

Ms Sonja Terpstra
Committee Chair
Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee
Via email: planninginquiry@parliament.vic.gov.au

7 February 2022

Dear Ms Terpstra,

Re: Inquiry into the Protections within the Victorian Planning Framework

Jesuit Social Services commends the initiation of this Inquiry into the Protections within the Victorian Planning Framework and welcomes the opportunity to respond.

For over 40 years, Jesuit Social Services has worked with people on the margins of society. We see many people – especially those with mental health and substance misuse issues, newly-arrived refugees and migrants, those exiting prison, and those leaving out-of-home care placements – who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness, inappropriate or unsafe housing, housing instability and stress, as well as other forms of disadvantage in their lives. We also witness how these populations are often the least responsible for ecological risks and threats but are the most affected by their emergence.

Our submission focusses on how Victoria’s Planning Framework, including the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* (Vic), can prioritise the needs of people experiencing vulnerability. We will address this through our responses to the following Terms of Reference:

- Environmental sustainability and vegetation protection, and
- The provision of social housing.

Environmental sustainability and vegetation protection

Ensuring Victoria’s Planning Framework adopts an ecological justice lens is critical to mitigating the risks of climate change for people experiencing vulnerability and assisting them to adapt. In recognition of the disproportionate impact that climate change is having on the people we work with, Jesuit Social Services has woven an ecological justice perspective into the fabric of its work.¹ This perspective acknowledges that the social is deeply intertwined with the environmental, and seeks to achieve a just society by simultaneously addressing the challenges facing the environment as well as social inequities experienced by marginalised communities.

¹ See: Jesuit Social Services. (2019). Expanding the conversation: Ecological Justice series Just Transitions. ([Weblink](#)).

Without concerted action now to build an ecologically just society, the significant disadvantage experienced by communities who are facing housing and environmental insecurity will compound. To this end, we have recently established the Centre for Just Places, with seed funding from the Victorian Government and Gandel Philanthropy. A key focus of the Centre is to build research and advocacy around the need to address the root causes of social, economic and environmental inequality and injustice. Ecological justice is a foundational pillar to the work of the Centre.

Jesuit Social Services notes the below recommendations that would further the protection of Victoria's environment for future generations. When embedding an ecological justice lens, justice and sovereignty for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be at the heart of Victoria's Planning Framework commitment. We cannot plan for environmental protection without acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' strong, ongoing connection to Country and their care of Victorian land for tens of thousands of years.

Develop and safeguard green and open spaces with a focus on disadvantaged locations

Last year, Jesuit Social Services' latest [Dropping Off the Edge report](#) was released—the fifth edition of research spanning over 20 years, which maps disadvantage by location. The report identifies where entrenched and persistent disadvantage is located and demonstrates the complex web of challenges faced by those communities. For the first time, Dropping Off the Edge 2021 includes environmental indicators alongside social, economic, education and health measures. The findings show that communities that experience persistent disadvantage often also experience disproportionate environmental injustice, represented by factors such as air pollution,² heat stress,³ and less green open spaces resulting in fewer natural features such as trees, flora and fauna⁴.

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 that 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 and countless other forms of rest, fitness and recreation that promote health and well-being. Green spaces and increased vegetation are critical to enhance and protect biodiversity, keep cities cool in an era of intensifying heat,⁵ and reduce environmental risks, such as air pollution. Considering these co-benefits, Jesuit Social Services recommends that the Victorian

² Tanton, R., Dare, L., Miranti, R., Vidyattama, Y., Yule, A. and McCabe, M. (2021), Dropping Off the Edge 2021: Persistent and multilayered disadvantage in Australia, Jesuit Social Services: Melbourne. Indicator 32. Pg 236.

³ Ibid. Indicator 34. Pg 236.

⁴ Ibid. Indicators 33 and 35. Pg 236.

⁵ Slessor, C. (2019). Australia's capital cities are getting hotter—but there are ways to cool them down. [ABC \(Weblink\)](#).

Planning Framework accommodate for the development, and safeguarding, of biodiversity and environmental infrastructure, including public green spaces for communities across Victoria to enjoy now, and into the future. This requires that further attention be paid to more disadvantaged areas with limited green space and to newer developments on the urban fringe.

Amend legislation to ensure that climate change is considered in decision-making

The *Planning and Environment Act 1987* plays a critical role in facilitating environmental protection and sustainability. Given the worsening impacts of climate change, it is now more important than ever to take tangible steps to fulfil the purpose set out in the Act – to ensure that the ‘use, development and protection’ of Victorian land meets the needs of all Victorians. Despite not referring to the term ‘climate change’, the Act does include objectives that relate to a climate resilient response, such as: ‘sustainable land use and development, the protection of biodiversity and natural resources, and the maintenance of ecological processes’.⁶

One pathway to improving decision-making processes and outcomes is to strengthen the alignment between planning and climate change legislation. Despite specific clauses in the Victorian Planning Provisions that require the consideration of climate change, amending the *Climate Change Act 2017* (Vic), to include the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* as a Schedule 1 listed statute is an important step in strengthening decision-making. A report prepared for the Department of Environment, Land Water and Planning (DELWP) which involved consultation with local governments across Victoria, highlighted the need for legislative reform to include an explicit climate change adaptation agenda within the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*.⁷

In working with local governments and ‘at risk’ or vulnerable communities to help build local resilience to climate change impacts, the Centre for Just Places is seeing first-hand the importance of better integrating state and local planning decisions to achieve the objectives under Victoria’s Climate Change Strategy and Adaptation Plans.⁸ Improving the alignment between planning and climate change legislation would improve equity outcomes. For example, policy objectives to ‘support vulnerable communities and promote social justice and intergenerational equity’⁹ and the guiding decision-making principle of equity outlined in s26 of the *Climate Change Act 2017*, should also underpin ecologically just decision-making within Victoria’s Planning Framework.

⁶ O’Donnell, T., Maloney, S., Butt, A., and Juszczak, G. (2020). Local Government Climate Change Adaptation Roles and Responsibilities under Victorian legislation. ([Weblink](#)).

⁷ O’Donnell, T., Maloney, S., and Butt, A. (2020). Guidance on Local Government Climate Change Adaptation Roles and Responsibilities under Victorian Legislation, Legislative Analysis and Community Consultation Report. ([Weblink](#)).

⁸ Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. (2022). Climate Change: Victoria’s path to a net-zero emissions and climate resilient future. ([Weblink](#)).

⁹ *Climate Change Act 2017* (Vic), s22(e).

Recommendations

- Recognise and address the interconnection between social and ecological inequities and disadvantage that sees the most disadvantaged communities most exposed to climate change risks and impacts.
- Safeguard and develop green and open spaces that are safe, accessible and strengthen biodiversity outcomes, with a particular focus on locations that experience entrenched disadvantage.
- Pursue legislative reform that includes changes to the *Planning and Environment Act 2017* so that it aligns with the *Climate Change Act 2017* (Vic) and ensures that relevant decisions made under Victoria's Planning Framework mitigate climate change and the inequitable impacts of climate change.

The provision of social housing

On the back of the Victorian Government's commendable investment of \$5.3 billion in the [Big Housing Build](#), we now need to ensure that Victoria develops sustainable housing solutions for the future, for all those who need it. The Victorian Planning Framework plays a role in creating this future.

Since 2018, a key objective of the *Planning and Environment Act 2017* has been to facilitate the provision of affordable housing in Victoria (ss4(fa)). Local government primarily enable this through voluntarily entering into agreements with the Director of Housing, of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, or community housing providers. As part of these agreements, factors such as allocation, affordability, location and tenure must be considered when meeting the housing needs of very low and low-to-moderate income households.¹⁰ While this is promising, we make the below recommendations to further improve the provision of social housing through Victoria's Planning Framework.

Increase the stock of good quality, safe and sustainable public housing

Jesuit Social Services believes that a key pathway to meeting the ss4(fa) objective through the Victorian Planning Framework, is through prioritising the increase in supply of public housing across the State.

Fundamentally, it should be recognised that access to safe, secure and affordable housing is an issue for many across the community. For this cohort, housing insecurity and the risk of homelessness is an everyday threat given the significant lack of social housing across Victoria.¹¹ It is unrealistic and unviable to rely too heavily on the private and community housing markets to rapidly expand and

¹⁰ *Planning and Environment Act 1987* (Vic), *Specified Matters Under Section 3AA(2) Ministerial Notice* (17 May 2018). ([Weblink](#)).

¹¹ Raynor, K., (2020, 18 November). Victoria's \$5.4bn Big Housing Build: it is big, but the social housing challenge is even bigger. *The Conversation*. ([Weblink](#)).

adequately provide for the diverse range of needs of those who require social and affordable housing. Public housing, facilitated in the Planning Framework through agreements between Councils and the Director of Housing, should be prioritised going forward given its affordability and security of longer-term tenure.¹²

Additionally, it is critical to ensure that new public housing dwellings are located, built or acquisitioned in locations that have a close proximity to infrastructure, amenities, transport, employment, environment, and importantly, community.

Embed long-term, wrap-around and tailored supports

People in both public and community housing must have access to long-term, wrap-around and tailored supports to ensure that they can sustain their tenancies.¹³ This is particularly important for tenants with multiple and complex needs who are known to cycle in and out of the social housing system.¹⁴

Cross-sector and long-term initiatives are required for people living in social housing with complex and multiple needs (e.g. young people, single people, women, people with experiences of trauma, and people with mental ill-health). 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.

We advocate for Victoria’s Planning Framework to play a greater role in encouraging integration of housing with 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. An example of integrated service delivery 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 readily be scaled up through targeted, adequately funded, housing initiatives. Jesuit Social Services would welcome the opportunity to provide this support model in public housing settings.

¹² Johnson, G., Scutella, R., Tseng, Y. P., & Wood, G. (2019). How do housing and labour markets affect individual homelessness?. *Housing Studies*, 34(7), 1089-1116. ([Weblink](#)).

¹³ Taylor, S. & Johnson, G. (2021) Sustaining social housing: Profiles and patterns. Melbourne: Unison Housing ([Weblink](#)).

¹⁴ Seelig, T., O’Flaherty, M., Haynes, M. & Han, J. (2008). Housing Consumption Patterns and Earnings Behaviour of Income Support Recipients Over Time. Melbourne: Australian Housing & Urban Research Institute, Final Report no. 118 as cited in Taylor, S. & Johnson, G. (2021) Sustaining social housing: Profiles and patterns. Melbourne: Unison Housing ([Weblink](#)).

Prioritise young people

The final report of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria identified people under 35 as the largest age group of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria.¹⁵ The report also found that experiencing prolonged youth homelessness is a strong predictor of experiencing homelessness later in life. 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. We therefore call for young people to be treated as a priority cohort in relation to the provision of social housing, to prevent a clearly identified pathway into longer-term homelessness.

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 develops the housing site and manages the tenancies, while Jesuit Social Services provides the support services for the tenants.

Ensure social housing is safe, sustainable and climate resilient

Jesuit Social Services is concerned to ensure that pre-existing inequities in housing in Victoria are not exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. As we collectively face increasingly harsh climatic conditions, the lack of adequate housing for sections of our community is an inequality that, if unaddressed, will exacerbate existing health inequities and undermine social cohesion.

Research shows that the changes observed in Australia's climate will continue well into the future, with more frequent and hotter days, extreme rainfall events and severe fire-prone weather expected to occur.¹⁶ We strongly emphasise the need for effective implementation of climate safe and energy efficient design in the planning and construction of all new public and community housing, and for this to become an integral part of Victoria's Planning Framework. Housing, and adaptations to make

¹⁵ Parliament of Victoria. (2021). Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria: Final report. ([Weblink](#)).

¹⁶ CSIRO. (2021). *Climate change in Australia*. CSIRO: Canberra. ([Weblink](#)).

housing more climate resilient and efficient, must be carefully integrated with new and existing infrastructure and services.

In this context, Jesuit Social Services supports the Victorian Council of Social Services recommendation that solar panels should be installed on public housing properties, and included as a priority in the planning of all future properties. VCOSS suggests that a program of this nature ‘will make tenants healthier and save them over \$800 a year on electricity bills.’¹⁷ Housing needs to be sustainable; both environmentally and financially. It is therefore critical to the tenure of properties that the costs of facilitating climate resilient thermal features in social housing, like adequate heating and cooling, does not come at the financial burden of residents.

Recommendations

- Incorporate greater protections to ensure that both Local and State Government deliver an adequate supply and development of affordable public housing.
- Play a greater role in encouraging integration of housing with specific initiatives targeted to people with complex, multiple and intensive long-term support needs.
- Treat young people as a priority cohort in relation to the provision of social housing, to prevent a clearly identified pathway into longer-term homelessness.
- Include provisions to ensure that current and future public and social housing is safe, sustainable, climate-resilient and energy-efficient.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission. If we can be of further assistance during this inquiry, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely,



Sally Parnell
Acting CEO, Jesuit Social Services

¹⁷ Victorian Council of Social Services. (2021). The way forward: Victorian Budget Submission 2022. ([Weblink](#)).