

APRIL 11, 2019

***Housing Needs in the City of  
Yarra:  
Consultation Report with  
Community Housing  
Organisations***

Beyerley  
Kliger  
& associates

# Contents

<b><i>Introduction</i></b> _____	<b>1</b>
<b><i>Context</i></b> _____	<b>2</b>
<b>Affordable and Social Housing</b> _____	<b>2</b>
<b>Needs Analysis</b> _____	<b>4</b>
<b><i>Community Housing in the City of Yarra</i></b> _____	<b>10</b>
<b>Community Housing Stock and Expressed Need</b> _____	<b>10</b>
<b>Key Issues</b> _____	<b>11</b>
<b><i>People and Households in Housing Need</i></b> _____	<b>15</b>
<b>Key Households Confronting Housing Stress</b> _____	<b>15</b>
<b>Current Community Housing Households in Yarra</b> _____	<b>17</b>
<b>Emerging Need Groups in Yarra</b> _____	<b>17</b>
<b><i>Suggested Role and Activity for Council</i></b> _____	<b>21</b>

## List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

<b>AIHW</b>	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
<b>Council</b>	Yarra City Council
<b>CRA</b>	Commonwealth Rent Assistance
<b>DHHS</b>	Department of Health and Human Services
<b>VHR</b>	Victorian Housing Register
<b>Yarra</b>	The municipality of Yarra

## Introduction

Beverley Kliger and Associates was contracted by the City of Yarra to conduct in-depth interviews during March 2019 with five key housing agencies to obtain information and data on:

- local housing needs
- unmet needs
- the experiences and role of community housing organisations.

The interviewees were provided confidentiality and as such the material provided in this summary does not cite individual sources of the information or the quotes. Please note quotes are *italicised*.

The time that the community housing representatives provided for the interviews is greatly appreciated.

This report summarises the information and data gathered during the interview process regarding local housing needs, and the role of community housing organisations. It also sets out community housing organisations experiences and perspectives regarding the role of the Yarra City Council (Council).

It is intended that this information will supplement the work Council has undertaken with regard to social and affordable housing needs.

## Context

The report commences with a context section setting out an overview of:

- the difference between affordable and social housing;
- the role of community housing organisations; and a
- needs analysis.

This overview establishes a benchmark for understanding the summary of discussions held with community housing organisation representatives on housing needs in relation to social and affordable housing.

### Affordable and Social Housing

Affordable housing is the outcome of complex interactions between household income, the costs of maintaining a reasonable standard of living, and the costs of adequate, appropriate and secure housing. As such, the problem of housing affordability can be due to low household income and/or high housing costs. Lack of affordable housing is a significant issue across Victoria.

The Victorian government provides the policy and legislative framework within which community housing organisations operate. *Plan Melbourne 2017-2050* is the Victorian Government's long-term planning strategy, guiding the way the city will grow and change to 2050.

Plan Melbourne defines affordable and social housing as:

**Affordable housing** is housing that is appropriate for the needs of a range of very low to moderate income households, and priced (whether mortgage repayments or rent) so these households can meet their other living costs.

**Social housing** is a type of rental housing that is provided and/or managed by the government (public housing), or by a not-for-profit organisation, (community housing). Social housing is an overarching term that covers both public housing and community housing.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Plan Melbourne 2017-2050, Strategy

Social housing provides rental housing in perpetuity to low household income groups. In the City of Yarra, social housing is provided as:

**Public housing** – provided, owned and managed by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Victorian Government. DHHS charges rent at 25% of gross household income.

**Community housing** – provided, owned and/or managed by community housing organisations. There are two types of community housing organisations in Victoria, referred to as Registered Housing Agencies:

- **Registered Housing Associations** develop, own and manage housing. Whilst housing providers generally focus on management of social housing, some are also developers and owners of affordable housing. Some community housing developed by housing associations and providers can be developed independently of government. Housing associations charge rents at 25% of gross household income for DHHS-owned housing they manage. At the same time, they can charge rents of up to 30% of income (or 75% of market rent) for housing they own. Registered housing associations can house people with incomes up to 65% higher than incomes of people living in public housing.
- **Registered Housing Providers** tend to be smaller than Registered Housing Associations. They can charge rents of up to 25% of gross household income for DHHS-owned housing they manage and can charge rents up to 30% of gross household income for housing they own.

There are five community housing organisations that currently, or in the future will, provide affordable housing in Yarra. These five community housing organisations are all Registered Housing Associations and have all been interviewed for this report.

The Victorian Government has a substantial policy and program focused on stimulating the growth of affordable and social housing. By defining and setting affordable housing income levels, in the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*<sup>2</sup>, for very low, low and moderate-income households, the

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<sup>2</sup> Section 3AB *Planning and Environment Act 1987*. Victorian Government Gazette No. S 256 Friday 1 June 2018.

government has established the benchmark for assessment of housing needs. The Victorian Government definitions of these incomes is set out in Table 1 below, which indicates the households whose income falls within the affordable housing income ranges.

*Table 1: 2018 Affordable Housing Income Levels for Greater Capital City Statistical Area of Melbourne*

<b>Household</b>	<b>Very low income range (annual)</b>	<b>Low income range (annual)</b>	<b>Moderate income range (annual)</b>
<b>Single adult</b>	Up to \$25,220	\$25,221 to \$40,340	\$40,341 to \$60,510
<b>Couple, no dependants</b>	Up to \$37,820	\$37,821 to \$60,520	\$60,521 to \$90,770
<b>Family (with one or two parents) and dependent children</b>	Up to \$52,940	\$52,941 to \$84,720	\$84,721 to \$127,080

*Source: Planning and Environment Act 1987, Section 3AB, Order in Council*

The Victorian Government has also established guidelines for application of agreements reached with developers per Section 173 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*. The State Government is delivering a key message that there is a role for collaboration between local government, the private sector and Registered Housing Agencies in creating affordable housing.

Moreover, the Commonwealth Government's new funding mechanisms for affordable housing, such as the bond aggregator, could act as a limited stimulus for growing effective partnerships between the housing development industry and community housing organisations.

## **Needs Analysis**

Needs assessment, as a process of identifying and prioritising needs, is crucial for successful allocation of limited funds and land for the development of social and affordable dwellings in Yarra.

It is important to note the ambiguity in the use of the term 'need'. For example, when we say that 'public spending should be directed to those in most need', it has the effect of diminishing the scale of overall need, as those without most need are seen to be less deserving. For example, in Australia, where there is a relatively small proportion of social housing, 'most need' has come to be interpreted as households who not only have a housing problem, but overlay it with a range of

complex issues such as mental illness, addiction, family and domestic violence. This has meant eligibility access for housing allocation has been structured in such a way that households cannot access social housing if they only have a housing problem, such as a major affordability problem, overcrowding, poor quality housing, poor amenity, isolation, unsafe or insecure housing.

In principle there are three broad levels of housing need. The policy consequences are set out in Table 2 below.

*Table 2: Level of Housing Need and Policy Implications*

<b>Level of Housing Need</b>	<b>Potential Income Levels</b>	<b>Social/Affordable housing Requirement</b>
<b>1. Households unable to afford appropriate (secure and affordable) private rental or purchase who have no other housing or wellbeing issues and are ineligible for social housing.</b>	Moderate Income	Significant opportunity for affordable housing without support provision and with shallow subsidy, e.g. discounted market rent.
<b>2. Households with major affordability issues who may have other housing issues, (e.g. locational needs) but at a level which does not warrant priority access to social housing.</b>	Low to moderate income depending on circumstances	Major growth opportunity for social housing and/or affordable housing but without support. Moderate subsidy required.
<b>3. People who experience issues in 1 and 2 above and suffer wellbeing issues (such as domestic violence, disability) which warrant priority allocation.</b>	Very low to moderate income depending on circumstances	Conventional role of social housing but one which also requires support provision. Deep subsidy, e.g. land, capital and recurring costs required.

There are three ways to measure housing need and these are summarised below. A brief discussion of each measure is provided with an outline of the advantages and problems of employing each measure.



1. **Objective need** is established by ‘experts’ based on a standard criterion or measure, such as a poverty line, or an affordability measure.
2. **Subjective need** is expressed by clients based on their own perspective of need. This can be expressed through client surveys or by clients’ actual application to a service. The problem is, clients may not be able to adequately identify their needs, as distinct from their wants. Moreover, client needs are often shaped by harsh day-to-day realities, including eligibility criteria for services or the stigma that attaches to a service.
3. **Expressed need** is used by economists. It equates with demand, expressed through the market (amount of goods or services which consumers are willing and able to pay for) or through waiting lists for public or community services.
  - a. **For market expressed demand**, there is the dilemma of whether it genuinely represents a person’s need, or whether it reflects the lack of alternative consumption possibilities such as, in the case of housing, affordable and available private rental housing. There is also a more fundamental problem. Market-based demand requires an income to express it, and therefore if demand is not expressed it is considered there is no need. This is a problem for social housing, as low income people do not have enough income to demand private rental hence the use of social housing waiting lists.
  - b. **Waiting lists** as a measure of expressed need are also problematic. They tend to underestimate need, particularly for services where there may be a lack of awareness of a program. Thus, as Burke et al.<sup>3</sup> found, almost half of Commonwealth Rent Assistance recipients were not aware that they may be eligible for public housing, greatly understating actual rental need. The same study found that the stigma attached to public housing and the lack of locational choice, also deterred application.

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<sup>3</sup> Burke, T., Neske, C. and Ralston, L., 2005, *Which households eligible for public housing do not apply and why?*, AHURI Research and Policy Bulletin No. 62, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/research-and-policy-bulletins/62>

Additionally, the wait time is so long, particularly for non-priority clients, that many households see no point in applying. Also, waiting lists are subject to changes in eligibility (tighter eligibility reduces the list) and culling, making it difficult to ascertain the real needs.

This study uses a mix of subjective and expressed need as the community housing organisation representatives referred to the applications to their service and observations of their tenants' needs.

## **Community Housing Organisations in Yarra**

All five community housing organisations that currently provide community housing or are in the process of developing community housing in Yarra were interviewed for the project.

Community housing organisations are providers and managers of affordable, secure and appropriate housing and, where appropriate, associated support for people facing housing stress and at risk of homelessness. They have a unique insight into the need for housing both locally and regionally.

The community housing organisations and their representatives interviewed are set out below:

### **Common Equity Housing Ltd (CEHL), Nicola Foxworthy, Program Director**

**CEHL** is a Registered Housing Association, a provider and developer of affordable housing. CEHL partners with independent co-operatives to provide the CEHL Housing Program. CEHL provides long-term tenancies with co-operative management of housing.

The co-ops manage their housing and member tenancies, while CEHL provide co-ops with technical expertise, program management, asset portfolio management and resourcing.

Target Group: moderate income earners

### **Community Housing Ltd (CHL), Shari McPhail, Victorian State Manager**

**CHL** is a Registered Housing Association, a provider and developer of affordable housing. CHL provides rental housing at subsidised market rents or at a percentage of income, for low to moderate income households who are unable to secure long-term affordable housing or are disadvantaged by private rental market.

CHL is currently developing housing within the City of Yarra at the Alphington Paper Mill redevelopment.

Target Groups: Low to moderate income earners

**Unison Housing, Ed Holmes, Chief Executive Officer**

**Unison Housing** is a Registered Housing Association, a provider and developer of affordable housing. Unison provides social and affordable long-term rental accommodation for people who are on a low income and at risk of homelessness. Tenants can be employed or on Centrelink benefits. The properties range from rooming houses, to apartments, units and houses.

Unison Housing (formerly Yarra Community Housing) historically provided rooming house and studio apartment accommodation within the City of Yarra.

Target Group: (Homelessness) Very low income to low income earners

**Housing Choices Australia Ltd, Roberta Buchanan, General Manager, Housing Services; Ellie Francis Brophy, Victorian State Manager**

Housing Choices is a Registered Housing Association. Housing Choices provides long-term housing with a priority for people with a physical or mental disability.

Housing Choices aims to create safe, quality and affordable housing for people struggling to find a home in Australia's challenging private rental market; working with partners to create resilient and inclusive communities.

Target Group: Very low to moderate income earners with a focus on disability

**Women's Housing Ltd (WHL), Judy Line, Chief Executive Officer; Lindy Parker, Operations Manager**

WHL is a Registered Housing Association in Victoria. WHL provides low costs housing to women at risk of homelessness.

Target Groups: Very low and low income women, with a focus on women escaping domestic violence

Whilst the five community housing organisations operate across several municipalities the interviews concentrated on the issues confronting the community housing organisations and needs for affordable and social housing specifically within Yarra.

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## **Community Housing in the City of Yarra**

### **Community Housing Stock and Expressed Need**

A request for data on the current community housing stock led to information being provided by two of the three community housing organisations that currently have dwellings in Yarra. The two community housing organisations currently with the highest numbers of social housing stock in Yarra reported the following numbers:

- Unison Housing with 639 properties in Yarra; and
- Housing Choices with 72 properties in Yarra.

On their website, CEHL state that they have 64 properties in Yarra, half of which are 2 bedroom dwellings.

The long-term community housing stock is primarily a mix of 1 and 2 bedroom dwellings. There is a small number of 3 bedroom community housing properties and at least one 5 bedroom property.

Due to the fact that community housing organisations operate across several municipalities and are now working within the new Victorian Housing Register (VHR) referral system it was difficult for them to provide client and waitlist data specifically for Yarra, particularly as the VHR is in a transitional phase<sup>4</sup>.

The community housing representatives have however been able to provide information regarding housing need in Yarra drawn from consideration of their current tenants, trends in applications for housing and those they have been unable to assist.

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<sup>4</sup> It was proposed that once the VHR referral system has been operating for a year, detailed data will be more readily available at the municipal level.

## **Key Issues**

The interviewees raised the following key issues currently faced by community housing organisations in the municipality of Yarra (Yarra):

### **Ageing and Unsuitable Stock**

There is a burgeoning need for community housing organisations to allocate funds for maintenance of older stock. Several community housing organisations are reviewing the suitability of stock given the changing needs of the community, changing expectations and standards of social housing, and quality of the community housing organisations' current stock. Community housing organisations are considering both renovation of their existing stock and upgrading existing stock through the sale and subsequent purchase, or building of, newer replacement stock.

An example is the change from rooming houses with communal facilities to self-contained one bedroom and/or studio apartments. As one interviewee stated:

*Older people (a growing social housing needs group) prefer self-contained rather than rooming houses.*

The conversion of rooming houses is costly, especially if there is a heritage overlay which creates an added financial pressure on the community housing organisation.

The determination to upgrade through the sale of existing stock and purchase or build of newer replacement stock, creates a challenge in Yarra, due to the high cost of land and housing.

### **Lack of Appropriate Community Housing for Families**

Community housing organisations are struggling to meet demand for housing in Yarra due to the lack of affordable and appropriate housing stock.

In Yarra, there is very limited 3 and 4 bedroom affordable housing stock due to the high cost of land and housing. This has resulted in very few families of two or more children able to be housed in Yarra even when the families have social networks and work opportunities in the municipality. This is a strongly held concern. As stated by one interviewee there is a:

*Mismatch of stock and needs ... we struggle to respond to demand in Yarra ...we can't assist couples with children.*

Another interviewee stated that it is a:

*Challenge to purchase or build 3 bedroom properties in Yarra, as it is too costly. We can develop larger housing in the West but not Yarra.*

Community housing organisations are aware of a demand for larger housing in Yarra, albeit small. The low level of demand for larger social housing stock of 3 and more bedrooms in Yarra, is almost certainly due to the fact that there is very little community housing of this size so people do not seek to apply. Applications for housing tend to reflect the type of housing provided by the organisation.

As one respondent stated:

*Families with 3 or more children do not apply for housing in Yarra given there is no housing.*

### **Support Services for those at Risk of Homelessness**

The causes of homelessness are complex. They can include the cost of housing, family violence, unemployment and mental health issues. There are a variety of types of services and supports that are required to help an individual or family end homelessness. These services may be specialised programs for people experiencing homelessness, or they may be broad services (such as health, financial counselling and/or drug treatment facilities), or specific services that are geared to individual or family needs. These support services are provided by governments, charitable organisations, faith communities and/or the non-profit sector.

There was an overall recognition by the interviewees that:

*For people who are at risk of, or have been, homeless there is a need for support services to accompany the housing provision.*

The community housing organisations in Yarra work in partnerships with a range of support services to ensure tenants' health and wellbeing, their future prospects and engage with the community.

Additionally, comments were made that Yarra is a good location for social housing for people with a disability as there is a range of support services available locally. As one interviewee stated:

*Yarra has a whole network of services such as hospitals, health centres, transport links and libraries.*

However, concern was raised about the ability of the community housing organisations' support service partners to sustain support for residents to maintain their tenancies and engage in local opportunities. Of particular concern was continuing mental health support, due to the changes associated with the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

### **Community Cohesion and Social Housing Tenants**

The long term health and well-being of tenants is a major consideration in determining allocation. As one interviewee stated about housing allocation decisions:

*Allocations for long-term housing take account of the need to ensure social harmony and cohesion.*

As such, community housing organisations consider the tenant mix within the housing development and appropriateness of the local amenities, services and infrastructure for the prospective tenant.

### **Public Housing Waiting Lists and Impact of a Centralised Victorian Housing Register Application System**

To facilitate access to public and community housing the Victorian government has established a single register of applications for all social housing, known as the Victorian Housing Register (VHR). There are two categories on the VHR:

- *Priority Housing*, which is designed for people who may be homeless or who have an urgent need for housing; and the
- *Register of Interest*, for people who do not have an urgent need for housing but who have a low income.



In December 2018, the VHR Transition Report stated that in Victoria there was 62,419 social housing applications; 15,528 for community housing and 47,056 for public housing, of which 49% were for priority access.<sup>5</sup>

In December 2018 the total number of social housing applications for North East Melbourne, which encompasses Collingwood, Fitzroy and Richmond, was 988 applications; 624 priority and 364 register of interest applications.<sup>6</sup>

There was consensus amongst the interviewees that there is a need to address the high numbers of people on the social housing waiting list. As such, the interviewees were in favour of the new VHR common waiting list. Respondents felt that it would eliminate duplication and the need for people to repeat their stories, which can be traumatic.

There was however some wariness about the requirement for community housing organisations to now take 75% of applications from the priority waiting list. This requirement would limit the capacity of housing organisations to offer housing to people with limited assets who may not be able to afford private rental but are not on the priority housing list. Concern was also expressed by one respondent that the VHR would not be able to cater for people confronting a housing crisis.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://housing.vic.gov.au/victorian-housing-register> cite 25 March 2019

<sup>6</sup> The report for the Victorian Housing Register (VHR) <https://housing.vic.gov.au/victorian-housing-register> cited 25 March 2019

## **People and Households in Housing Need**

This section begins with a concise summary of the households facing housing stress in Australia and the reason for their precarious housing situation. This sets a framework for understanding the particular issues confronting community housing organisations and the local community in Yarra.

**Housing stress** occurs when households have to pay a large proportion of their income on housing costs (rental or mortgage payments) and thereby reduce spending on essentials such as food, energy and health<sup>7</sup>. Generally, a benchmark of housing stress is when households on very low, low and moderate incomes spend more than 30% of their income on housing costs.

### **Key Households Confronting Housing Stress**

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) identified several population groups that are susceptible to housing stress due to their vulnerabilities. The main groups confronting housing stress across Australia were identified as:

- **Older people** (65 years and over) are susceptible due to their reduced earning capacity, retirement incomes being lower than earned incomes, and the increased expenses due to the potential onset of health issues and the need for appropriate and accessible housing.
- **Single people** across all age ranges are susceptible to housing stress. This includes young single people (up to 25 years of age) who are susceptible due to their limited incomes, particularly those on Newstart. Single people who are not working are also vulnerable due to their limited income, lack of affordable private rental housing and lack of security of tenure if they are renting in the private market.
- **Lone parents with dependent children** are susceptible due to their limited income and lack of affordable private rental.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/policy/ahuri-briefs/2016/3040-indicator> cited 4 April 2019

- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people** whose vulnerability is exacerbated by existing disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>8</sup>
- **Older single women** have been identified in numerous reports and research studies<sup>9</sup> as a group that is particularly susceptible to homelessness and are increasingly approaching housing and homelessness services for support. The reasons for older women's vulnerability are linked to economic and social factors that result in older women's financial disadvantage including:
  - the gender pay and superannuation gaps – women retire with generally half of men's superannuation and some with no superannuation;
  - change in circumstance such as divorce, death of partner, change in health;<sup>10</sup>
  - violence including elder abuse;
  - part-time work and time out of the workforce due to caring for children and other family members.<sup>11</sup>

However, the housing affordability problem is not only due to insufficient supply of affordable and social housing stock. The problem also relates to the location of dwellings relative to where:

- householders live or want to live (e.g. near social and service networks and supports);
- their low income relative to high housing prices;
- the preferences of householders for different types of dwellings (this is particularly relevant for people with a disability seeking accessible and appropriate housing); and
- the size of households relative to the size of housing (number of bedrooms).

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<sup>8</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2018, data provided at the National Homelessness Conference, 6-7 July Melbourne

<sup>9</sup> Tually S., Beer A. and Faulkner D., 2007, *Too Big to Ignore: Future Issues for Australian Women's Housing 2006-2025* AHURI Southern Research Centre; Sharam, A., 2008, *Going it Alone: Single, Low Needs Women and Hidden Homelessness*, Women's Information, Support and Housing in the North, Melbourne; McFerran, L., 2009, *The disappearing age: a strategy to address violence against older women*, Older Women's Network NSW Inc.; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2007, *It's about time: women, men, work and family*, HREOC, Sydney; Casey, S., 2002, 'Snakes and ladders: women's pathways into and out of homelessness', in T. Eardley and B. Bradbury (eds), *Competing visions: refereed proceedings of the national social policy conference*, 2001, Social Policy Research Centre report 1/02, University of New South Wales, Sydney.

<sup>10</sup>Equity Rights Alliance and Homelessness Australia, 2015, *Ending and Preventing Older Women's Experiences of Homelessness in Australia: Joint Submission of Homelessness Australia and Equity Rights Alliance to the Senate Inquiry on the Economic Security of Older Women*

<sup>11</sup> YWCA, 2018, *Older Women's Homelessness Issues Paper*

For example, families with three or more children struggle to find suitable housing of three or more bedrooms, and low incomes may lead people to move to areas with lower priced housing but with limited public transport and social infrastructure, increasing their cost of living.

### **Current Community Housing Households in Yarra**

Long-term social and affordable housing is provided in Yarra by registered housing organisations for many very low and low income households, and some moderate income in need including, single people, single parents, couples, Indigenous people, young people and small families.

Single households are the largest household group in social housing in Yarra, with more males than females. This is likely to be due to the high proportion of rooming house accommodation that is available Yarra. This accommodation is often not suitable for women due to the design of the dwelling not providing a safe environment.

There is expressed demand for long-term rental housing from single people, with the highest demand from people in receipt of a Disability Support Pension followed by people in receipt of Newstart.

The interviewees suggest, that the highest number of community housing tenants are in the age range of 25 to 54 years. This is followed by people over 55 years of age. However, one organisation stated that the average age of their community housing tenants is 59 years.

Young people 15-24 are the smallest cohort of community housing tenants in Yarra.

### **Emerging Need Groups in Yarra**

It was stated that all low and moderate income household groups are in need of affordable housing and people living on Centrelink incomes are in particular need of social housing. Interviewees outlined that they were observing increased demand from a range of household types in Yarra. These households are set out below.

## **Women**

Housing for low income women is a growing area of need and community housing organisation representatives mentioned the needs of women from different age cohorts.

One reason given for older women's growing need for housing was that:

*Older women need housing following a marriage break-up.*

Older women who become single due to a divorce, separation or becoming widowed struggle to afford private rental and 'age in place'.

It was proposed that older women were also struggling with the cost of maintaining underutilised houses when their families have left and they are widowed. Many of these women express concern that if they sold their properties they would have to move into a new area away from social networks and may become socially isolated:

*Older women in larger housing are wary of 'downsizing' due to their fear of not finding affordable housing in Yarra.*

There is also a demand for long-term, affordable, secure and safe housing for women and their dependents escaping domestic violence. Transitional housing for women with children that is shorter-term (18 months to 2 year durations) is available, however there is concern that when women are ready to move from transitional housing there is very limited appropriate and affordable long-term housing in Yarra.

*There is a road block, there is limited long-term affordable, secure housing for women in Yarra.*

One interviewee stated that their organisation is experiencing an increase in demand from younger single women, both under 30 years of age and under 20 years of age, seeking housing. But that there is very little affordable and appropriate social housing for them in Yarra.

*There is nowhere for younger women to go to be housed in Yarra.*

## **Older Single People**

Another group that community housing organisations observed experiencing increasing need for social housing is single people over 55 years of age. This is especially the situation for older people that are not in the workforce, living on Newstart, and with limited retirement funds or alternative incomes.

## **People with a Disability**

It was highlighted that the municipality of Yarra is a good location to provide appropriate, affordable and social housing for people with a disability. As such there is continuing demand for suitable affordable housing for people with a disability. As stated by one interviewee:

*Yarra is a preferred location for low income people with a disability, as the municipality has an extensive range of health and community services as well as good transport networks.*

## **Moderate Income Households**

It was also identified that there is a growing need for affordable housing for moderate income households. It was proposed that these moderate income households are moving out of the municipality and losing their social supports and networks because of the lack of affordable housing in Yarra.

*Moderate income households in Yarra who are being driven into a housing crisis as housing costs rise.*

## **Low Income and Key Workers**

The particular issues confronting low income wage earners and key workers in Yarra were raised in the interviewees. Before outlining the issues, it is worth noting the difference between low income workers and key worker as:

- **Low income workers** are functional workers providing services to the community, such as cleaning, child care and hospitality services such as bar staff and baristas.

- **Key workers** work in occupations that provide essential human services to the community such as nursing, policing, ambulance, and teaching.<sup>12</sup>

Affordable housing is provided by some community housing organisations for low income working households in Yarra, such as child care workers, taxi and Uber drivers and service workers such as those working in hospitality, cleaning and sales. These low income workers often live in a precarious situation with casual employment and income being a combination of Centrelink income and wages. It was outlined that:

*The casualisation of many occupations of the low income workforce [such as cleaners and hospitality workers] results in their lack of certainty regarding capacity to pay rents.*

This results in low income workers seeking housing in less costly, outer metropolitan suburbs. Whilst this group may not face the risk of homelessness, they will have their limited income reduced by high travel costs to Yarra from the areas where they can afford to live. The problem in the longer term may be experienced by businesses in Yarra as low income workers (cleaners, café staff etc.) may be hard to find as they search for work closer to where they can afford to live.

Community housing has traditionally not provided affordable housing for moderate income key workers such as police and ambulance paramedics. However, as one community housing representative highlighted:

*Consideration is being undertaken as to how to house low and moderate income workers who will be, or are, unable to afford to live in Yarra, and emerging lower paid occupations that will be in Yarra over the next 10 years.*

As a case in point, the community housing that will be provided at the new development at the Alphington Paper Mill site, will be focused on providing 1 and 2 bedroom rental properties with fixed rent over 10 years to moderate income service workers.

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<sup>12</sup> T. Burke & B. Kliger, 2019, *City of Port Phillip Housing Needs Assessment and Allocations Framework Report* (unpublished)

## **Suggested Role and Activity for Council**

Interviewees were keen to provide information on a range of actions that Council could implement to assist the development and sustainability of community housing in the municipality. These proposed actions are set out below, in no order of preference.

- Any transfer, gift or sale of Council land, should not limit community housing organisations to hold specific community housing properties in perpetuity. That is, ensure the property value is retained in the municipality, but the community housing organisation have the capacity to change the actual property, to reflect changing needs and property conditions. This facilitates asset management for the community housing organisation and ensures that the housing stock reflects the needs for community housing over the long-term.
- The Council's Social and Affordable Housing Strategy should determine the level of social and affordable housing that the Council seeks to encourage (i.e. the proportion of housing stock that is affordable housing) and the population cohorts that Council seeks to encourage to reside in the municipality now and into the foreseeable future. This estimation should be undertaken both for the whole of the Council area and by precincts (areas within Council). The Social and Affordable Housing Strategy should be linked to the Municipal Health Plan and Municipal Strategic Plan so that the Strategy has standing as part of the City of Yarra Planning Scheme and Health policies.
- It was preferred that Council does not use a Section 173 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* for the development of affordable or social housing. Community housing providers stated that when the land is gained with a Section 173 agreement the community housing providers cannot use the land as equity to obtain a bank loan with a mortgage over the property. Community housing organisations depend on bank loans as a key mechanism for financing community housing development.
- Council should consider innovative approaches to new developments with mixed-use buildings and building in air space, for example over refurbished or new health centres and retail shopping areas. It was proposed that:



*Building social housing above health centres provides immediate access to support services and enables “ageing in place”.*

- Council should consider providing assistance (financial or expertise such as heritage planning advice) to community housing organisations with their work to upgrade old community housing stock in the municipality. Council’s assistance could ensure that community housing owned social housing stock is retained in Yarra and the replacement stock is not located outside the Yarra municipality.
- Council should identify land that could be allocated to community and/or affordable housing. This was an action clearly articulated by most of the interviewee for example:

*Council could identify possible sites for social housing such as underutilised recreation halls, scout halls and cark parks.*

- Council should consider reducing expenses of community housing organisations by providing rate relief for properties owned by community housing organisations. This was cited by a number of community housing representatives as a valuable way that Council could contribute to reducing costs for community housing organisations.
- Inform Councillors and the community about the difference between affordable and social/community housing. Council could assist the community to develop an understanding of the role of community housing organisations. Numerous comments were made regarding this including:

*Community housing organisations respond quickly to needs of the residents, neighbours and the broader community. For example by ensuring that properties are kept well maintained and support tenants, and by working with neighbours to ensure social harmony and cohesion.*

It was stated that Council work with community housing organisations to:

*Break down the perception that social housing is high-rise public housing.*

It was suggested that Council could publish good news stories about the provision of community housing and set out the positive outcomes to individual tenants and local communities.

*Happy tenants in a settled community, [makes a] happy community.*

*People on Centrelink benefits are good tenants, social housing tenants have the same aspirations as private tenants.*

- Council should work in partnership with community housing providers and private developers. One interviewee stated that:

*The partnership, between community housing providers and private developers, could work to ascertain the most optimum housing mix in Yarra that takes account of the developers' economic needs and the most appropriate affordable and/or social housing outcomes.*