

Housing Strategy Team
Homes Victoria
Victorian State Government

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Dear Homes Victoria

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *10-Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy* ('the Strategy') consultation, which is seeking feedback about what is most important to build a social and affordable housing system that enables all Victorians to access safe, secure and appropriate housing.

Our submission summarises our feedback on the Strategy, then specifically addresses questions posed in the Discussion Paper, *Establishing a 10-Year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing*.

Summary of Jesuit Social Services' feedback on the Strategy

Jesuit Social Services commends the Strategy's positive vision for every Victorian to have access to a safe, affordable and appropriate home; and principles on which the vision is based – for the housing system to be person-centric; to involve collaborative action and clear roles and accountability across government, service providers, private business and the community; to maximise value; and to be sustainable, ensuring ongoing capacity and capability for growth.

We also commend the bold initiatives already announced and variously implemented by the Victorian Government in working towards the Strategy – namely the range of emergency and transitional measures introduced in 2020 to address and prevent homelessness in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the \$5.3 billion Big Housing Build.

Nevertheless, to ensure a just housing system, Jesuit Social Services believes the Strategy should be strengthened in several ways. These include:

- tightening the terminology to ensure clear, understandable and agreed definitions
- grounding in a human rights framework
- ensuring fair and transparent planning and decision-making processes
- focusing on young people as a priority cohort
- increasing public housing stock, and
- increasing targeted, specialised and holistic packages of housing and support for people whose multiple and complex needs are not met through the private rental market or community housing systems.

Responses to specific consultation questions

PATHWAYS:

What actions will enable people to access social housing, sustain their tenancies, and move between different housing options as their needs change?

Jesuit Social Services believes grounding Victoria's *10-Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy* in a human rights framework is foundational to ensuring Victorians can fairly access social housing, sustain their tenancies, and move between different housing options as their needs change.

Human rights framework

The vision outlined in the Strategy is for every Victorian to have access to a safe, affordable and appropriate home – this vision is for a just housing system. Jesuit Social Services strongly supports the vision and is concerned to ensure it is sustained as a government priority, rather than be subject to budget initiatives that may be dismantled by successive governments through the electoral cycle. We believe the best way to sustain the vision for a just housing system is for the Strategy to be underpinned by a human rights framework and enshrined in legislation.

To this end, we call for the right to housing to be included in the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic). This accords with Recommendation 34 of the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's final report from its recent *Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria* (2021) and is implicit in Recommendation 25 of the final report from the *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System* (2021).

Fair and transparent planning and decision-making

A cornerstone of a just housing system is fair, transparent and timely planning and decision-making that is publicly monitored and accountable. Jesuit Social Services notes that the term *fair* is absent from the Strategy; and that the term *transparent* is used only three times, twice in vague reference to "oversight and regulation" of the social and affordable housing system (pp. 11, 22), and once in relation to "governance around investment" (p. 13).

Following from our call for the right to housing to be included in the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic), we believe the Strategy would be enhanced by adding a principle that embeds fairness and transparency in the planning for and implementation of Victoria's social housing system.

Fair and transparent application and decision-making processes

Likewise, fair, transparent and timely application and decision-making processes would facilitate individual access to and sustainability of social housing tenure, including as tenants' needs change and they move between housing options.

In particular, Jesuit Social Services emphasises the need to prioritise clear and responsive pathways for vulnerable young people into the social housing system and strong supports within the system, to ensure they do not fall between gaps in service provision at key transition points in their lives – such as leaving school (including disengaging from education), transitioning from out-of-home care, transitioning to employment, or transitioning back into the community from the Youth Justice system. Tenancy managers need to understand, and be supportive of and responsive to, young people's specific needs. They also need to assist young people to access relevant supports to help them maintain their tenancies when they encounter challenges. A partnership model can clearly delineate

the provision of housing and support services for vulnerable young people. For example, Jesuit Social Services has engaged in a partnership with [Unison](#) community housing organisation whereby Unison will develop the housing site and manage the tenancies, while Jesuit Social Services will provide the support services for the tenants.

What are the most important features of affordable housing? (e.g. price, location, security of tenure, access to transport or daily amenities, connection to support services etc.)

Jesuit Social Services considers it important that definitions of the terms used in the housing, social housing and homelessness sectors are clear, comprehensible and agreed to ensure common understandings – especially in relation to the term *affordable*. We also advocate a multi-faceted definition of the term *affordable*.

Tighten the terminology

While the definitions of *social housing*, *public housing* and *community housing* used in the Strategy are reasonably widely used, Jesuit Social Services believes the Strategy would benefit from more discussion and clarification of terminology, especially regarding the term *affordable*. *Affordable housing* can be a generic concept in the general housing context, or a specific term in the social housing and homelessness services contexts – it is variously used to refer to affordable purchase price or affordable loan repayments, or affordable rental payments.

Jesuit Social Services is concerned to ensure housing affordability for all, across the range of cohorts and circumstances. For example, many participants in our programs have multiple and complex needs and may never be in a position to consider purchasing their own home. Therefore, we are concerned to ensure *affordable rental* options that provide appropriate and secure long-term support for such people. Meanwhile, we are also concerned to ensure the availability of properties with an *affordable purchase price* and *affordable loan repayments* for people who require less or no support (e.g. they are in stable but low-income employment). To this end, for example, we have been working with not-for-profit property developer, [The Barnett Foundation](#), on a project with the goal of re-developing a site in Brunswick owned by Jesuit Social Services that would create approximately 57 high quality, sustainably-designed, affordable apartments to be sold under The Barnett Foundation model – that is, to be sold to current public housing tenants who would otherwise be locked out of the private housing market.

Broaden the concept of *affordable*

Jesuit Social Services also considers that the concept of *affordable housing* should incorporate affordable price (in relation to rental or purchase, as appropriate) AND security of tenure (for rental), easy access to regular and reliable public transport and amenities (including supermarkets, schools, childcare facilities, medical services, community services, support services, etc.), access to relevant employment opportunities, and energy efficiency and ecological sustainability.

We also argue that an *affordable* dwelling must be located safely and enable flexible living for the resident(s). *Safety* incorporates neighbourhood factors (e.g. adequate openness and green spaces, night lighting), as well as socio-geographic factors (e.g. adequate distance from the residence of a violent ex-partner or parent, proximity to supportive family and social networks). *Flexibility* incorporates the internal sleeping capacity of the dwelling, such as the number of bedrooms or rooms suitable for people to sleep (e.g. a mother exiting prison needs a property with more than one bedroom, to enable her child/ren to be restored to her care, even if only for overnight visits).

What actions will support people to find and obtain an affordable home?

Jesuit Social Services recognises that there must be a diverse range of housing options to meet the different needs of the various cohorts facing or at risk of homelessness – for example, women and children escaping family violence, older women, people with mental health issues, people exiting prison, and young people. For this reason, we believe public housing is a vital component of Victoria’s social housing system, and that it is unrealistic and unviable to rely too heavily on the private and community housing markets to rapidly expand and adequately provide for the diverse range of needs of those who require social and affordable housing – especially young people. We advocate for a significant increase in the number of public housing dwellings, as well as in the number of community housing dwellings; and for young people to be treated as a priority cohort.

Increase public housing

Jesuit Social Services holds that government-owned and managed housing – that is, public housing – is another cornerstone of a just housing system. A key reason for this position is that the decline in Victoria’s social (including both public and community) housing stock over several decades is associated with a “drift to highest needs households”¹ (i.e. lowest income households), which has reduced rent revenue to community housing providers and, along with it, their capacity and arguably also willingness to accommodate people with complex or multiple needs. Regardless, community housing organisations charge tenants more for rent (usually 25-30 per cent of their income plus Commonwealth Rent Assistance) than is charged by public housing (25 per cent of tenants’ income).² Relatedly, research has found that public housing (distinguished from community housing) is a strong protective factor against homelessness, because it is more affordable and provides secure long-term tenure.³

Public housing is a vital component of Victoria’s social housing system for those not accommodated by the community housing industry – including, for example, people experiencing homelessness and young people. This is likely to be the case for years to come due to the increase in homelessness anticipated in Victoria following the ending (in March 2021) of moratoriums on evictions and rent increases that were critical measures in the Victorian Government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic⁴, and because the significant increase in community-based social housing planned under the Big Housing Build will take some time to deliver. We believe that “public housing must continue to be an essential feature of any [social housing] supply mix”, because it “drives down cost of living” and generates benefits throughout the economy.⁵

We support the Victorian Public Tenants Association [Homes For All](#) campaign for the Victorian Government to invest not only in replacement and refurbishment of existing public housing stock, but also in significantly increasing the number of public housing dwellings in Victoria. In particular, we highlight the urgent need for acquisition of a range of public housing properties suitable to the needs

¹ Groenhart, L. & T. Burke (2018). ‘What has happened to Australia’s public housing? Thirty years of policy and outcomes, 1981 to 2011’. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 49(2), p. 18.

² Housing Peaks Alliance (2020). *Make social housing work: A Framework for Victoria’s Public and Community Housing 2020-2030*: <https://apo.org.au/node/303828>.

³ Johnson, G., Scutella, R., et al. (2019). ‘How do housing and labour markets affect individual homelessness?’ *Housing Studies*, 34(7): https://unison.org.au/cms/uploads/docs/journeys-home_housingmarkets.pdf.

⁴ MacKenzie, D. (2021). ‘Homeless numbers set to rise again, but inquiry can be a turning point if we get smarter about housing people.’ *The Conversation*, 31 March 2021: [weblink](#).

⁵ Burns, J. (2021). *The crumbling Australian dream: an examination of Australia’s housing sector*. The McKell Institute, p. 49: <https://apo.org.au/node/311408>.

of young people – that is, low to medium density dwellings, close to amenities (e.g. regular and reliable public transport) and employment opportunities, etc. While [Youth Foyers](#) meet the housing needs of many young people (aged 16 to 24) enabling them to continue their educational and employment pathways, that model is generally not suited to young people with complex and multiple needs, such as those who participate in the specialist supported housing programs offered by Jesuit Social Services.

We call on the Victorian Government to invest in significantly increasing the number of public housing dwellings in Victoria.

Prioritise young people

The final report of the recent [Parliamentary Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria \(March 2021\)](#) identified people under 35 as the largest age group of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria. The report also found that experiencing prolonged youth homelessness is a strong predictor of experiencing homelessness later in life. The latest homelessness and homelessness services data published by the [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(December 2020\)](#) indicates that, in 2019-20, the largest number of young people (aged 15-24) presenting alone to homelessness services in any state/territory was in Victoria – comprising 13,700 clients (or 32 per cent). Yet, young people are not identified as a priority cohort in Victoria in either the Big Housing Build or the *10-Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy*. Jesuit Social Services' experience providing services to young people has found that those experiencing homelessness have the lowest incomes and the highest barriers to accessing community-based social housing.

Jesuit Social Services thus calls for the Victorian Government to treat young people as a priority cohort in relation to social housing, to prevent a clearly identified pathway into longer-term homelessness.

GROWTH:

What actions will enable and deliver growth in social housing?

Jesuit Social Services believes that confidence in a continuous pipeline of funding to facilitate and expand on the Victorian Government's \$5.3 billion Big Housing Build is critical to ensuring continued growth in Victoria's social housing stock. We understand that investment of the magnitude required is not, and cannot be, solely the responsibility of the Victorian Government, and that only so much can be achieved through partnerships with private development, community not-for-profit, philanthropic, and local government organisations.

We argue that significantly greater investment is required by the Federal Government to enable and deliver growth in social housing in Victoria. To this end, our [submission](#) to the *Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia* made recommendations, accordingly.

What do we need to do to ensure housing supply meets the needs of people with specific support and housing needs?

Jesuit Social Services has long advocated for increased investment in the provision of a range of supported housing options for highly vulnerable people with multiple and complex needs. For example, our [submission](#) to the recent *Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria* makes specific recommendations for people involved with the Youth Justice or Adult Justice systems, especially those exiting prison; other cohorts of people with complex and multiple needs (e.g. young people, single people, women, people with experience of trauma, and people with mental ill-health); and cross-sector initiatives (e.g. housing-employment services) to create a more integrated response for people

in crisis.

To achieve a housing system that meets the needs of people with specific needs, we believe that a range of initiatives should be tailored to each priority cohort, with relevant targets, implementation plans and timelines, which are monitored, regularly reviewed and publicly reported on. The necessary strategic planning and systematic oversight of implementation may well require improved resourcing for the relevant Government bodies, which have been undermined and diminished over many years.

We also advocate for significantly increased investment in specific initiatives targeted to people with complex, multiple and intensive *long-term* support needs who too often fall through the service gaps in community housing.

Specialist support packages

We note that the Strategy identifies the desired outcome of “People with complex needs [being able to] access holistic packages of housing and support” (p. 17). However, aside from the development of targeted new ‘social housing stock’ and the existing Tenancy Plus program, the Strategy provides little detail about how this outcome will be achieved.

In this context, Jesuit Social Services advocates for significantly increased investment in specific initiatives targeted to people with complex, multiple and intensive *long-term* support needs – such as through expansion of the specialist housing and intensive support packages accessed by the young participants in our *Next Steps*⁶ and *Perry House*⁷ programs. We emphasise the need to increase funding and availability of specialised housing and support packages targeted to people whose multiple and complex needs are not generally met through the private rental market and community housing organisations. This includes, but is not limited to, people transitioning from prison who often enter it with a cognitive impairment/disability or acquired brain injury and leave with an even higher level of dysfunction. Everyone needs a safe and appropriate place to live, and adequately supported transitional housing is especially important for people exiting the Justice System because it can facilitate their access to employment, as well as to suitable longer-term accommodation. It is not appropriate for people exiting prison to be accommodated in rooming houses, which are generally neither safe nor supportive.

PARTNERSHIPS:

How do we strengthen our partnership approach to build a stronger and more effective social and affordable housing system?

Jesuit Social Services is currently engaged in several partnerships with other organisations to deliver a range of social and affordable housing options. These include the partnerships with Unison and The Barnett Foundation discussed in our responses to previous consultation questions. Another example is our innovative pilot program launched in 2018, *Link Youth Justice Housing Program*, which supports young people (aged 16–22 years) exiting the justice system who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. *Link* secures and sustains participants’ access to stable living arrangements by head leasing through partner agency VincentCare. Such partnerships provide effective models that could

⁶ *Next Steps* is a supported housing program (based at our Dillon House property) for 16–24 year-olds who are involved with the justice system and are experiencing, or are at risk of, homelessness.

⁷ *Perry House* is an award-winning residential-based living skills program for justice system-involved young people with an intellectual disability who are at risk of, or are experiencing, homelessness and require support.

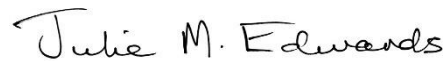
readily be scaled up through targeted, adequately funded, housing initiatives.

ENGAGEMENT:

How can we engage with you as we develop new initiatives over the course of this strategy?

Jesuit Social Services would be pleased to engage in further consultation or deliberative processes with a view to expanding our existing housing programs or developing new housing initiatives in the context of implementing the *10-Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy*.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julie M. Edwards". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Julie Edwards – CEO, Jesuit Social Services