



OPINION PIECE

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Behind recently reported resident outcries about consultation on new social housing developments lie more than just issues of due consultation and housing design. There's an element of fear, loathing and snobbery dressed up as community concern.

Fair enough I'd be upset if I looked out my window and saw a demolition site next door with a permission to build a seven storey housing block. There's no question that local authorities must get better at consulting with people about issues that affect their lives and properties. But that does not tell the whole story.

The subtext here is community anxiety, and even fear about social housing and its residents. Some residents are alarmed that their communities will be less desirable, or even safe if someone less wealthy, or educated moves in next door. What they don't realise is that these people are already living there. Potential residents of social housing are a part of our communities. They're the ones through sheer bad luck, or misfortune can't afford home ownership, so spend a significant proportion of their income on paying the rent, or going homeless.

Victoria has a severe shortage of affordable housing. In fact social housing makes up a lower percentage of Victoria's housing stock than any other Australian state or territory. Yet Melbourne is fast closing the gap on Sydney as the country's largest city.

Meanwhile Melbourne is gripped by a housing affordability crisis that is getting steadily worse. Hardly a day goes by without the media screaming headlines about soaring house prices rises. Rental vacancies in rural and regional areas are getting squeezed and house prices are escalating as people move further afield in search of an affordable home. These skyrocketing prices lock more and more Victorians out of home ownership and in to lifelong renting and insecure housing. Housing affordability is an issue that must top the government's agenda.

Unfortunately today's release of the Victorian Government's much anticipated Integrated Housing Strategy was a lost opportunity to plan for how Victoria can meet its housing needs into the future, affordably and equitably. There's a lot in the strategy that the Government is already doing, and they should be applauded for those initiatives, but important opportunities have been missed.

The strategy urgently needed to harness the planning gain that land owners receive when their property is rezoned by implementing inclusionary zoning; to set in place a dedicated growth fund to ensure affordable housing keeps pace with population growth; and to deliver a shared equity options to give struggling low income households a real chance to get their foot in the property market.

Furthermore, there was little there to boost desperately needed public and community housing stock. Without it, Victorians falling on hard times will fall much harder as a consequence.

While communities must have a right to have a say about development in their local community, should these rights outweigh the right to housing for those in need?

Often social housing providers with limited resources have to leave land purchased for a social housing development vacant, paying interest on their loans while battling expensive VCAT objections to their proposals. While some of these objections are raised by thoughtful objectors on behalf of potential residents, like the size of the units being too small, or that 'these' people shouldn't be located next to a pub, club, or school or they should have more open space. While these sound like well meaning concerns, they jeopardise someone's chances of living in a decent home.

Clearly to spring social housing developments on communities is counter productive. Residents do have a right to know what's happening in their local area, but when objecting to a development they must bear in mind what's happening in other parts of their city.

Each night over 21,000 Victorians are homeless. Others struggle to make rental payments and are forced to move out of their local community, moving their kids from the local school, family networks and travel hours to get to work.

It's time for Melbourne to have an honest and adult conversation about planning and its implications for affordable housing. If we don't want to see our urban growth

boundary constantly extended then it's crucial that all of Melbourne be prepared to undergo some redevelopment for social housing as well as increased density for private developments.

The truth is in order to ensure Melbourne's long-term sustainable growth we have to get more social housing built because our city suffers from a paucity of affordable homes. To put it more bluntly it's time Melburnians got over their fear of social housing in their own backyards.

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