires and now during the COVID-19 pandemic, these crises throw many more Australians into positions of precarity and poverty.

The community resilience approach is well-established and embedded in many local councils, and aid and development programs. Community resilience refers to the ability of communities to create, over the long-term, the enabling conditions for collaborative and equitable adaptation and recovery from emergency events. Resilient communities are those that build social cohesion; ecological resilience; localised social and economic initiatives; strong collaboration and engagement within and between communities and sectors; and prioritise principles of equity and social justice in preparedness and responses, ensuring the needs of the most vulnerable are at the forefront of relief efforts. Community-led projects that safeguard and enhance local environmental infrastructure such as waterways, parks, bushland, and garden plots, would help build community resilience.

There are profound social, economic and equity implications to living within ecosystems under stress and degradation. **To meet these inevitable challenges, and in line with the place-based approach outlined above, Jesuit Social Services calls on the Victorian Government to explore best practice models to adopt a whole of government approach to embedding community resilience within Victorian communities and ecosystems that prioritises community participation and engagement. This will build upon the Bushfire Recovery Victoria with insights from the emerging Resilience NSW, with a view towards eventual national coordination. This approach would help support local communities to build resilience over the long-term, enabling them to withstand and recover from disasters and emergencies when they do occur, and to thrive in the interim.**

Invest in green infrastructure as part of COVID-19 recovery

The economic toll of COVID-19 in Victoria will be significant and prolonged. Recent estimates at the national level outlined that there was one job for every 12 people looking for work,¹⁸ and unemployment and underemployment are set to continue to rise. The role of governments will be crucial in helping to drive the creation of meaningful, sustainable jobs that reduce inequality and advance ecological justice. Green infrastructure investment provides one such opportunity. The City of Melbourne has been cited¹⁹ as a positive example of a local government encouraging green infrastructure through its Green Our City Strategic Action Plan.²⁰ **We call on the Victorian Government to make investment in the state's environmental infrastructure a key plank of its post-COVID-19 economic recovery. This would simultaneously create employment, enhance community resilience**

¹⁸ ACOSS (Sept 2020) *People on JobSeeker need financial security, not cuts, to rebuild from crisis*,

https://www.acoss.org.au/media_release/people-on-jobseeker-need-financial-security-not-cuts-to-rebuild-from-crisis-2/

¹⁹ UNSW Newsroom (2020) *Greener cities could be a key component of our COVID-19 recovery*,

<https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/art-architecture-design/greener-cities-could-be-key-component-our-covid-19-recovery>

²⁰ City of Melbourne, *Green Our City Strategic Action Plan*, <https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/community/greening-the-city/green-infrastructure/Pages/green-our-city-action-plan.aspx>

and public health, and build our climate resilience – key goals which should be intertwined in policy planning as we continue to respond to a public health crisis and an ongoing climate emergency.

5. SAFE, EFFICIENT, SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL HOUSING

Where and how we build housing will be an important consideration as part of the planning to secure our environmental infrastructure. Importantly, we need to recognise that access to safe, secure and affordable housing is an issue for many across the community. The severe shortage in social housing across Australia is well-established. More than 140,000 Australians were on a wait list for public housing as of June 2018.²¹ Victoria lags even further behind, with the lowest proportion of social housing of any Australian jurisdiction.²² On the back of the Victorian Government’s commendable actions in housing thousands of people experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic, we now need to ensure sustainable housing solutions for the future, for all those who need it.

Significant investment by all Australian governments in social (public and community) and affordable housing is vital. Victoria should take the lead. This is imperative from a public health perspective – as this pandemic has shown – and also makes economic sense. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) has made a compelling business case for social housing to be considered as public infrastructure.²³ Infrastructure Australia concurs that social housing is “an important piece of social infrastructure in Australia that serves both a social and economic purpose and contributes to the effective functioning of society”.²⁴ Plans to secure our green infrastructure, while building the sustainable and energy-efficient social housing that we sorely need, should be carefully integrated.

It has been identified that to meet the current shortfall, Victoria would need to build 6,000 new social housing homes annually over 10 years.²⁵ Given this scale, strong partnerships across all levels of government, the community and private sector are needed. Public support for these efforts is clear. A recent poll found 77 per cent of Victorian voters wanted the Government to build more public and community housing.²⁶ **To reduce homelessness and generate jobs, we support and reiterate the Council to Homeless Persons’ call on the Victorian Government to provide significant public investment in building new social housing dwellings.²⁷ We also emphasise that this housing must be safe, sustainable and energy-efficient, and carefully integrated with new and existing environmental infrastructure.**

Jesuit Social Services also supports the joint proposal developed by the Healthy and Affordable Homes Coalition for a national low-income energy productivity program that would improve the energy

²¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (18 July 2019) *Housing assistance in Australia 2019*, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2019/contents/priority-groups-and-wait-lists#pg4>

²² The Housing Peaks Alliance, *Make Social Housing Work*, <https://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Make-Social-Housing-Work.pdf>

²³ Denham, T., Dodson, J., & Lawson, J. (2019). *The business case for social housing as infrastructure*, Australian Housing & Urban Research Institute, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/312>

²⁴ Infrastructure Australia (2019). *An Assessment of Australia’s Future Infrastructure Needs: The Australian Infrastructure Audit 2019*, Infrastructure Australia, Australian Government, <https://www.infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-08/Australian%20Infrastructure%20Audit%202019.pdf>

²⁵ The Housing Peaks Alliance, *Make Social Housing Work*, <https://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Make-Social-Housing-Work.pdf>

²⁶ VCOSS (2020) *Victorians back significant social housing push*, <https://vcoss.org.au/news/2020/08/victorians-back-social-housing/>

²⁷ Council to Homeless Persons (2020) *Victoria needs social housing to end homelessness and stimulate the Victorian economy*, <https://chp.org.au/victoria-needs-social-housing-to-end-homelessness-and-stimulate-the-victorian-economy/>.

efficiency of low-income homes.²⁸ The initiative aims to create jobs in areas of the program such as auditing, installation and manufacturing, and relieve financial pressure and improve the health and well-being of people on low incomes, including those in social housing. This proposal, which meets important objectives such as lower energy bills, cuts in carbon emissions and reduced pressure on the electricity grid, is one we believe the Victorian Government should support. Importantly, this initiative is in line with the need to advance climate resilience and adaptation efforts across our community, of which securing our green infrastructure is also an integral part.

Recommendations to the Victorian Government

- **Recognise and address the interconnection between social and ecological disadvantage that sees the most disadvantaged communities most exposed to climate risks and issues such as poor or lacking environmental infrastructure.**
- **Drawing on the findings of this Inquiry, develop a long-term plan to securing and enhancing our environmental infrastructure, informed by local communities, community organisations, and local governments.**
- **Explore best practice models to adopt a whole-of-government approach to embedding community resilience within Victorian communities and ecosystems that prioritises community participation and engagement.**
- **Recognise the importance of environmental infrastructure planning to ensuring Victoria's future climate resilience, and tie such planning to the adaptation work taking place under the *Victorian Climate Change Act*.**
- **Invest in green infrastructure as part of a post-COVID-19 economic recovery plan, simultaneously creating employment, enhancing community resilience and public health, and building climate resilience.**
- **Invest significantly in building new social housing dwellings that are safe, sustainable and energy-efficient, and that enhance access to new and existing green infrastructure.**
- **Support the joint proposal of the Healthy and Affordable Homes Coalition for a national low-income energy productivity program that would improve the energy efficiency of low-income homes, helping to create jobs, lower energy bills and cut carbon emissions.**



Sally Parnell
Acting CEO, Jesuit Social Services

²⁸ ACOSS (2020) *POST COVID-19 Economic Recovery: Briefing*, <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/200429-Economic-Recovery-Briefing-PDF-1.pdf>.