

## PUBLIC

### **THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY SELECT COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AFFORDABILITY MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM, GROUND FLOOR, HENTY HOUSE, CHARLES STREET, LAUNCESTON ON TUESDAY 20 AUGUST 2019.**

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**Ms RIA BRINK**, AND **Ms LESLEY IKIN**, KARINYA YOUNG WOMEN'S SERVICE, WERE CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED.

**CHAIR** (Ms Standen) - Sorry about the delayed start and thank you for your forbearance. I would like to reiterate some important aspects of that document. A committee hearing is a proceeding in parliament. This means it receives the protection of parliamentary privilege. This is an important legal protection that allows individuals giving evidence to a parliamentary committee to speak with complete freedom without the fear of being sued or questioned in any court or place outside the parliament. It applies to ensure that parliament receives the very best information when conducting its inquiries. It is important to be aware that this protection is not accorded to you if statements that may be defamatory are repeated or referred to by you outside the confines of the parliamentary proceedings.

This is a public hearing. Members of the public and journalists may be present, although not apparent to me right now, but this means that your evidence may be reported. It is important that should you wish all or part of your evidence to be heard in private you must make this request and given an explanation prior to giving the relevant evidence.

Finally, there is a change to the terms of reference with the House resolving to add a new term of reference to the committee's terms for the inquiry, namely -

- (ka) Regulation of rent price increases with particular reference to the ACT model.

We welcome your input on any or all of the terms of reference.

Thank you for being here. It is terrific to hear straight from you to add some more information to your submission. If you would like to begin by providing an opening statement then we can get into questions and discussion.

**Ms BRINK** - Lesley and I are here to represent the Karinya Young Women's Service that has been operating in Launceston for 40 years now, initially as a shelter for 16- to 25-year-old women, but that changed around 2002 when the age range dropped to accommodate young women between 13 and 20. Karinya also operates a young mum's program that provides accommodation for young parents, so young mums and dads. That is currently government funded but only for a three-year period. After that we don't know what's going to happen.

Last year Karinya started to manage transitional housing for youth in Launceston. NYAC, or the Northern Youth Accommodation Coalition, has been around for about 24 years. Initially there were purpose-purchased units in the community, which slowly has been replaced by housing stock. There has been a change so Housing Tas no longer manages those properties and Karinya put in a bid for it last year to manage the properties. There are 12 designated one-bedroom units in the community for young people between 16 and 20. That's roughly, in a nutshell, what Karinya does.

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**CHAIR** - Thank you for that overview. It is wonderful to talk directly with you to add some more information. We've heard quite a lot about financial barriers, and discrimination and all sorts of things. Given that your focus is on younger people, would you like to add some flavour for us around the sorts of circumstances that the young people who come to your service are coming from, and what sorts of futures there are for them?

**Ms IKIN** - When you are talking about financial limitations or exclusions, most of ours given the age group, actually aren't even on an income. Your 13- to 16-year olds don't even have access to an income so they're completely out of the property market and the housing market. For those 16 and above it's a matter of accessing unreasonable to live at home or whatever other type of benefit they might be able to access, depending on their circumstances. In some of those cases the circumstances are very clear cut. They aren't able to live at home any more for reasons of family violence, drugs and alcohol, or overcrowded situations, which often happens. But there is a time lag in terms of accessing income in any case. Added to that is the fact that most of them have never lived independently and in some cases haven't had particularly strong role modelling in terms of independent living and how to manage a tenancy. So even if they can find accommodation they need the support to be able to maintain that accommodation. For most of them private rental is not on the cards at all.

**Ms BRINK** - Not any more.

**Ms IKIN** - Not any more. Landlords and real estate agents would probably put young people at the bottom of their list of who you would be putting into a very competitive list of tenant possibilities. They miss out all the time.

**Ms BRINK** - We have seen great changes over the last 25 years.

**CHAIR** - Are you saying that's more about discrimination? We heard in the south of the state particularly about very small occupancy rates, very few private rental properties available. Is that your experience in the north of the state as well?

**Ms IKIN** - Absolutely it is, and that makes it a very competitive market. The least popular choice on a list if you have a working couple or a working single versus an 18-year-old who for the first time can sign a lease, they're going to be favouring those that fit the mould of a more stable and reliant tenant.

**Ms BRINK** - We put in our submission also to really put youth on the agenda because we know the housing affordability and you read other submissions. I read the Shelter submission which was very strong about needing more social housing. Of course, that seems like a very simple answer - more houses built will fix everything - but it's really important to also look at the different population groups that are struggling to get into the housing market. Young people are a specific cohort. Even within that there are huge variations, like kids with disabilities, young people with mental health issues, first time out of home with very few independent living skills. There is also no longer interplay with child protection that used to be a lot stronger 25 years ago, so people find themselves independent at a very young age.

Of course the landscape has changed as well. About 20 years ago you could probably rent a room in someone's house and there were options for boarding and options for entering the labour market at a young age. All these things have changed dramatically, but the housing opportunities haven't kept pace with the changes in our world.

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**Ms O'CONNOR** - We heard some testimony in the hearings in Hobart about a particular squeeze on availability of private rentals and the affordability, and a lot of the focus of the discussion about the housing situation has been on the south of the state. You point to specific issues for the cohort of young women and young people you work with. What has changed in terms of availability and affordability for young people in Launceston over the last five or six years? From the witnesses who are coming before us in Hobart, something happened and changed in about 2014.

**Ms IKIN** - The type of rentals our younger people used to be able to access, the lower end of the rental market that was prepared to accept younger tenants at that point, a lot of them have moved up and they're seeing more money in perhaps Airbnb or similar types of things. So they've changed their focus a little bit and are no longer available. There is just a huge number of other prospective tenants who are prepared to take less than fabulous rental properties now and that pushes the younger ones out. I don't know exactly why that is; we haven't really looked at why.

**Ms BRINK** - But it's also the availability. If you look at an income which is \$450 a fortnight you basically don't see many rentals under \$200 to \$250 a week, so how on earth can someone on an income of \$450 spend \$200 in rent?

**Ms O'CONNOR** - And rents have gone up.

**Ms IKIN** - That's what I mean about those lower-end ones that they may have been able to pick up at \$150 a week at one stage with two bedrooms and share with a friend. They're just not there anymore. It's squeezing them out of that market totally.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - You would see some of those young people who can't find accommodation and they are at a particular stressful point in their lives. What are you hearing about what is happening to young people, particularly from lower socio-economic backgrounds who can't find housing in Launceston at the moment?

**Ms BRINK** - There is a lack of hope and lack of dreaming. When you see the kids in the shelters, private rental doesn't even enter their thinking anymore because it is just unattainable. Then comes this attitude that their only pathway is housing, which is a waiting game. At the shelter we try to say they need to try to look for exit options or they have applied for housing, that's it. There's nowhere else.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - They've given up on the private rental market.

**Ms BRINK** - Absolutely. It doesn't even factor in their thinking.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Karinya manages about 29 Housing Tasmania properties according to your submissions?

**Ms IKIN** - Yes.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Twelve of them are specifically units for 16- to 20-year-old. In terms of exit points for Karinya, you point to people staying longer in crisis accommodation. That has been a trend that was happening even when I first met you as minister. Is it even harder now for Karinya to find an exit for the young people you have in your care for a while?

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**Ms BRINK** - It's very limited. It's the three options we put in our submission. It's either the Niak(?) units, Thyne House is an option or Housing. Basically, that is all people can look at. Over-18s have a few other supported accommodation options like Indigo Lodge in (?) Street which we didn't mention because our focus is really on the under-18s who are caught. Once they find themselves homeless they have very few options, very few places to go.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - And then the vicious cycles begin.

**CHAIR** - Because under-18s can't take a tenancy agreement.

**Ms BRINK** - No. Private landlords used to accept under-18s quite readily. That hasn't been the case for years.

**Ms IKIN** - And the same with brokerage accommodation?

**Ms BRINK** - Yes.

**Ms IKIN** - We have a three-year age range, with the 13- to 16-year-olds who do not have anywhere. They don't have access to income, they don't have access to external support agencies, they don't have access to accommodation.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - What happens to those kids?

**Ms BUTLER** - Can you run through how you case-manage a 15-year-old parent with support services, accommodation and what's available to them at the moment.

**Ms IKIN** - A young parent is an easy one because we run our Young Mums 'n' Bubs Program. That is why we started it. That was a primary program we were driven to fight for because we simply lacked options. An under-18 with a child couldn't access Magnolia, the women's shelter. We couldn't keep them in the refuge for very long. We kept lobbying for other services that we thought were more appropriately positioned to set up something like Young Mums 'n' Bubs. That didn't happen so 12 years ago we started the process of setting up Young Mums 'n' Bubs.

If a young woman who is pregnant comes into the refuge we can forward them into our Young Mums 'n' Bubs program, even at 15. If they are brought to our attention at 15 with a baby, we can't accommodate them in the refuge but we will hook them into our Young Mums 'n' Bubs program and they will do assessments and take them in there. A 15-year old without a baby we would be case-managing and encouraging them to return home, if it is safe, until they are 16 and they have more options. That is not ideal.

**Ms BUTLER** - And if it's not safe at home because usually if they are presenting, there is an issue?

**Ms IKIN** - We have already done a mandatory report to Child Protection. That's happening. We get an acknowledgement for that; very rarely would we get a response for 15-year old so we have to try to hold on to them until they can find somewhere like a couch-surfing situation with a friend's family or a -

**Ms BRINK** - Or a stay in Karinya for a long time.

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**Ms IKIN** - For four or five months in crisis accommodation, which is counterproductive. We are meant to be a six-week or eight-week stay at the most. We have a no visitors policy, security issues, shared rooms. You can imagine having someone live in that environment for five months when it is meant to be crisis, it is not particularly conducive to good outcomes.

**Ms BUTLER** - That is a big gap in the system.

**Ms IKIN** - It's been one of the biggest gaps for a long time.

**Ms BRINK** - We try to be creative. We had a 15-year-old who was quite independent. We did get special permission to rent a unit and she was living there independently. She was able to finish year 10 and finish college. We accommodated her until she was able to move on, but there are not many 15-year-olds who would be so skilled at independent living.

**Ms BUTLER** - They are the ones with a bit of flair.

**Ms BRINK** - Yes. The year before I had a 14-year-old who was with us on and off. She kept on going back home, it was not a safe situation. She was probably with us for six to eight months. When she was 15 and had an income she managed to self-fund a foster placement through Temcare.

**Ms IKIN** - Which is still going on.

**Ms BRINK** - Which is still going years later. That is also being creative.

**Ms BUTLER** - How does that work?

**Ms IKIN** - That is being creative and us doing lots of phone calls with Temcare and trying to find an option for her that fitted. This is a young woman who obviously really wanted to stay at school and was finding it difficult to be able to do that when she was couch surfing. We could see that just finding somewhere stable for her was going to make all the difference in the world, which it has. Temcare came to the party.

**Ms BRINK** - So, you look at creative solutions, but they are not sustainable solutions and are not available for everyone.

**Ms BUTLER** - What could Temcare provide to -

**CHAIR** - Last question and I'll go to Mr Tucker.

**Ms BUTLER** - Sorry.

**Ms IKIN** - They did what they could. It was a one-off situation. They are not resourced enough and have enough carers to be able to provide for all the under 16-year-olds we have coming through. Some under 16s do not want to live in a family because family is not something that is very pleasant for them. They need support, but it is not necessarily in a family environment. It is not one homogenous group of people. It is actually very different. It is about having options out there for them, supported options.

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**Mr TUCKER** - Family breakdown is obviously a big problem here. We heard about this. Are there things that we can bring in as a government to try to alleviate some of the pressures?

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Well, you could not enact the poker machine legislation, which will lead to family breakdown.

**CHAIR** - Ms O'Connor, we've given the call Mr Tucker.

**Mr TUCKER** - Thank you.

**Ms BRINK** - It's a really difficult question because how can you prevent family breakdown. There are so many aspects to that. The fallout from family breakdown that we see is young people becoming homeless. In situations where it is just not safe to return home there need to be options.

It doesn't sit completely in the housing sphere, it also sits in the child safety sphere. It is really important that government looks at those typical silos where housing or crisis accommodation sits in one silo and child protection sits somewhere else and the two will never meet. There needs to be some changes in that system where there could be a more integrated and wholistic response.

Where there are possibilities to return home it is really important that places like [??? 2:29:35] are appropriately funded to facilitate a safe return home. In some cases it is possible the family just needs assistance. We are not saying that every 15- or 16-year-old that comes in through the shelter should have a house. Where it is appropriate to return home that is the first place you would start.

**Mr TUCKER** - You said before that you can help a young girl with a baby at 15 but you can't help a single girl before she is 16. Do you see that it makes the girls want to get pregnant to fix that issue?

**Ms IKIN** - No. The only reason we can help them is because we worked really hard to help them. We created a program and we fought very hard to get the funding for it. That is not an easy kind of parallel to make. There used to be a huge amount of comment about the baby bonus, for instance, that girls got pregnant just to get the big TV. Ms Brink and I have talked about this before because we have been doing this for a long time and I don't think we have seen many big TVs in many young women's houses, sadly. That is because they can't afford it, not because they didn't get the baby bonus. I don't think young women do that. For most young women who get pregnant, it is either by mistake or they simply want someone to love and who loves them. It is not about material things as such.

**Mr TUCKER** - How do we fix that problem with them wanting someone to love them?

**Ms IKIN** - I can't answer that one right now. It is human nature to want someone to love and human nature for that not to work sometimes. In terms of what you were mentioned before, as to what can be put in place to address family breakdown, families, for hundreds of years, thousands of years, possibly, have always broken down. We are human, but alleviating some of the extra stresses that are out there at the moment with affordable housing, gambling, drug and alcohol counselling, a number of things like this, can perhaps minimise or mitigate to some extent the fact that family breakdown will happen. We can't fix it.

**Mr TUCKER** - You made a statement that it has occurred throughout the years. It would be interesting to see some actual data that backs up what you are saying.

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**Ms IKIN** - I imagine it would. There is a very old saying that it takes a village to raise a child, and that is to say that communities used to support each other in that way.

**Mr TUCKER** - I think you have hit a nail on the head there. It is something I have been trying to push.

**Ms IKIN** - When a breakdown occurred it probably didn't appear the same way as it does now because it wasn't an isolated unit breaking down, it was one part of a larger unit.

**CHAIR** - I might follow up with a question about child safety. You mentioned that, on occasion, you will refer to child safety and that you will get an acknowledgement but not a response. I find that hard to comprehend.

**Ms BRINK** - It is very rare to get a response for over 13-year-olds.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - What do you mean by 'response'?

**CHAIR** - Can you elaborate on what response you would be hoping for and expecting?

**Ms BRINK** - That the case will be investigated properly and, if need be, a child taken into care.

**CHAIR** - Do you sit down with child protection workers and understand what is going on? People are falling between the gaps.

**Ms IKIN** - We have attempted to come to some kind of agreement about it many times over the years. There is a little bit of thinking within child protection that if they are in a type-three crisis accommodation service that they are safe. What we are saying is it is temporary and they're not safe for many reasons, some of which are covered quite well in the legislation, one aspect in being safe from themselves. They're not rational thinkers, they are going to be making some perhaps unwise choices. It is not only investigating the home, it is around the whole story of that child and what is going on for them. We just don't get any 13- to 15-year-olds picked up, in all honesty.

**CHAIR** - A couple of years ago, an Anglicare researcher was doing work on unaccompanied minors in the out-of-home care system. I remember attending an event at the children's commissioner's office. You are much more engaged in this space, this is your real area. Are you aware of any practical outcomes from that sort of attention on that area in the last couple of years?

**Ms BRINK** - The youth task force is currently looking into that situation.

**CHAIR** - Can you tell us some more about that?

**Ms BRINK** - The under-16s task force, it's Mark Mason.

**Ms IKIN** - We had Mark and Megan visit us the other day. They are putting together, is that a standing committee as well?

**Ms BRINK** - I am not sure.

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**Ms IKIN** - It is a task force inquiry, which I believe is reporting their findings at the end of October -

**Ms O'CONNOR** - It's not a parliamentary inquiry as such, I don't think.

**Ms IKIN** - It could be departmental.

**CHAIR** - Okay.

**Ms IKIN** - Catherine Robinson is also on that task force.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - I wanted to have a chat about the role of Centrelink in the situation that some of these young people make their way or are forced into. You talk about it in the submission. There are a whole lot of challenges, aren't there, with the way Centrelink approaches children who are not living in the family home for a whole range of reasons? Can you elaborate on them, please? Where do you begin?

**Ms BRINK** - Sometimes, even beginning is the really hard part because the goalposts keep on changing. They need to do online applications, for starters. Some of these young kids are couch surfing, they have no mobile and they have no access to internet, so doing an online application, often with low literacy levels, is quite a challenge. The Centrelink website is certainly not the most user-friendly.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - I think that's by design.

**Ms BRINK** - Absolutely. It is quite difficult. Their claims are investigated and that's appropriate. Then, the reporting requirements start. That is where a lot of young people find themselves constantly being cut off. If you don't have a stable address and don't necessarily have a mobile phone or access to internet, we are talking about kids that are often quite disengaged from school. I quite often get a phone call, 'I just found out I got cut off and my rent hasn't come out'. We are constantly negotiating.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - With Centrelink?

**Ms BRINK** - With the young people. We do have some fantastic workers in Centrelink that will help sort the problems and reinstate them quite quickly.

**Ms IKIN** - Which is fine if a young person happens to be linked into a support service that has that relationship with the social workers at Centrelink, but it doesn't help those that aren't.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Who are probably in the majority.

**Ms IKIN** - Yes. That is a real downfall because they would probably find it very difficult to link into those particular workers that are in a position to help them.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Which is compounding the risk of homelessness and at-risk behaviours.

**Ms IKIN** - Yes, to get the money that wasn't in the bank this week.

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**Ms BRINK** - We've had some cases in which someone was cut off and then had to reapply from scratch. She had to prove all over again that it was unreasonable to live at home, so she was without money for three or four months before her Centrelink was reinstated. That is three or four months in a shelter with basically nothing and nowhere to go because the whole time she was with us was spent reinstating Centrelink.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Have you found that Centrelink's approaches have become more punitive in recent years?

**Ms BRINK** - Yes.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Since when, roughly, do you think?

**Ms IKIN** - I've noticed it more in the last three years than prior to that. There are so many more cases of kids being cut off very rapidly. One other thing, too, was that the third-party evidence for our age group is really difficult. With the unreasonable to live at home application, for instance, there is a requirement for a third party, which is understandable, but at the same time for many of them in a family violence situation there really isn't a third party who has witnessed that and that leaves them with a very strong case or a likelihood of being knocked back.

**Ms BRINK** - Although mum says now she can live at home because she doesn't want to lose her parenting payment.

**Ms IKIN** - And no, we've never touched her or whatever else and there's no third party to back up the young person's side.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Can't Karinya play that role?

**Mr BRINK** - No, we can't, because often when they come into a crisis situation we only hear one side of the story so it's not really appropriate. We can say this is the side of the story we heard but you still need more proof to back up the facts.

**Ms IKIN** - School social workers play a part with that.

**CHAIR** - You mentioned your young mums and dads program has a three-year funding agreement but that is coming to end, as far as you understand. Is that state government funding?

**Ms BRINK** - Yes, but we're hoping it's not going to come to an end.

**CHAIR** - Part of this committee's role is to look at system gaps including funding arrangements to ensure continuity of services that are making a worthwhile impact. Can you talk about your funding security at the moment and what you would like to see?

**Ms BRINK** - The funding for Young Mums 'n' Bubs came about as an election promise from both Labor and Liberal and if that promise hadn't happened we would have had to shut down that space.

**Ms IKIN** - We'd already operated for six years with philanthropic help so we'd had a couple of bites of the cherry from -

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**Ms BRINK** - The problem with philanthropic funding is that they tend to fund new pilots and new projects. So once you become an ongoing project, after six years there is no philanthropic that would really fund a full program, so we were very fortunate to get government funding.

**CHAIR** - When does your current funding run out and what security do you have? Do you have any indication what might happen next, and whether you have the opportunity to apply for ongoing funding?

**Ms IKIN** - No, we haven't had those discussions yet.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Quite handily, it will expire not long before the next state election.

**Ms BRINK** - I think we're a year out.

**Mr TUCKER** - I want to come back to communication and community. In my own community we set up a mental health action group in the local council. The issues that came out to us was communication and community. I wondered if you want to expand a little more on where you were heading before with that.

**Ms BUTLER** - Between the different providers in Launceston?

**Mr TUCKER** - Between local government and state government and providers. One of the things that came to us with mental health was that we had providers operating in the community but neither of them could operate because they didn't have enough clients, but when we combined them together they could operate. Then we found we were missing other services because we were getting these services when we didn't need them but we needed those other services, and it was communication, not funds.

**Ms IKIN** - I suppose as a grassroots organisation we can sit back and look at where we think that communication breaks down. One example of that, we have just formed an informal coalition with two other youth services in the north and north-west of the state to overcome some of those issues as well. One is to give us strength as a voice because we are all small organisations but also to better communicate with each other and share our external resources, for instance, training and those things if anything comes up. We have overcome that at a level where we can act on it, but we often see what we call the old shuffling the deckchairs on the *Titanic*, where a state government is talking about doing this, but we have very little to do with local government, I have to say.

**Mr TUCKER** - It is a huge issue right across the state. It really opened my eyes up when I saw what occurred with our mental health action group at Break O'Day Council. The flow-on effect with communication was enormous and it wasn't about funding.

**Ms BRINK** - We have network meetings run through the council, so youth service providers come together on a regular basis to share information and ideas.

**Mr TUCKER** - What about the providers? Do they come together in those meetings?

**Ms BRINK** - The homeless providers have very strong networks so we work together really well and the Housing Connect model makes sure that you have to work in partnership with other organisations.

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**Ms IKIN** - Perhaps the breakdown is between us and the mainstream service providers such as the hospitals. We work really well with the Education department because of the age group we work with, but hospitals -

**Mr TUCKER** - That's interesting because charge nurses were on that group as well.

**Ms IKIN** - Hospitals are an issue, especially working with mental health-affected clients.

**CHAIR** - We are going just a few minutes over but we were late starting, so last question to Ms Butler.

**Ms BUTLER** - I wanted to ask you a bit about the increasing demand for your service since we have started in this housing affordability crisis and whether you have seen an increase in demand and also the impact of that demand, if there has been one, on your workload?

**Ms BRINK** - I think through the years it's probably quite a steady stream of young people that we see. The biggest difference we are experiencing is longer stays which then impacts on the house being full. We are now also seeing the young cohort which is quite tricky to work with because there are not enough external agencies that work with this target group. The biggest problem is more the flow-through. Yes, there has been an increase in clients but not hugely. Family breakdown and issues of youth becoming homeless probably saw a steep rise until about 2008 and then it sort of plateaued and seemed to be sitting on that same level, but the exit points definitely have plummeted.

**Ms BUTLER** - You made a comment about hospitals being an issue. Would you like to elaborate on what is going on there?

**Ms IKIN** - We get a number of referrals from the hospital for young people who have come in through what was 1E, Northside, or have come into emergency following a psychotic episode, for instance, but we don't get the information passed on to us with the referral about their state and how to manage that state. For various reasons the hospital feels they don't have to give us that information despite us asking for it, which makes it very difficult for us to manage that young person and the rest of the household to whom we have a duty of care. We also don't get the information about the medication they have been put on during the time they were in there that was controlling their behaviours and what the impact was going to be when it was wearing off. It happens. It doesn't happen all the time but it's happening quite regularly now, particularly around drug-induced psychosis and psychotic episodes connected to ice.

**Ms BRINK** - There used to be a mental health protocol or referral protocols that obviously are sitting on a shelf somewhere and not being used, but that's facilitated information-sharing and at least you knew that a person was stable or had ongoing medication or needed to go back to hospital. We don't get any -

**Ms BUTLER** - Protocols protect you and protect them; that's why there are protocols.

**Ms BRINK** - Yes, and we're usually only one worker on shift with six young women, so if you have someone who is psychotic and potentially dangerous, that's not the best duty of care to any party.

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**CHAIR** - We could spend another three-quarters of an hour, I am sure. Thank you so much for sharing that information. Incidentally, I visited Launceston City Mission's facility today and that precise issue around medication management and referral pathways was raised with me, so it was good to hear that from you.

**Ms IKIN** - I'm glad it's not just our service.

**CHAIR** - I don't think so, no. You're special but you're not different.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Did you learn that being a mum?

**CHAIR** - I just made that up on the spot.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - It was pretty good.

**CHAIR** - I am required to read you a final statement before you leave us. As I advised you at the commencement of your evidence, what you have said to us here today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Once you leave the table you need to be aware that privilege does not attach to comments you may make to anyone including the media, even if you are simply repeating what you said to us. Do you understand that?

**Witnesses** - Yes.

**CHAIR** - Thank you very much, Ria and Lesley. We very much appreciate your time. Thank you for all that you have done. I know that you do not have a lot of time to spare.

**Ms BRINK** - Thank you for having us.

**THE WITNESSES WITHDREW.**

## **PUBLIC**

**Ms WENDY FOWLER** WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

**CHAIR** - Thank you for coming, Ms Fowler. We are required to read a statement before you provide evidence. I will introduce the panel and we will get underway. Thank you for appearing before the committee. Thank you for the time you have put into your submission and for appearing before us today and giving us the opportunity to chat about your thoughts. We are very pleased to hear your evidence today. Before you begin giving your evidence, I would like to ask whether you received and read the guide sent to you by the committee secretary?

**Ms FOWLER** - Yes, I did.

**CHAIR** - Highlighting a couple of important aspects, a committee hearing is a proceeding in parliament. This means that it receives the protection of parliamentary privilege. This is an important legal protection that allows individuals giving evidence to a parliamentary committee to speak with complete freedom without the fear of being sued or questioned in any court or place out of parliament. It applies to ensure that parliament receives the very best information when conducting its inquiries. It is important to be aware that this protection is not accorded to you if statements that may be defamatory are repeated or referred to by you outside the confines of the parliamentary proceedings. This is a public hearing. Members of the public and journalists may be present and this means your evidence may be reported. It is important that should you wish all or part of your evidence to be heard in private you must make this request and give an explanation prior to giving the relevant evidence. Do you understand?

**Ms FOWLER** - Yes.

**CHAIR** - Finally, just to flag that there has been an additional term of reference added to the inquiry, namely, '(ka) Regulation of rent price increases, with particular reference to the ACT model'. If you wanted to address that or any other term of reference, please do.

**Ms FOWLER** - It is not something I know a great deal about, so I won't.

**CHAIR** - With those brief introductions, over to you, Ms Fowler, if you would like to provide an initial overview of the things you wanted to raise, then we can begin our discussion.

**Ms FOWLER** - I am in several happy states. I am retired and I own my own home but I live in a small community. I live in St Marys, which is part of the Break O'Day municipality. I have lived and worked all around the state, principally as a nurse, frequently in either occupational health or community-based practice, and I've noticed community changing. I was most interested in the ladies who clearly work for a youth support agency and what they had to say because that, in some ways, reflects my experience as the sole nurse practitioner at Strahan, or the last man standing at Ouse, and some of the other peculiar jobs I've done over the years.

My submission was a group of general statements, I suppose. I'm terribly concerned about the people who are couch surfing, sleeping on park benches and in tents at the showground, and all sorts of other terrible things. I'm also quite concerned about the middle rung of people - and that was one of the points that I raised - who find it practically impossible to rent or buy affordable housing within a reasonable commuting distance of their place of employment.

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If you're a nurse at Calvary and you can't find a house that you can afford to buy in Lenah Valley or New Town - I think I said that when I bought a house in New Town it was 50 per cent of my wages. A similar house now is nearly \$100 000. If I can have a base salary of \$500 000, I will go back to work at Calvary tomorrow. If that moves them to Brighton, for example, with no disrespect to Brighton, where do the people who were in that market end up living, and how? That concerns me because of the dreadful commute for shift-working nursing and teachers who coach hockey teams after school and all of that sort of thing. If they have moved to those outer suburbs, the people who are the next rung out who have to move on further don't necessarily have reliable transport, and the public transport is practically non-existent once you get too far out.

It interests me because I have a friend who has been involved as an architect in subdivisions and gated community-type developments, in the UK. Their council zoning regulations require that a percentage of any development - and I can't remember the exact percentage - is social housing, say 20 per cent, and 10 per cent has a ring fence around it for nurses, school teachers and policemen. If you're going to put 100 houses somewhere that puts more kids in the school, so you need some schoolteachers. I had quite a long conversation with these people about it about 12 months ago. Initially, there was a bit of concern that the 30 houses of 100 in the subdivision would be jerry built because they were cheap but, in fact, the 70 per cent of higher-end houses upped the ante for the 30 per cent because the oldest real estate mantra on the planet is buy the worst house in a good street. You don't want to have the best house in 100 housing lot. That kept these ring-fenced houses up to a reasonable standard.

The other thing that concerns me, and it is no fault of anybody currently in parliament, historically, is that the state government, as well as shedding public housing stock, has shed public servant's housing: school teachers, policemen, forestry, parks. For example, I bought what was the headmaster's house in St Mary's. So where does the headmaster live? St Mary's still has a school and a headmaster. He must live somewhere, which means that he has either bought another house, which potentially bumps the price up, or he is renting somewhere.

It's not rocket science. If you have a house to rent, let me think, will I rent it to the headmaster whose salary is guaranteed by the state government and he probably gets his rent partly paid anyway, or will I rent it to the family with six children who are on Newstart?

That interests me, the knock-on effect of that in country towns. Mr Tucker is probably in a better position than I am to know because he has been on council until quite recently. My instinct is that has nearly as big an impact in rural and regional centres, where these people were historically housed, as Airbnb. There is a lot of talk about Airbnb causing a housing crisis and it might in Launceston or Hobart. In St Mary's, it's probably the flogging off of state housing stock as opposed to public housing stock, if that makes sense?

**Ms O'CONNOR** - You mean dedicated homes for public service?

**Ms FOWLER** - Yes.

**CHAIR** - You have raised a number of really valid points. We've heard evidence about housing stock. Although we are awaiting clarification from the department on the exact figures, by my calculation it is a decline of around 600 over a five-year period. There has been an increase in community housing but this is a net in the social housing, a public and community housing stock decline over that period. You have raised a key issue about key workers and that hasn't been a specific focus of the committee's submissions we have heard so far. As I understand, this is part of

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the history of social housing; governments have established housing for miners, nurses, teachers and so on. You are raising a really important issue around the change in direction of government priorities. Finally, you've raised the point about potential discrimination, of people being squeezed out of the private rental market. We have heard a little bit of that, particularly from the youth sector.

It is great to have a submission from an interested citizen, particularly with your experience and background in nursing. Would you like to elaborate any further on the rural and regional aspects of housing and homelessness? We have heard, mostly, submissions from Hobart-based organisations and many of those have a statewide focus but you're in a unique seat.

**Ms FOWLER** - The rental situation is pretty tight in country towns, generally. You're not quite waiting on dead men's bones, but nearly. You only have to have the thought that I might move to Launceston and the word's out and people are looking for houses. When I, for example, went to Ouse to work when the hospital was still there, there was no rental accommodation in Ouse. Happily, my late father was an old Launcestonian, which means that he was in the same class at school as some of the property owners. Someone asked if I was Roger's daughter and I said yes, so they took pity on me and rented me a farm cottage. Frequently, rentals for people coming in from outside are pretty hard to find in country towns.

**CHAIR** - Is that for people within the community who grow up at home and want to go into a private rental? Does the community pool together and assist these young people?

**Ms FOWLER** - It probably depends who you are. It is both a positive and negative situation. If you are unlucky enough to have been a bit of brat at school, everybody probably knows and the kindergarten teacher probably still lives in the town and it's quite hard. I know that's an issue for some of the young people in Break O'Day because there are only two high schools, so the young folk who are struggling at school tend to be known.

I heard the previous witnesses talking about third-person reporting, country towns keep their business to themselves. Everybody knows that Joe Bloggs knocks his missus around but nobody is going to put their hand up, particularly not to tell the government, children's services or the Education department, and that certainly leaves people trapped.

**CHAIR** - The other point you raised was about short-stay accommodation. You commented that the decline in housing stock might have more of a part to play than the rise in short-stay accommodation, perhaps in your community.

**Ms FOWLER** - That is my observation.

**CHAIR** - Is that even during peak tourist season?

**Ms FOWLER** - I suspect that if you are not on a lease, you may be asked during the tourist season. I would say that what I have observed around St Marys particularly, the two or three places that set up as Airbnbs was an excellent idea from November long weekend until Easter, and then who wants to come to St Marys? It is freezing. It is really cold there this week. Suddenly, maybe they are better off with their \$180 a week every week for 52 weeks a year instead of \$300 a week for three months and nothing.

**Mr TUCKER** - I was talking to the council on Friday and they said the change from the Airbnb has swung the other way, back on to long-term rentals in the last three months.

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**Ms FOWLER** - For that reason, yes. Maybe in Hobart it is attractive to have an Airbnb but there is fairly limited charm in the winter, even at sunny St Helens, I would suggest.

**Ms BUTLER** - I wanted to have a chat to you about whether you have seen any differences in the St Marys area with extra pressure on services and more people couch surfing. As you said, the community tends to look after each other quite well. Have you seen an increase in demand for those services?

**Ms FOWLER** - I am certainly aware of a family with six children who is currently homeless.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Where are they sleeping?

**Ms FOWLER** - At his parents' place, which is very overcrowded.

**Ms BUTLER** - Can I catch up with you after this and talk to you about that?

**Ms FOWLER** - Absolutely. I am also aware of a couple of young single mums with children who have recently got leases after impermanent accommodation, which is most unsatisfactory if you have primary school-aged children. You are in St Marys for three months, so your kids at St Marys School and you move back to Fingal for three months and the kids are at Fingal School. Those two young women have just got rentals with 12-month leases but they were certainly in a spot of bother until quite recently.

That is my limited social circle, so I would say, yes, there is pressure. There are other people that I am aware of in the community, including an older couple who, although they have been in a rental for some time, no longer have a lease. They had a lease; their lease has expired and they don't have a lease and that is quite concerning for them.

**Ms BUTLER** - Have you noticed an increase in charges for rent and what the market is demanding in St Marys?

**Ms FOWLER** - I don't know. I am homeowner and I don't pay rent, so I don't know.

**Ms BUTLER** - We are seeing in quite a lot of areas that the rents are really going up.

**Ms FOWLER** - Certainly, the purchase price is going up so I think that rents would have to. If the housing market has gone up quite a lot, properties are selling and people are coming in from interstate and purchasing and putting tenants in their houses. If they pay \$220 000 for a house that was \$160 000 five years ago, the Commonwealth Bank wants its money back so they have to put the rent up. That is being a bit simplistic but I know that the housing market is rising so the natural extrapolation would be that the rental market would rise.

**Ms BUTLER** - There has been a bit of an increase in population in St Mary's?

**Ms FOWLER** - A little bit I think, yes.

**Ms BUTLER** - Do you think that has put an extra demand on because there haven't been many new houses built to keep up with that?

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**Ms FOWLER** - I think it has. I think that the reason it has increased demand is because it's cashed up people coming in from outside

**CHAIR** - There are a few coming in?

**Ms FOWLER** - Of which I am one. I came in, from within Tasmania, and paid cash for property. That puts the price up. You do hear the long-term locals say, and Mr Tucker may be as aware of it as I am, 'You bloody people come in from inside and you put the price up and you play on the tennis courts we've all worked hard to build'.

**CHAIR** - But the fact is that housing is more affordable than in greater Hobart?

**Ms FOWLER** - Absolutely. That is why I am in St Mary's. When I had retirement thrust upon me with a back injury I looked at the mortgage and I looked at the bank balance and I thought, 'You have a problem here. Sell the house in New Town and pay cash for the next property and clear the mortgage'. That's a sensible thing to do when you are going to retire.

**Mr TUCKER** - Chair, I agree totally that small rural and regional communities look after their own. I do this myself, offering houses to people who need houses. I have houses because it is better for me to have a house with someone living in it. It creates a community. They do things for you and you provide that for them.

Do you see any opportunities with what they do on the mainland in some rural and regional towns to try to get people to move there? We have always had a problem with population in rural and regional areas. Everyone seems to move to the cities. What they do is the community comes around and does the houses up to bring families in. This keeps the schools and things like that open in their areas.

**Ms FOWLER** - The difficulty with that - they did it at Levendale or Woodsdale, between Oatlands and Triabunna.

**Ms BUTLER** - Levendale.

**Ms FOWLER** - Yes, my only concern about that, and I hear what you are saying about the schools and the hospitals, we are so lucky to have two K-12 schools and two hospitals in our municipality

**Mr TUCKER** - Not every community does.

**Ms FOWLER** - I for one will be on the barricades if there is any threat of any of those four things closing. I will just give you all notice.

**Mr TUCKER** - Pleased you are parochial.

**Ms FOWLER** - Employment is a really huge issue. One of the challenges of the Break O'Day area from the young folk to whom I speak is the fear of going to Launceston or Hobart for an apprenticeship, or to university or to a TAFE offering which is different from what we can offer in the Break O'Day and having trouble finding housing.

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Before some of you in this room, I suspect, were born I was a student nurse at Launceston General Hospital. We lived in the nurses home. It was pretty horrific and we worked out all of the ways of sneaking in and out, but we were safe, we were fed, we were forced to tidy our rooms, and we were forced to be home by midnight or explain ourselves to matron. We were 18. We don't offer that degree of - we thought it was bullying - but in retrospect it was supervision and support for kids now to come to Launceston or to go to Hobart.

The downside of encouraging people to come, hypothetically, to the Break O'Day is, are we trapping them there? I don't know.

**Ms BUTLER** - As a young person growing up in St Helens I had to leave at a certain age, because there just wasn't year 11 and 12 there. It was difficult. There was maybe greater access to hostels and things then. We were young, we were 15 and gone.

**CHAIR** - We'll take that as a comment. A follow up question by Mr Tucker?

**Mr TUCKER** - I've been a home boy all of my life and I have only been kicked out in the last three or four months.

**CHAIR** - I'll take that as a comment.

**Mr TUCKER** - We saw Airbnb as a benefit to the community because of the employment. I ended up bringing this up because of what you said about the employment opportunities in the area. I agree with you because we were one of the six councils Australia-wide that rely heavily on tourism. We need that tourism dollar to be coming in. We need access for those people. If we take Airbnbs away from the community, in my opinion, we are going to lose jobs. Do you have any thoughts on that?

**Ms FOWLER** - A little bit of self-disclosure here. When my career as a nurse ended, I worked for a short time for the former member for Pembroke, Alison Ritchie, as a staffer. Then I moved to the Tasman Peninsula and I worked at Port Arthur. One of the things about Tasmania and tourism is it's seasonal, it's casual, it's short-term contracts. I don't know who you good people bank with, but if you can find a banker that will lend money to a person who has no set hours, a short-term contract and seasonal work let me know, because I'll take my business there too. That is the negative of tourism. We must not hang every single hat we own on that particular hook.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Hear, hear.

**Ms FOWLER** - It's a good hook, but it's not that good. You want a very big tube of araldite.

**Mr TUCKER** - We need our agriculture, forestry and those industries, don't we?

**Ms FOWLER** - If things like agriculture are the araldite that keeps the tourism hook on the wall, yes, we do.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Does Housing Tasmania have much of a presence in St. Marys?

**Ms FOWLER** - Yes. There are two blocks of units, so there are probably 10 units, which are single person or married couple units. There are three houses in Groom Street, which are family homes, three-bedroom houses, standalone houses, whereas the units are in two blocks. There are

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two or three houses near the Irishtown Road turnoff, which I would say by the look of them were public housing stock. They've been sold in the last two or three years. To the best of my knowledge nothing has been built to replace those two or three properties that have been sold. There are 10, 12, maybe 14, public housing properties in St. Marys.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Do you have any contact with the tenants in the Housing Tasmanian properties?

**Ms FOWLER** - Yes.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Can you pass on anything about their experience, the security of their lease and whether or not they regard those properties as long-term housing?

**Ms FOWLER** - The couple of people I class as friends who are in those properties see them as their homes and see themselves as being there long term. The one observation I would make about those two properties is that there would not appear to be a particularly regular maintenance schedule. I was visiting somebody three or four weeks ago and she went to the loo and the toilet handle came off in her hand, which was pretty inconvenient. Because she is a women with a acquired brain injury she was really quite distressed about that so I put on my best Sister Fowler voice and said, 'Sit down, shut up, take three deep breaths and let's talk about what we can do about this toilet door situation'. She said, 'I'll ring dad' and I said, 'No, ring Housing first. Tell Housing and find out - if they're not going to be able to fix the loo door until the middle of next week we'll ring dad, but we'll ring Housing first'.

**CHAIR** - Did she get a response?

**Ms FOWLER** - She did get a response and it was about a week before someone came to fix the loo door, but dad managed to put a latch on it because she and her two adult daughters are in the house, so that was a temporary fix which dad managed to effect because he's a pretty competent sort of dad, but Donna didn't know what to do.

**Ms BUTLER** - Regarding maintenance to the Housing properties, I know there used to historically be a delay in maintenance and also a lag in time from when people would move out of the properties and when they were filled again, so you would have people couch-surfing waiting often in St Marys to be able to move in to a Housing place and then even then the maintenance of the property was still wasn't great.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - So it wasn't a question so much as statement.

**Ms BUTLER** - I wondered if you had heard whether those maintenance issues are still there and the delay in time to fill those properties?

**Ms FOWLER** - I don't think there is a massive delay between someone vacating and someone else moving in, but my observation of the maintenance is just poor stewardship is the only way to express it. If you own a property yourself, you paint the front door from time to time to keep it in reasonable nick. It seems to me to be false economy not to have a regular schedule of when the painter goes to St Marys and paints all the front doors. If we, the taxpayers of the state, owned those front doors, they ought to be looked after and they don't seem to be.

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**Ms O'CONNOR** - Wendy, you talked earlier about a whole middle rung of people that are missing out on access to affordable housing because of the lack of availability in St Helens and other places you have worked in. In St Marys are you seeing people leave the area for a lack of availability of affordable housing?

**Ms FOWLER** - Yes, but not a huge number. Part of it is affordable housing and part of it is employment, as in if it's going to cost me this much to live here I might as well move to Campbell Town where I've got more chance of getting a job. It's quite hard to sort the difference between affordable housing and access to stable employment because they're both very closely tied together.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - As a final point, you were talking earlier about inclusion rezoning, which as we know happens in the UK and other jurisdictions, and is certainly something that has come up in the hearings from significant stakeholders like Shelter Tasmania. In broad terms you would be supportive of a planning scheme that made provision for social and affordable housing within development approvals?

**Ms FOWLER** - Absolutely, and which made provision for housing for essential services as well. Our fireies are all volunteers in our municipality but if we had paid firefighters they have to live somewhere and be able to afford to live there.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - The same with teachers and nurses.

**Ms FOWLER** - And policemen. There is at least one police officer in Break O'Day in private rental. That just happens to be one I know because he is the son of a friend. Those people need to be housed. Whether they buy their own houses or whether the Crown buys them, they need to be housed. There is a standard for teachers and police sergeants, police constables and so on. Once again, my suspicion, having bought a former Education department house, is that one of the reasons the housing stock has been disposed of was because there has been a long history of poor stewardship. The houses didn't meet the standard, so we flogged them off, but we didn't put the money into building another house for the headmaster.

Lord only knows where the money's gone - consolidated revenue. But if we'd looked after the house we had - painted the front door, upgraded the wiring - we wouldn't have had to sell it off. If we're going to ringfence social housing and essential services housing, we also have to ringfence the funding to keep it market-ready and in reasonable nick - fit for habitation.

**Mr TUCKER** - You say that perhaps some of the unemployed could, in consultation with the HIA and TAFE, be offered traineeships to do necessary work. I was very strong on this on council that we should be employing our own and not bringing someone else in from another district - look after our own first.

**Ms FOWLER** - Absolutely.

**Mr TUCKER** - Trish Duffy's submission was talking about the shipping container units they transferred and the older people working with the younger people and training them. Do you have any thoughts on that?

**Ms FOWLER** - Absolutely. I mean, I'm an old bag, I'm 63 and waiting to move up the road.

**Mr TUCKER** - That's not old.

## **PUBLIC**

**Ms FOWLER** - I had an opportunity at 18 when I was choofed off to the nurses' home. Nursing was good to me and then it went sour. I had some educational opportunities as well. We've got to train those young kids and we've got to do it locally. It's a side issue, but it gets to your point, are there no surveyors in Tasmania, no surveying firms? There have been surveyors around in vehicles with Victorian plates. I've got nothing against Victoria, it was settled from Launceston after all, but why are they surveying the main road through St Marys?

**Mr TUCKER** - I can answer that one for you because I know the local surveyor. They have a lot of trouble getting young surveyors to come and work here. It is a big issue.

**Ms FOWLER** - Okay.

**Mr TUCKER** - The shipping containers in rural and regional areas interest me. To do them in the cities I see a lot of problems, but in the rural and regional areas and training our young people, would you say there is an opportunity there?

**Ms FOWLER** - I would hope so. That's another one of my pet things - we've sold our kids a pup. University is a wonderful thing for some children -

**Mr TUCKER** - I agree totally with you.

**Ms FOWLER** - but there are some people whose skills are elsewhere and they should have the chance to develop those skills. If, in the fullness of time, they decide they want to go and do surveying, fantastic, let's support them to do it. If they want to start being an apprentice cabinetmaker, let them fit out shipping containers.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Absolutely.

**CHAIR** - I don't think you have any opposition from this panel. At the risk of being trite, Ms Fowler, you have outlined a range of reasons why we should look as much to the past as to the future as to where we should go toward housing affordability. There are some good lessons in how we've looked after key workers in the past, public servants and the like. Thank you very much for taking the time to appear and to outline your thoughts in writing.

As I advised you at the commencement of your evidence, what you have said to us here today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Once you leave the table you need to be aware that privilege does not attach to comments you may make to anyone, including the media, even if you are simply repeating what you said to us. Do you understand that?

**Ms FOWLER** - Absolutely.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - That was excellent evidence, thank you. It has a quality to it and an insight into rural and regional Tasmania. I am very thankful.

**Mr TUCKER** - Ms Fowler, she says that to everyone who has been from Break O'Day.

**CHAIR** - I have to say, Break O'Day has batted above its weight. I always mix my metaphors, but you know what I mean.

**PUBLIC**

**Mr TUCKER** - We are having a crack up there at the moment.

**THE WITNESS WITHDREW.**

## PUBLIC

**Ms JUSTINE BROOKS**, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, LAUREL HOUSE, WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

**CHAIR** - Welcome, Ms Brooks. May I ask if you received information from the secretary? If so, there are some aspects of that document I need to reiterate. A committee hearing is a proceeding of parliament. That means it receives the protection of parliamentary privilege. This is an important legal protection that allows individuals giving evidence to a parliamentary committee to speak with complete freedom without the fear of being sued or questioned in any court or place out of parliament. It applies to ensure that parliament receives the very best information when conducting its inquiries. It is important to be aware that this protection is not accorded to you if statements that may be defamatory are repeated or referred to by you outside the confines of the parliamentary proceedings. This is a public hearing. Members of the public and journalists may be present and this means your evidence may be reported. It is important that should you wish all or part of your evidence to be heard in private you must make this request and give an explanation prior to giving the relevant evidence. Do you understand?

**Ms BROOKS** - I do.

**CHAIR** - I will also highlight that we have an additional term of reference agreed by the House for the inquiry and that is, '(ka) regulation of rent price increases, with particular reference to the ACT model'. We certainly welcome input on that or any other term of reference.

Please feel free to offer an overview before we then go to questions and further discussion.

**Ms BROOKS** - Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to present to you today on this important topic. I am advocating on behalf of the clients of Laurel House and I also wear a hat as a Councillor on the George Town Council, so I advocate on behalf of that community as well. I would also like to identify another special interest group, which is women in general. Today, I present evidence on behalf of those three select groups, which overlap and intertwine in my roles every day.

When searching for answers on matters of importance, such as homelessness and housing affordability and certainly in my university studies, one of the first things I would do is a literacy review. I conducted that to some extent, not a thorough one, but I did find that there have been over 20 inquiries into housing affordability across Australia, across varying levels of government, private industry and tertiary education in the last 10 years. There is a wealth of information out there. I suggest that somebody could potentially do a really thorough review for you in less than a month, one single person. I thought I would make that observation.

My second observation is that, when reviewing my submission against the fact that we are entering into the second stage of the Housing Affordability Strategy that is already released, a lot of those issues cover some of the matters that I have raised in my submission. What I would like to talk to today is where there are gaps because I don't want to go over information that you already have. I know your time is precious.

Those gaps are on my recommendation page, which you have in my submission. We would argue and when I say we, again, I am representing those three bodies. I am acutely aware of both Laurel House clients and community members within the George Town municipal area who are in varying stages of what I call a vicious cycle. That cycle is being impacted by domestic and sexual violence but unable to escape it without somewhere safe and stable to go.

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I will say they are generally women because the percentage is almost 90 per cent women. Of those men who are impacted, they are impacted by male partners predominantly as well. Those women often have children and they have to make a decision every day; do I flee this relationship and end up homeless with my children or do I stay at home and protect my children as best I can and continue to suffer in this domestic violence situation? I say domestic violence but it also covers sexual violence because the two often go hand in hand in the home.

We would advocate on behalf of that cohort, our clients, that there needs to be an easier, more responsive way to find them stable housing because without that they're not going to leave or they will leave and find themselves in further duress, homeless or couch surfing, their children are removed from their stable environments, their homes and their schools. Often when they do leave it is as a result of what I call the tipping point or an incident that triggers it so they flee. They don't do it in a planned manner. They leave without possessions, school items - just the clothes on their back, which actually just puts them into further duress. We would say that there needs to be an absolute focus on providing them somewhere to go and there are shelters out there, I acknowledge that, but they are bursting and overflowing and full to capacity. It really is a dire situation and we see it every day and it absolutely breaks my heart.

We would recommend another alternative approach, which is the gap I refer to in my submission which is to focus on the perpetrator to find ways of getting them out of the situation. Often they will be willing to do it and it would be easier to find single men's accommodation than to rehouse a whole family of children. Leave the children and the mother where they are with their support systems in place - their friends, their schools, their possessions - and for those perpetrators that are willing, and often they want to do better, find them somewhere to go with support. Don't just pick them up and place them somewhere else without any support. In that location have the facilities in place to teach them and take them through perpetrator programs and assist them. Whether it be an alcohol or substance abuse issue or anger, whatever the case might be, put them into supported housing and help them.

I know that seems counterintuitive because our clients are predominantly women, but we are not ignorant enough to not understand the whole ramification of this cycle that is happening. Without those supports in place this will just keep happening. They might move from that family and then go to another family and then that family is impacted and there will be another one. Relationships continue but there needs to be more help for the perpetrators. They could be single men's housing quarters, or bedsits. They are cheaper to come up with than whole houses, so that is an area worth considering and I can guarantee you that people would willingly take up that option if it was available. There isn't anything like that at the moment.

My second recommendation focused on private rental assistance. Of course we have that in Tasmania already, but I did a comparison between the program I highlighted in my submission which is the PRAP that is predominately in Victoria versus what is available in Tasmania. There is a new one in Tasmania we have seen recently where they are encouraging private home owners to rent their houses for a reduced fee to low-income earners and the Government will subsidise that. I am not criticising that in any way shape or form.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - It's short term though.

**Ms BROOKS** - It really is, and the comparison between that program and what's occurring on the mainland is again the supports that are put in place. The Tasmanian one has some requirements

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that not everyone is going to be able to meet, and certainly those people trying to flee aren't going to be able to meet.

Here's some language examples for comparison. With the Private Rental Assistance Program on the mainland it says it is 'intended to prevent or end homelessness and housing crisis by rapidly rehousing people capable of sustaining private rental after initial support', so they understand that they might not be able to do it straight away but they have the capacity, once they get settled, to get a job. They have an interest and a drive to get a job or improve their education or whatever the case might be. We don't have that in Tasmania. We expect the person to right here right now be able to just pick up things and run a household and get themselves settled.

Some other differences are that the mainland one 'supports at-risk households to sustain affordable and appropriate housing in the private rental market by assisting people to move to independence', and that is through training, support, education, financial education - there is a whole raft of programs in place to assist those people to make it more sustainable and so that you set them up for success. We tend to pick people up and pop them there and leave them alone and then go, 'You'll be right'. But what if they've never done a budget before? What if they don't know about how to keep your energy bills low, or whatever the case might be - budgets for shopping, those sorts of things? There needs to be training, assistance and support for these people otherwise they will just fall back into the cycle again or be evicted because they don't look after the house or pay their rent. There needs to be support and education to accompany the programs that we run here, like they do on the mainland, if we're going to see some success.

That segues into my third recommendation which is the one I am quite passionate about. I think there is a lot of hope for it and merit if somebody took it up, if someone had the time and effort to really look into it and the funding to take it up. That is to relax the criteria for those who find themselves in a crisis. I will start with that cohort of women I was talking about. The fastest demographic of people who are finding themselves homeless at the moment are women over 50 and that is because they may have been in a long-term relationship and that relationship has ended; they have been the traditional homemaker and probably not built up a lot of superannuation. They may not have the skills in place to re-enter the workforce because they have spent their lives doing meaningful work but not work that society deems as employable, if that makes sense.

**CHAIR** - They have also been paid 20 per cent less than men.

**Ms BROOKS** - Exactly. These women in the rates of hundreds - the data is scary - are finding themselves homeless, couch-surfing, sleeping in their cars. Those who do have a bit of superannuation quickly erode that and find later in life, before they reach entitlements to pensions and things like that, there is this gap where they are living in poverty.

I would advocate on behalf of those women, particularly the ones who leave a relationship. They may on paper have an asset that says they have shares in a house and therefore are not entitled to traditional social housing, but that asset is tied up for various reasons. Sometimes these legal proceedings drag on for years and the money is eroded at the end of it anyway, but during that time what do these women do, where do they live, who helps them? On paper they don't meet the criteria. I would advocate for those women that we relax the criteria and consider all the extenuating circumstances and then say, 'Yes, at the end of this process when all your legal matters are resolved we will review it'. By that stage, once it is resolved, if they have the means they are not going to be wanting to rely on government help anyway if they don't need to. Most people, generally, want to get up and be really proactive and contribute to society. These women just need some assistance.

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This then leads me to another idea when we talk about relaxing criteria. At the moment our clients tell us that if they are lucky enough to have public housing, and they do appreciate it, they are not able to house-share or rent a room out to a friend who might also need help, so they could help other people but they aren't allowed to do that.

**Ms BUTLER** - They get penalised, don't they?

**Ms BROOKS** - Exactly. I would recommend that the Government have a look at that. It wouldn't cost the Government any more, they still have the one house but if there are two women or two people or two youths, whoever they are, who determine that they want to house-share, they would each have reduced rent and it is taking another person off the streets, out of homelessness or unstable housing. That is a model that could be looked at.

One model I am following in Sydney - and this isn't in my submission so I hope you don't mind my adding it in - is a matching of elderly people with young people. I find it quite exciting for a whole raft of reasons, not just stable housing. They will match an elderly person who needs some assistance in the garden or shopping or cooking or cleaning, whatever the case may be, and then a young person who is at risk of homelessness, or a student who has a low income. They will match them together. The student lives in that person's home, helps them with their chores and is company. It is good for social inclusion. It is good for breaking down age barriers. That young person might get free accommodation or reduced rent. If that elderly person is in subsidised housing they are not allowed to do that at the moment. They are not allowed to rent their room out and be seen to be making an income from it.

If the Government stepped in and said, 'Okay, you have reduced rent because we recognise you are in subsidised housing and the other person has reduced rent, they both have reduced payments. The benefits to society are just untold. Mental health, isolation, there are so many other issues that could be resolved through a model such as this.

I know there will have been a raft of other people that have come before you and they will talk about housing releases, land releases and all of those sorts of things, but I am looking at social impacts. My submission is purely around social. It's about relaxing the rules to take into account extenuating circumstances of people and the genuine real need that is out there. Let's say, 'Right, here are some ideas, let's trial some models. Let's see who might volunteer to live in a model like this'. There are well-known models all around the world where women, particularly, determine that, 'I can't afford a house on my own. I have a friend, she has children, together we'll buy a house. We're not in a relationship, but we are friends. Together we can support one another, help look after each other's children, share the debt'. It's that type of model, which actually also strengthens communities that I'm recommending through my submission.

**CHAIR** - Wow. That's a lot to take in. Thank you, Ms Brooks, for really innovative thinking and commonsense thinking at that. You eloquently outlined some gaps in the system and some great ideas for plugging some of those. You have obviously been in the sector for a little while, a number of years probably. In the context of the number of submissions we've received I think you are the only specific support service focusing on sexual assault. It is a unique perspective that you are providing, potentially with a regional overlay, representing George Town community. We welcome this thinking.

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I thought that the principle of Safe at Home and addressing family violence was supposed to be exactly what you are outlining in terms of supporting perpetrators as well as those experiencing domestic and family violence in their home. In your experience is that the case? You are highlighting a gap here, but the legislation must have changed a good five, 10 years ago?

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Safe at Home, 2008 I think it was.

**CHAIR** - Yes, it was 10 years ago.

**Ms BROOKS** - The feedback that we get from our clients is not specific to the legislation. It would seem that the reality is vastly different to the policies that are in place. Actually, enacting them are different too. When you need something in a crisis right here, right now there are only shelters to go to. The feedback is they are absolutely full. I spoke to a shelter worker recently and she said sometimes they have to bend rules, because they can't turn people away. It is breaking their hearts.

The policies that are in place would work if they had sufficient resources, sufficient funding behind them, and as Jez mentioned they were over a longer term. Not just help a person and then tick them off a list. I think the foundations of it probably are sound.

**CHAIR** - What can you tell us about the unassisted requests, or unmet demand? From my understanding the gains that have been made in the area of domestic and family violence mean that people are potentially more likely to come forward for assistance. I do not know that the prevalence has necessarily changed, although we hope to reduce prevalence, obviously. What can you tell us over the last decade or so around demand in this area?

**Ms BROOKS** - I cannot speak about a decade. I am relatively new to the role, but I have done a huge amount of research in that short period of time. What I can tell you is in just a few short months our referrals have spiked by 35 per cent. That was just for this year. With that obviously comes a greater demand across -

**CHAIR** - Is that for Launceston and the north west coast?

**Ms BROOKS** - That is the north of Tasmania. I know through talking to the CEO of the southern-based Sexual Assault Support Service, its referrals are the same, they have increased dramatically. We do attribute that to people now feeling more comfortable to come forward. We also think there are more attacks occurring, or more assaults occurring. I know that for a fact because the spike is not linked to historical offences. It is linked to actual recent events. That is how we can determine that there is an increase.

**CHAIR** - Notwithstanding the points that you have made about the lack of housing options to immediately respond, is your support service able to respond to that increased demand or are people having to wait longer or falling through the cracks?

**Ms BROOKS** - Yes. I am reluctant to admit that our waiting list has grown to what I would call an unacceptable level. Our response to that is to do a whole-of-organisation review on the way we manage or caseloads. Where someone may have been able to access weekly visits, they may now need to be pushed out to fortnightly to allow a greater number of people to go through the service. We are comfortable that we can still meet the needs of our clients effectively with some of this new modelling we are putting in place.

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**CHAIR** - Are you talking about counselling and so on?

**Ms BROOKS** - That is right. If the pattern of increase continues at the rate it currently is I just don't think it will be physically possible to provide the amount of service that is required to effectively take these people correctly through their trauma pathway - what I call trauma to triumph. We know that if they do not get the full support that is required to help them effectively they often end up coming back through at a later stage. It is one thing to be efficient but it is another thing to be effective.

**CHAIR** - We have certainly heard about recidivism in other parts of the system too.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Justine, you were talking earlier about a 35 per cent spike in referrals to Laurel House. Obviously you are not going to have really precise quantitative data as to the causes of that referral but what are the women who are coming in telling you about the causes that may give us some better understanding of why there has been such a sharp spike in a short space of time?

**Ms BROOKS** - For Laurel House, to be honest, it is a matter that we are going through a transformation process. We are reinvigorating the organisation and becoming more prevalent in the community. We are doing a lot of outreach. We previously did not do that. I am linking some of this to the fact that our referral partners have continued to increase their referral pathways to us. Part of my role as the CEO is to keep an eye on that. We are integrating ourselves better into the community. As a result, we are establishing greater relationships with our referring partners, which I think results in the increase.

However, speaking to my counterpart in the south, who has also experienced this large spike and they are already prevalent throughout the south, that can't be the only cause. Laurel House being more active cannot be the only cause. It is because there are increases.

One of the patterns that we recently were vocal about is an increase in referrals to us through what we call image-based abuse in schools, with teens using electronic devices to abuse -

**CHAIR** - Cyber bullying?

**Ms BROOKS** - That's correct. Cyberbullying and what they call porn revenge. We called it image-based abuse, so there has been a spike in those types of reports. We did run a little campaign and I think schools, teachers and social workers saw that. As a result of that, we often see a spike after we run a campaign focusing on a particular activity.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - We had some evidence put to us by the Salvation Army and the quote from the director was, this is the first time our staff have asked for panic buttons. The concern was that it's related to increased methamphetamine and ice use in the community, so you are seeing pressure put on emergency departments and staff in the hospitals, community service organisations and housing providers. Is it your experience that we are seeing more drug-related assaults?

**Ms BROOKS** - I can't attest to that. I haven't had that reported to me but substance abuse is absolutely a trigger for sexual assault in general, so alcohol and drugs, but I can't say that we have had a spike specifically relating to particular types of drugs.

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**Ms O'CONNOR** - Going back to what you were saying earlier about the need for a change of policy in how we respond to women and children who have come out of a violent situation, are you talking about Housing Tasmania policies, or is it something that we need to look at, such as the Residential Tenancy Act, to amend that to make it fairer for tenants or people who are in rental properties?

**Ms BROOKS** - When I say 'relaxing the criteria' I am talking about Housing Tasmania in terms of accessibility to some of these programs that are in place to help people enter into affordable housing. The common theme through them is a means testing.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Have you ever tried to get copies of those policies?

**Ms BROOKS** - No, I can't say that I have. Is it difficult?

**Ms O'CONNOR** - I think it might be a bit difficult. Thank you.

**Mrs RYLAH** -It is really interesting to read your paper and I congratulate you on your interesting ideas and succinct writing, so well done. The concept you have put in 1(b), accommodation for perpetrators of domestic violence, I have a concern about that. I would like you to outline to me how you would envisage working with people, perhaps if we had particular accommodation for the perpetrators so that they wouldn't be so stigmatised. If there were a legal argument, he said, she said, as to the abuse, might that put them in a weakened legal position? I am not necessarily saying it's the male or the female, whoever it is could easily be removed from the house, keep children stable and all that sort of stuff.

**Ms BROOKS** - Yes, and that is a good point you raise. One of the key words in my submission is that they would 'willingly' go. In other words, we are told by our clients, who often make excuses for their partner, that he's a good man. He didn't want to do it. He really wants to change. I pushed him. I shouldn't have said that, I shouldn't have done that. We like to envisage an image of perpetrators, that is, bad people, and they are essentially violent people but not all of them are like that. Some have sought assistance and some, through their own self-reflection, don't want to behave that way but there is not a lot of support in the community for them at the moment. There aren't many places they can go to get that support to enact that genuine change they are looking for.

My thinking is that those people who willingly offer to remove themselves from the home wouldn't actually feel the way that you have described at the start of that statement. They are my thoughts on that but I probably would need to do a bit of research around it. You do make a good point. We obviously don't want to have a house or a building that is seen as being full of perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence because it would have a stigma around it, that is correct.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Just to take that a bit further. I have been thinking about since I read the paper. What about the rapid rehousing model that we have. I know the recommendation is that the services be wrapped around. Do the services need to be in the same building, or could we have a mobile group or support people moving between various locations wherever these people might be located?

**Ms BROOKS** - Absolutely, I haven't stipulated how that support would be in place because I understand some of challenges that would occur. If I put my George Town Council hat on, we recently donated vacant land to CatholicCare for the social housing construction of 16 units. They provide those support mechanisms around the tenants that they place in those. We were so impressed by the model that they run that we donated the land free of charge. That's the response

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George Town Council wanted to provide its community for the people currently experiencing homelessness and housing stress there.

It was very important to us that those support mechanisms or systems were also provided to ensure the success of those tenancies. Housing Tasmania could learn a lot from the CatholicCare model. They have very few instances where they have to evict their tenants. They have done it but they also demonstrated to us that there is less damage, that there are more success outcomes because of the support system that they put in place. My recommendation is that the state review the model they are running, or perhaps just hand it all over to them. I am not sure.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Do the support people need to be domiciled in the same building?

**Ms BROOKS** - No, they could come from wherever, as long as the support is in place when and where it is needed and they are easily accessible. There is no point having them centralised in Hobart for a community in Smithton. It needs to be accessible by the people that need that support.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Great. Regarding CatholicCare and community care, there is additional money that they can receive that the state government can't receive to support better renovations, all sorts of things. It is a much better model, so that gives them more funding than Housing Tasmania gets. It is a different model.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - They can access Commonwealth rent assistance.

**CHAIR** - We will take that as a comment.

**Ms BUTLER** - Thank you very much for your wonderful submission it is really well put together and you have put a lot of time and effort into it. I want to talk to you about waiting times, firstly for mothers with children and how long it takes them to move, on average, from crisis accommodation to longer term accommodation.

We have over 3000 applicants on the housing waiting list. I think over 2000 of them are priority. Women in those situations are classed as priority. I think that is correct. The average waiting time, if you know, for families to find long-term accommodation and for single women coming out of traumatic family violent situations to find long-term accommodation.

**Ms BROOKS** - Because the provision of, or assisting people to, find accommodation isn't one of Laurel House's core business I couldn't confidently quote those times for you. I can give you anecdotal evidence about a number of families I am aware of in George Town who were moved from their homes or left on their own accord and to assist them were placed into the local motel. They have been there for months. While they tick a box that they have been afforded accommodation, that accommodation is literally a hotel room with no kitchen facilities. It has beds and -

**CHAIR** - This would be through Housing Connect brokerage accommodation?

**Ms BROOKS** - That's correct. Yes, they have a roof over their heads but they can't cook there so it drives takeaways out for tea. Then you've got a whole heap of these families in crisis in a very small space as well, which brings its own relationship issues, I guess. Unfortunately I haven't come prepared to tell you time frames because that's not our area, but I am aware of stories from both

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clients from Laurel House and also through the council of some of these issues that occur with helping people but not really helping them, if that makes sense.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Justine, I just want you to put your George Town councillor's hat on for a moment, because now that we have you at the table it's an opportunity to find out or to get a bit of a picture of what's happening with housing availability and affordability more broadly in the municipality. Obviously there's part of an issue because the council has donated land for more affordable housing, but what's it like there now?

**Ms BROOKS** - Two short years ago I was actually the GM, so I was able to meet with the then Housing minister with our mayor at the time. We brought to their attention a large parcel of land owned by Housing Tasmania that was sitting there dormant that was subdivided and had been there for 20 years. It was sitting there untouched and we advocated way back then that they could be providing these houses. Since then Housing Tas has picked that up. I believe they are selling the land rather than constructing homes, but selling it at what I would call affordable prices. We're talking about pricing points of \$40 000 and \$45 000. That certainly provides opportunities for people to enter the affordable housing market but it's still not social housing. To my knowledge the state isn't necessarily doing anything specific in social housing, but CatholicCare has stepped up into that space with opening up an office and starting with the two blocks that we've provided them and looking at other options within the community.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - I was looking for more of a snapshot, if you like, of the residents' capacity to access affordable housing or social housing. We have heard from other people who have come before the table that things have changed in the last four, five or six years. I wonder whether you have seen a change in the municipality.

**Ms BROOKS** - It was two years ago that I literally, physically, saw homeless people for the first time. That was the first time I have actually been confronted with that in the George Town streets. That is when we started advocating for it because suddenly it was visible and real. The Neighbourhood House is very vocal and supportive and advocates on behalf of their clients as well. I understand there is a dire need for increased social housing there. As to rental affordability, there aren't any houses to rent. Vacancies are at like 1 per cent and they are some of the higher end houses in Low Head, which are traditionally shacks that people let out some parts of the year. There is an actual housing need in the community. I am not just talking about the George Town township. I am talking about the whole municipal area. Council is limited in what it does, because we will step up and fill gaps where we're able to but it's not what I would call our core business. We are leaders in the community and we look after our community members, so we will assist and advocate where and when we can, which is partially why I'm sitting before you here today.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - With your multiple hats.

**Ms BROOKS** - With my many hats.

**CHAIR** - If I can just clarify for *Hansard*, are you a current councillor?

**Ms BROOKS** - Yes, I am.

**CHAIR** - You are, but you said former GM.

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**Ms BROOKS** - I was previously the GM of the council. One of my side passions and interests was advocating for women and this role came up so I thought I can have my cake and eat it too.

**Mr TUCKER** - We heard from the last speaker in rural and regional areas about domestic violence and how people know it happens but nothing is done about it. I hear where you are coming from about the rehab of perpetrators and talk of more help for them. Is there anything we can do in your opinion to keep the family structure together more than what is occurring at the moment, with help for those perpetrators? Don't think that I am condoning what happens -

**Ms BROOKS** - No, I understand.

**Mr TUCKER** - but for the greater benefit of that family, if we can help to keep them together, isn't that a better outcome than splitting their family apart?

**Ms BROOKS** - Absolutely. I guess it depends on the level of perpetration as well. There are some levels where you absolutely would not advocate for keeping the family together, but when it's once or twice-off instances and there are other factors involved - which again, I am not endorsing either - alcohol is a major player and poverty or lack of money is another stress as well. There is a multiple layer of stresses and it's a ticking timebomb. Whilst we don't condone it either, we do recognise that once a perpetrator doesn't necessarily mean always a perpetrator. If support systems can be put in place for them, training programs and counselling for those people, they absolutely can turn things around. If you can keep the family unit together, that's the most ideal outcome for all involved, for a whole range of reasons. Investment in that space would be greatly welcomed.

**CHAIR** - Time has flown and we need to quickly wrap up. I have a very quick question about the Victorian private rental assistance scheme. Do you know the time frame for that because the private rental incentive scheme that operates within the state has now been extended from 12 months to two years?

**Ms BROOKS** - In terms of leases?

**CHAIR** - Yes.

**Ms BROOKS** - It is a minimum two-year lease as well.

**CHAIR** - Thank you again for your comprehensive submission and the rich information you have provided to the committee today.

As I advised you at the commencement of your evidence, what you have said to us here today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Once you leave the table, you need to be aware that privilege does not attach to comments you may make to anyone, including the media, even if you are just repeating what you said to us.

**THE WITNESS WITHDREW.**

## **PUBLIC**

**Mr TONY WALSH**, WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

**CHAIR** - Welcome. It is nice to hear from you about your evidence today and thank you for forwarding your submission. It is a good opportunity to talk through that further.

A committee hearing is a proceeding in parliament. This means it receives the protection of parliamentary privilege. This is an important legal protection that allows individuals giving evidence to a parliamentary committee to speak with complete freedom without the fear of being sued or questioned in any court or place out of parliament. It applies to ensure that parliament receives the very information when conducting its inquiries. It is important to be aware that this protection is not accorded to you if statements that may be defamatory are repeated or referred to by you outside the confines of the parliamentary proceeding. This is a public hearing. Members of the public and journalists may be present and this means your evidence may be reported. It is important that should you wish all or part of your evidence to be heard in private you must make this request and give an explanation prior to giving the relevant evidence.

An additional term of reference has been added by the House for this inquiry which is -

(ka) Regulation of rent price increases with particular reference to the ACT model.

We welcome input on any of our terms of reference.

Procedurally, I know that you are familiar with the process so I will hand over to you to provide whatever overview you would like. It would be good if you were able to allow some time for questions and discussion.

**Mr WALSH** - I would like to make a short statement, then show a slideshow which I will do as quickly as possible, and then I would like to offer a few recommendations.

I want to tell you where I am coming from and why I am interested in speaking to you. I began my working career back in 1961 as a cadet draughtsman with a firm of architects. I worked for them for 10 years and after that time I came to the conclusion that what I was seeing on building sites - and I was involved in supervision and drawing up house plans and all that sort of stuff - and the way we were building houses then was inefficient and, quite frankly, appalling. So I set myself the task back then of trying to find out a better way of doing it. That is appropriate now because one of the serious causes of poor affordability with housing is the actual cost of building a house in the first place and that is so simple it's obvious when you think about it.

At the same time, I was studying and I achieved a graduate diploma in architecture that is roughly the equivalent of a master's degree back in 1981. My specialty subject for the final year was a housing-related project. Two years later I became a building consultant and I designed houses for people and a few commercial buildings as well. I was informed in my design practice by my experience with a firm of architects that specialised in industrialised housing, or systems housing as it was called back then, in quite a big way.

My first client was back in 1972 and I designed him an affordable house. That started me thinking about ways and means of doing it better because what I designed was a hybrid of conventional and new stuff that I had come across. I kept searching. It's a bit like a needle in a

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haystack. If you're going to come up with something better it has to be good otherwise it won't survive, so I kept searching.

In 1998 I decided to get out the tools and I had an opportunity to become a builder so I'm now a registered builder, or a licensed builder now - that's the new term for it. Between 1998 and 2015 I built quite a few homes. They were all experimental and I was still searching for that. There were a few interesting circumstances relating to my health and so on and in the process I found the answer, if you like, in 2011, an answer that I want to share with you now.

As it says on the slide, let's have a look at it and enjoy it and become inspired at what happened to me. The bottom sentence on there I think you all know. It is pretty timely.

Offset Build is the product of two people. It's myself, and you already know about me, but my partner is an engineer, a well-known and very respected engineer here in Launceston. He holds a postgraduate degree in civil and structural engineering and he is the best engineer I have ever had the privilege to work with. Between us we've come up and we're offering this information to you right now.

If a housing method is going to take over from stud framing, because it rules the roost at present, it has to be significantly better. That is what the term 'next generation' means. We're offering that to you. It is simple, smart and sustainable. The reason for the name will become obvious pretty soon.

That is my take on the situation we're now in and it is probably somewhat understated. Probably the statement by the Prime Minister that we are facing a national crisis is closer to the mark. There is a lot of discussion about what to do about it and I'm sure you've heard a lot of that, but I suspect you haven't heard much about reducing the cost of actually building a house. It is an elephant in the room thing. It has been around since about 1850, you know, but society has changed then. That is what it delivers.

The first one there, if that could be introduced into the cost of the house what will do that to your mortgages and government budgets and things? In addition, it creates more usable floor area, it has no downside, it is flexible. If you can build it in stud framing you can build it in this. It offers intrinsically more insulation and it introduces for the first time moderate thermal mass. It is based on a simple concept and this is, if you like, the needle in the haystack that I found back in 2011. It is called that. It is a technique for joining together building boards, both in the faces, through the face using screws and in the edges.

Let us go back to some basic engineering. If you configure boards side by side like that, they will bend at the joints and that is not good. It is like the big bad wolf blowing the house down. However, if you do that, you have something that is inherently stiff to start with.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Tony, can you tell me what 'this' and 'that' is, please?

**Mr WALSH** - No, I can't, sorry, it would take too long.

**CHAIR** - We're up to about the slide that says if boards are configured like this they can bend at the joints. Do you have the presentation in front of you, Joan?

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**Mr WALSH** - My apologies, but it's going to get worse as the slideshow goes on. If you haven't got it already there is full documentation that repeats all this.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Yes, I just need to know when you move from slide to slide, please.

**Mr WALSH** - All right, each time I press the button I will say.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Okay, great, thank you.

**CHAIR** - We're up to the slide that says 'if layers of boards are attached with'.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Thanks, Alison.

**Mr WALSH** - Now, I've lost my train of thought. If you extend that idea in two directions you can end up with what I call a composite board, which become very large, indeed, and you have something that assumes the strength of all of the boards together. There is a composite board -

**CHAIR** - Next slide.

**Mr WALSH** - that is a wall, yes.

**CHAIR** - The one with the light bulb on. That is all right, I will say 'slide' when you change slides and then you can just keep concentrating.

**Mr WALSH** - This is a combination on how to make a composite board. I have extra slides in here so we can move through it quickly. You bring the boards together, then you drill clearance holes, but not right up - this is the trick - you bring the clearance holes right up close to the back face so that they are close to the back face, but not penetrating it, so that the drillings don't go down into the cavity in between. The boards have to be tightly joined together.

Then you insert the screws and all the drillings in up around the screw threads. The best part of it, you can then flush the joint off and you end up with a smooth surface that you can then paint and it becomes just like plasterboard. We are up to one material and one process now.

Using those composite boards, you can create a house - one for the floor, one for each wall, and one for the ceiling. In one fell swoop you achieve four things, and they are listed there on the bottom of the slide. I am trying to be quick. On the outside, you tailor the house to suit yourself - you can have bricks - you can see it all on the slide, and add your choice of roof covering.

This is the first slide of three showing the model. It starts off with a floor system like that, add the walls and the floor and then add the ceiling and the trusses.

The next slide is in a little more detail. You start off with a grid of posts set in concrete or whatever, but they are further apart than with stud framing. They don't extend out to the edges so there are fewer of them. The floor supports then go on and they are angled that way because of a structural imperative - it is quite important that they be like that. It is using what's called LVL or laminated veneer lumber - it is a commonly-used structural, hugely thick, plywood for want of a better term. Then you add the layers of -

**Mrs RYLAH** - Is that the equivalent of cross-laminated timber?

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**Mr WALSH** - No, it is not. Cross-laminated timber is usually made in much larger bits. Those support beams are only about a metre long and about 400 high.

Then you add the layers that become the floor.

We are on the plan on section now - that's another way of looking at the same thing, that's all that is.

**CHAIR** - The last slide on the floor?

**Mr WALSH** - Yes, the costing slide on off-set floor. Let's forget about all that stuff which changes over time; it's the comparison that is important. Materials cost is down that much and our estimate of labour cost - you can cut the labour in half and because you have a thicker floor you don't need as much insulation or you can do without it.

Back to the wall - you lay the boards vertically, like that; and the staggered joints with a little gap in between the outside one and that's where you run the electrics.

The plan on section slide now showing the same thing. There it shows you how you can vary the insulation thickness to suit your need and it also shows how you get the electrics into an internal wall as well. It has all those characteristics there. You can see it's good. The costings, again - materials cost is slightly down but the labour cost still is significantly less.

At the bottom, because the floors are thin, you create more useable floor area which amounts to about \$10 000-worth of floor per 100 square metre of house. That is quite a big deal.

Off-set ceiling now - it is essentially a repeat of the floor and then you add the trusses, that's the next slide - offset ceiling with trusses. You then attach the trusses to the top and attach them through the ceiling. Another way of looking at the same thing and the costings on the offset ceiling. The ceiling costs more because it's a structural layer, not just the lining, and it's got more insulation and it's got thermal mass. As you will see soon, it is necessary for the structure that it be that way. The overall cost saving on materials though is significantly down on the equivalent of in-stud framing.

We are on to a slide now - concrete floor. If you want, you can put in a concrete floor and you can have light-weight cladding or bricks.

Wall opening slide - first, you build the wall and then you put timber framing around, then you cut the hole and then you put the window in - easy.

We are onto the slide door now - that is detailing for a conventional door which looks like any other door and that is where you run the electrics for the light switch. You can add on a fanlight if you want to, that is cheap and it looks good and it creates visual flow. You can do that because the ceiling is structural and doesn't need any support under it where there is a hole.

Wall cladding slide now - the key there is you can attach any cladding you want and you attach it with long screws through the insulation into the wall itself.

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On the slide clever integrated engineering, a blue slide. The next one is engineering integration - the relationship of the walls and the floor and the ceiling is such that at those zones where they meet if they are joined that way they create a beam without a beam being there. That is what makes the structure stiff and rigid. The slide with the shoe box there shows what I mean. It is very similar engineering that goes into a modern car body.

Two storey slide - there are two principles here: extend the continuous wall from floor to the top ceiling and you create a stiff joint at that point and you are in business. A lot quicker and easier than conventional construction.

**CHAIR** - In terms in height though, you would be limited to two storeys?

**Mr WALSH** - I would think so yes, you are not looking three, four, five storeys. We are basically looking at cottages here, single storey cottage.

Prefabrication - there are lots of variations there but the operative thing is you can break it down because of the offset idea into components that you can put on a truck and cart it along the road without a police escort which saves you a heap of money and you can use a small crane at the other end.

You can build the ceiling and the roof on the floor, that is the benefit of the structural ceiling, and that becomes a space frame - that is an engineering term - something that is basically stiff when you are moving it around on a crane. You can build that on site on the floor or somewhere else on site and lift it up. So you have safety and efficiency benefits there.

My partner asked himself those questions and that is his answer - it is over design because of that integrated shell.

We are onto the calculations part in the engineering one now - do you all understand that? No, I don't either. My engineer explains it this way, and I can explain it: if you apply a roof load or sideways load there, the wall is going to want to bend. What is resisting that is the depth of the studs on the top one there. In the case of the offset wall, it is less but the studs are intermittent and the offset wall is continuous. So when you apply those loads, there is more resisting it and so it is stiffer than a stud wall, even though it is much thinner.

That is him tying up all the loose ends and that is his considered view he is happy to sign off on. Very briefly that is his design for the floor system and for the walls and the ceiling.

We are up to the excellent credentials slide, the blue slide. If you want to separate yourself from noise, you place something heavy between you and it. Two layers of plaster board isn't enough, but with this system it is twice the weight and you get twice the benefit. You get that dB drop which means it works very well. Remember, you are looking at it on all four sides of the room. However, the weak point is the door. Here is a design for a door which maintains the dB drop and it becomes integrated into the wall. So it is very unobtrusive and you can build it using offcuts from building the walls, et cetera.

Thermal insulation is important. Basically, stud framing uses studs and plaster board and that is not insulation. But offset build is built with boards that do have insulation properties to start with, so although both systems need more insulation, offset build needs less. You are limited to the thickness of insulation you can put in the stud wall by the stud depth. That is a potential problem.

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However, with offset build, you can put in the thickness you want. And here's the rub: our construction regulator is going to make any house more energy efficient by that extent. They are starting the planning now. Stud framing is struggling to comply now, and when they do that it is going to be much more difficult, but with offset build it will pass it easily.

Moderate thermal mass is something that you don't get with stud framing. We are after a moderate thermal mass insulation now. The physics behind it I won't go into but, basically, it makes a considerable contribution to cutting your heating and cooling costs and making you feel more comfortable inside. Offset Build is right on the money there. If our regulator isn't into this I suspect they soon will be and it is going to be something that is coming up.

We are on to inherent condensation control. There has been a debate around here, and it has been quite difficult and I am sure you have been following this. This is the first of two solutions. An easy way there to maintain ceiling ventilation and maintain the insulation value at the corner, you introduce the ventilation up through the corrugations in the roof, but the big one is that you create a gradual grading from the inside to the outside and you have insulation that won't absorb moisture as fibreglass does. So the combination of those two things means the condensation problem disappears. It just won't happen.

We are on to thermal assessment now. We asked a colleague of ours, Lane Bormann, to assess the offset build method. He said he couldn't put the method alone in his computer and come up with a star rating, but what he could do was assess the likely temperatures in rooms on hot and cold days. This is his determination.

Those two other slides show the first wall that I built and also the kitchen with the offset walls around it. You can see how narrow the wall is but on the coldest night when the temperature is, say, minus 3 or something, that is the temperature you get inside the house without any help. That is what happens when the outside temperature is around the vicinity of 40 degrees. So you can see the house needs a little bit of help but not much and your costs go right down.

That house is built and had a star rating of 6.8 and I rented it out for three years. They had various tenants in there and they all commented that they hardly ever used the air conditioner or the heater. That is his summation, so he is very happy.

**Ms BUTLER** - Whereabouts is the house?

**Mr WALSH** - The house is in Lilydale.

We are up to a main slide, big picture solutions. I have changed the order around here. This one is next generations car design which is further down the ones you are looking at. Historically, cars were built this way - and I am very encouraged by this scenario. They were expensive to buy and they were all built on the chassis like that. Someone invented the monocoque bodywork so they got rid of the chassis and that created a whole wave of new creativity, which morphed over time into the very efficient cars we have now and they were affordable. If this sort of thinking can be introduced into the building industry, we will reap similar benefits to what happened to the car industry.

We are on to sustainability emphasis now. This is what our regulator is trying to instil into everybody. You combine those three things together and you get sustainability in the middle. Sorry

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to bring them up again but that's what they are doing to try to enforce it, and with offset build, it can cope. With stud framing, it probably won't.

Here is an example - the for example slide in that area too - if you consider a building material it has to have a reason to be there. Those reasons you can sum up on those five dot points on the left hand. They are one or more of those five things. If you have a stud-frame wall, the studs are the structure like our skeleton, the plaster board is like our skin. It doesn't have insulation and it doesn't have thermal mass. With stud-framing you have one work crew for each trade and each makes a mess, and one comes and goes and then the other comes and goes. So you have an inherent inefficiency there. Here, you've got one process: one work crew doing one thing and it achieves all of those four internal purposes in one fell swoop.

Flooring grade particle board is the material you are using and it does all of those things but - that's a sample of particle board which I would like you to have a quick look at. It does all of those things but the big one is - does it survive being out in the wet for a considerable period of time? The manufacturer says it does but I wanted to find out whether it would do more than that. So I immersed that sample in water - you can see the rock holding it down and the matchsticks letting the water in underneath. I left it there for 24 hours and I took it out - the edges swelled up a little bit, the middle was still dry. I let it dry out and it went back to the size and shape it was. What you can see on the screen is that piece of particle board on the table; that's it, it's gone back to the size and shape it was. That's a piece of particle board that hasn't been in the water. You compare the two together but they are both the same so it does work. There are people around who don't agree with that. They need to do a bit more work on it, I think.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Is that like TrueDeck, or can you give me some sort of description?

**Mr WALSH** - It's 19 mm thick flooring-grade particle board. It is the material that's used as a floor system in stud-frame homes that are built on bearers and joists.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Thank you.

**CHAIR** - I am highlighting that we have 10 to 15 minutes.

**Mr WALSH** - I am being as quick as I can.

**Mr TUCKER** - Is this the Yellow Tongue particle board?

**Mr WALSH** - It's made by Laminex Industries in Australia or Carter Holt Harvey in New Zealand.

**Mr TUCKER** - When I was building my house two years ago we had to paint it, otherwise it - yes, it took a lot of sanding.

**Mr WALSH** - Yes, you can if it's (?).

Welcome to a messy garage - that's what happens when you apply a load to it. That's the equivalent of me standing on that and Rod was very happy with that end result.

A big marketing no-no is to have exposed joints. People don't like them; they like large expanses of wall like that. It is basically a conservatism - that shows how the wall will appear when

## **PUBLIC**

it is painted. The slide doesn't do it justice. That is the real thing and it also shows how you fit the power point and you see the shelf support on there as well? You can't do that with plaster board.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Is the styro insulation?

**Mr WALSH** - That represents the insulation on the back face, which can be any thickness you want. It is expanded polystyrene.

**Mr TUCKER** - We have been getting a lot about cladding; how flammable is it?

**Mr WALSH** - Expanded polystyrene - the building grade is non-flammable. When it gets hot, it melts.

**Ms BUTLER** - The particle board itself is flammable, isn't it?

**Mr WALSH** - Yes, it's too similar to timber really, but for a dwelling construction, the ethos is you don't worry too much about whether the house will burn or not. The important thing is to get the occupants out quickly - if it is on the ground floor they can, and to separate that house from the houses on either side. That is why the boundaries setback so when the fire brigade arrives they can concentrate on making sure the houses on either side don't get burnt. There are no fire separation needs.

If we are going to call this 'next generation', we need to succeed in all those seven areas so let's look at them very quickly. I think we have been through all that; we have covered that; you can read all this at your leisure; that has been covered; it is more energy efficient - that's been covered. It is more durable than stud framing particularly in areas involving violence like people kicking holes in plaster board walls. It is very tough.

**CHAIR** - You could easily do some damage to a fist.

**Mr WALSH** - Oh yes, if you want to, you can punch a plaster board wall and put your fist through it, it might not do much good to you. You can certainly kick a hole in it and people do. It costs the Housing department a fortune maintaining that sort of thing.

We have looked at the sustainability emphasis, and that is right on the money there. It is safer to build - you can walk around of the ground building the floor instead on the joists and you can walk around on the ceiling when you are putting the roof together; it requires less effort over head when it is attaching that way and the boards are easier to handle. It is very suitable for building in a factory where the conditions are safer anyway. It moves the whole heirarchy closer to the top one there in elimination.

We are up to better universal disabled access now. These are features attributed to the method itself rather than the design of the house. Because you have thinner walls you don't have to worry too much about skimping and saving to maintain a decent wheelchair circulation in places in where they need it. You can fit grab rails anywhere without having to preplan for them, and you can maintain a strictly level floor by varying the layers in the floor so you have different floor surfaces so it removes any trip hazard. These are all simple, practical things.

I am coming to what I really want to talk about, but I can't until I show you this is a viable alternative to framing. You put all those things together and you have simple, smart outcomes.

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Now it is one simple response, and that is what it is, to those seven complex issues. It is a virtually impossible - it is a very difficult problem to solve. But the simplicity is what makes it appealing. It creates the magnet that a system needs to succeed. They are the things that people are looking for - and people aren't stupid. When they see those things, they will latch on to that. Leonardo da Vinci summed it up pretty well. Some thank yous to people who have been involved with me right back to 1970 in a few of those cases. Those three people on the top who have died and that is it.

**CHAIR** - Mr Walsh, thank you for a very comprehensive presentation. You are right, we haven't heard much about cost of building other than it's a barrier in terms of affordable housing.

**Mr WALSH** - Yes, I have been following what you have been doing.

**CHAIR** - As an architect and licensed builder partnering with an engineer and other professionals, you are in a unique position to advise the committee. It sounds a bit too good to be true. Are there any design challenges here? Any down sides at all?

**Mr WALSH** - It is probably a bit too good to be true, but it is. I have to tell you it is. I have been searching for the answer since 1970. I'm 75 years old and I started thinking about this when I was 25.

**CHAIR** - What is the pathway for innovative ideas like this to market?

**Mr WALSH** - That is what I want to talk to you about. There isn't any.

**CHAIR** - Why not?

**Mr WALSH** - I don't know what the pathway is, but what I want to suggest is that if we are going to create a medium-term contribution to solving this housing affordability crisis, as the Prime Minister put it, we have to make a start now. What I heard earlier this afternoon were outcomes because of the problem.

**CHAIR** - Consequences, that's right.

**Mr WALSH** - Yes. To solve the problem, we have to get into the 21st century and come up with a better alternative than framing, because it is just not working.

**CHAIR** - So, you built at least one prototype. Have you thought about how to promote the idea?

**Mr WALSH** - I've been thinking about it for years and I am getting frustrated. The plan you saw there had prototype offset walls. It was conventional construction for the rest. A bit unconventional in that it had particle board wall linings around the outside walls and on the ceiling, but apart from that it was steel stud framing. That is the shot taken during construction. So it is basically a conventional house. I did that on spec on the anticipation of selling it and making money on it. I was caught in the GFC and my business went downhill. Now I am a pensioner with a debt, and so I am not in a position to build a full prototype.

**CHAIR** - You need an angel investor.

## **PUBLIC**

**Mr WALSH** - No. Even if I could build a prototype I think it is probably not the right way to go because I would need the backing of someone with the resources to make it continue to happen. In other words, someone with sufficient capital and expertise to carry it on. We need a catalyst for this to happen. I don't think it can happen through the industry association such as the HIA and the Master Builders because their membership includes those who sell the products whose sales would be impacted particularly plasterboard and timber. The particle board manufacturers would like it but they don't want to - I have had discussions with them and I haven't got very far.

**CHAIR** - With HIA and Master Builders?

**Mr WALSH** - Yes. I was a member with the HIA for quite some time but I resigned over this. I didn't get very far with them. I've talked to quite a few building organisations and they are very happy making their money and doing what they do. I think too, reading between the lines and I can't prove this, but I think they are aware of their market position, which is there aren't enough tradesmen around to make the houses that the government want happen. Bearing in mind that we are looking at a 50 per cent labour reduction here, what does that do to the equation? The builders around, I think those involved in the tendering process know where they are going, so I suspect the government is paying top dollar for the houses that they do build. I don't know that for sure but I wouldn't be at all surprised if that is the case.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - That's the question I was going to come to. So roughly, the cost of building a Housing Tasmania home, a two-bedroom home for example, sits at around \$250 000 to \$260 000 per home, and that is a bare minimum. What is your estimate on what could be saved on those costs? Are we looking at a 25 per cent, a 30 per cent reduction in costs?

**Mr WALSH** - The costs that we have cited there of 30 per cent, we believe is the conservative minimum. That is made up more in there are some material savings and your overheads stay the same of course, but the biggest saving is in labour. That's where it happens. Tasmania wouldn't be successful in importing tradesman from the mainland to achieve the Government's aims because the situation on the mainland is the same as here. They can stay home and work just as well and get their top dollars. Building tradesmen are now are on a very good wicket because of what is happening and the need around in the housing area. There is a shortage of tradesman, and in the commercial area it is the same.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Yes, we have heard that a lot of the available labour is actually working in the construction industry on large projects and that is taking the skilled people away from the housing supply area. Have you put a patent on this?

**Mr WALSH** - Yes, I own the intellectual property on it.

**Mr TUCKER** - You've missed out.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Yes, I've missed out. I can't steal your idea. Wonderful idea, Mr Walsh.

**Mr WALSH** - Quite frankly, a patent has the value that is equal to the depth of the patent holder's pockets when someone tries to infringe. In other words, if you don't have the resources it doesn't really matter. I am 75 and I have a health condition, I am mortal. My motivation for all this is to make it happen, and probably make a bit out of it, sure.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - After all those decades of work on it you would think so.

## **PUBLIC**

**Mr WALSH** - That's right. I want to go to my grave knowing that it has happened and if you like the curse of - that's a bit hard but the influence of stud framing is gone. My suggestion or recommendation if you like -

**CHAIR** - Just a couple of minutes.

**Mr WALSH** - Sorry, I will be as quick as I can. I think the catalyst needs to be the government. The catalyst in conjunction with a fairly large building firm - and I do have one in mind. I have been talking to building firms and they've all said no to me except one. So I am in discussion with this person and I won't name who that person is or the firm because he doesn't know this is happening. But if there can be a consortium, if you like, or a cooperative venture with the government and private enterprise combining to make it happen, then as part of the process letting a few homes be built this way and test. It will take a year or two but this sort of thing is going to happen anyway whether those involved like it or not. I am asking for the committee to give serious consideration to that sort of cooperative approach because even if I had the resources to build it I probably wouldn't because it wouldn't result in a viable result further downstream if you like.

If it was built in a cooperative way. Now, what the government could then do is introduce that into their housing program. Because of the reduced cost, you will end up building more homes and then following the success of that you can then sell it or somehow deal with governments on the mainland.

**CHAIR** - We are going to have to wind up. Mr Walsh, the committee will be producing a report for parliament and we will certainly look to include your ideas within that. The other thoughts that I have - well, I think we will. I don't know what the process is actually but obviously accepting your evidence and I'll consider that along with all of the other submissions. It would be interesting for you to make direct contact with some of the community housing providers also that partner with building and construction industry.

**Mr WALSH** - I am in the process of that. That is difficult because they are constrained by government policy, aren't they?

**CHAIR** - I am not sure about that.

**Mr WALSH** - Yes, they are.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - In terms of the materials.

**Mr WALSH** - They compete for tenders and the tenders are based on designs based on stud work.

**CHAIR** - We are out of time and it would be interesting to explore things like local suppliers and so on. Perhaps there are avenues outside of this hearing to continue the conversation. I am sure that my colleague, Ms Butler, as shadow minister for building and construction has a million questions. I am aware that not everybody on the panel had an opportunity to ask questions. Nonetheless, we have an obligation with other witnesses also appearing. Thank you very much for all of the work that you put into your submission.

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As I advised you at the commencement of your evidence what you have said to us here today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Once you leave the table you need to be aware that privilege does not attach to comments you may make to anyone including the media even if you are just repeating what you have said to us. Do you understand that?

Thank you again, Mr Walsh for your time.

**Mr WALSH** - Thank you.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Thank you. That was really fascinating.

**THE WITNESS WITHDREW.**

## **PUBLIC**

**Mr MATTHEW POLLOCK**, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MASTER BUILDERS TASMANIA, WAS CALLED VIA TELECONFERENCE, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

**CHAIR** - Welcome, Matthew, apologies for the late commencement. If we can pull back some time that would be good but by the same token I don't want to cut short a worthwhile conversation. It is terrific to have you here on behalf of the Master Builders Tasmania. If you would like to just open with any opening remarks or statement and then we will get into questions and discussion.

**Mr POLLOCK** - Thank you, Alison, as Chair and other committee members for the opportunity to provide evidence today. This is a very important area of policy and social reform for the Master Builders Association and I believe we play quite a critical role in it. We have 650 members around the state of which about 75 per cent of those are residential housing builders. They provide quite a large share of new construction or new dwelling construction in Tasmania in all regions and so I suppose I provide evidence today representing those members.

In terms of the evidence that I wanted to provide in context to the terms of reference that was highlighted in my submission, and I note the terms of reference are rather broad and touch on a broad remit of issues when it comes to housing affordability.

Just going back to my comments before about the role of the construction industry and builders particularly in that, that really is about building new houses and delivering of supply. So in that respect I suppose my submission on behalf of the association really was focusing in that area and particularly term of reference (h) in terms of housing supply and what we need to focus on in the expectations of population growth and other demand drivers that we see into the future over the next couple of years.

I deliberately stayed away from some of the other issues raised within the terms of reference but, by doing so, we don't discount those as important areas for the select committee to focus on. It is more that I think there are perhaps other stakeholders who are more qualified to comment on them.

In support of our submission and particularly the term of reference (h) around market developments, housing supply and future demand, I provided some preliminary estimates on Master Builders' expectations around construction activity over the next few years, in particular forecasts for new dwelling starts, home renovations, and also growth rates in those areas.

I have included commercial building activity in there as well not for the sake of it but I suppose providing to housing supply directly but also just in context of the scale of the building task across different sectors over the next few years, and what that will mean when it comes to competing for resources and labour, which is important for the committee to consider in what the industry can deliver.

I might just finish up by going over - I won't go over the background that I've included within the submission. I suppose we certainly see housing affordability as a critical part of our own policy priorities and also the Tasmanian economy. It's a major drawcard to Tasmania and the liveability of the state, particularly in Hobart and some of the other urban centres. It would certainly be a shame to lose that.

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Regarding our priorities, I have made a short list some of Master Builders' policy priorities, and some of these are quite longheld, but I believe relevant to the committee. I note that we've certainly provided these on several occasions in the past to government. These are not new, but I thought it was worthwhile just reiterating those. It really does, again, focus on supply and what we see from an industry perspective of some of the things that are constraining supply, or perhaps put another way, get in the way sometimes of supply meeting new housing demand, which is ultimately what we'd like to see the industry able to do.

Some of those are:

An increased emphasis on the provision of adequate stock of public housing.

Land release policies that are tied to housing supply targets - I think there is certainly a relationship there that I would be happy to go into in more detail if need be;

Greater funding of upgrading utilities infrastructure, particularly in major growth corridors slated for new residential development. One thing that we've seen in the past is that new housing construction activity has been held up by delays in the provision of infrastructure.

Then maybe some more ambitious goals and some incentives around state government activity, particularly tied to local government performance with respect to delivering housing affordability policy outcomes.

State government incentive payments tied to local government performance with respect to efficiency improvement in planning and zoning, which is perhaps related to the point above.

An option to provide some funding to investigate the performance of local government and agencies with respect to planning and adequate land release.

Ultimately, an overarching goal is that we still see that housing policy should, as much as possible, incentivise home ownership. That really is ultimately a social goal in that home ownership has been proven over time - and there are several studies in support of it - that show it really is one of the most powerful factors in improving the wealth of ordinary people.

I might leave it there. Obviously, I am more than willing to take questions if anybody has any.

**CHAIR** - Thank you, Mr Pollock. With your forbearance I need a couple of minutes just to quickly outline to the committee. I have just been advised that our next witness is constrained by time and needs to jump on a bus actually at 6.30. I am going to propose that instead of rushing through this evidence, we give this due consideration and instead ask our final witness to join us for three-quarters of an hour in the time slot that we have allocated in the next sitting week.

I know that we want to meet with the university witnesses again and given that we've already had some preliminary discussion and we don't need introduction from them we could constrain that to three-quarters of an hour and hence do both. That is my proposal. Is anyone opposed to that?

**Ms O'CONNOR** - No.

## **PUBLIC**

**CHAIR** - Secretary, if you could just advise our next witness that that is our plan of action so as not to cut short his contribution. That is on the Wednesday of the next sitting week in the lunch break.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - It's Wednesday, 4th.

**CHAIR** - I know that that's not ideal, but we've had some technical issues and it is a good compromise. Thank you, committee.

Mr Pollock, sorry about that, just getting through some logistics here, but it does mean that we can give you full and due consideration.

I might just kick off the question around housing demand. Mr Pollock, we received some evidence from REIT that was rather controversial, I think, and the only voice saying at that point that in terms of social and affordable housing that in their view it was a role for government and not the private sector. But we have had Property Council and others willing to come to the table.

Your submission outlines the new housing demand to exceed 25 000 over the next decade and we did have evidence from the University of Tasmania flagging that their estimation was for 14 200 new social and affordable housing dwellings over 20 years. Just to be clear, this demand of 25 000 - that is all dwelling presumably not just social and affordable homes?

**Mr POLLOCK** - That is correct, yes.

**CHAIR** - Can you contextualise then. Social and affordable housing is obviously the focus of this inquiry, but it appears to me that in terms of the overall effort it seems inevitable that there is quite a lot in the private building and construction industry to meet that demand.

**Mr POLLOCK** - Yes, I would agree with that. There are probably two points there. First of all just make it clear what the number is representing. That is an estimate of new housing demand. It does not take into consideration any existing shortages. We see that as essentially the base line. If we are going to ensure that we do not make the housing affordability issue any worse then we need to build 25 000 houses over the next decade overall. I would say that to make it better to fill some of the existing housing shortage, and I think there is enough evidence in the market at the moment to suggest that that is the case, that there is one, then we need to build more than that.

That number there is just an estimation of the expected demand. That is really coming from a number of factors. Most of all expectations around population growth. We know that on average, and we have the numbers across the country to show it, that housing demand has a fairly consistent relationship with population. Generally, you have around 2.6 people per household. If you take that as a rough number then that gives an underlying expectation around what new housing construction needs to meet in terms of completions.

There are other industry and market drivers in that. Growing sectors, tourism, education have an increasing influence on housing demand as well, which are also included in that number. What it does not do is split it in terms of what is the demand for social housing relative to private demand for housing. That being said, and as much as the process of the committee is on the provision of social housing, I would not go as far as saying the two are disconnected. At the end of the introduction I did mention that it is very much a priority of Master Builders and I would urge that it is a priority of the committee also to really take a look from a long-term perspective around how

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we incentivise home ownership. That means the social and public housing sector and the private housing sector, and the delivery across those two sectors are related.

**CHAIR** - Yes, that is understood. We have had other evidence too about the bigger picture and that is terrific.

The other question I had before handing over to Ms O'Connor, are you able to provide us with some advice about the industry in terms of capacity to meet this demand? We've heard evidence around in particular some of the larger infrastructure projects pulling a number of key workers in the building and construction industry into particular commercial developments and potentially taking away from residential building and construction. I was wondering if you were able to give us insight into the industry and what your view is of all of that?

**Mr POLLOCK** - Yes, I'd certainly like to. I think there's some anecdotal evidence in the sense, which we can say that the last 12 months has been a little bit exceptional. There has been a confluence of factors, particularly in Hobart where you've had very large commercial construction projects really in the most resource-heavy part of their construction. You've also had exceptionally good growth in residential construction, some public funding in civil, and then also remediation works from the floods. The combination of those really did see the industry hit some pretty significant capacity constraints.

Some of that is starting to ease up, but it's easing up in a very elevated level. Moving forward, our expectation is that we are still going to see capacity constraints from the market in delivering supply across the different sectors of construction, which is why I included our commercial construction forecasts in the submission as well for the context.

**CHAIR** - Mr Pollock, we're hearing a picture from various witnesses that this situation has been looming for a while, perhaps for a decade or even longer, and could have been forecast. Why is it that TAFE, as our major public training provider, hasn't been able to respond quickly enough to address this significant capacity constraint?

**Mr POLLOCK** - You see it in all sectors. There is always a delay in terms of the industry's ability to meet demand when it grows at a rate that is significantly faster than the rest of the economy, and certainly faster than the labour force. There are some inherent constraints there, which we have perhaps seen in the construction industry start to emerge here over the last couple of years. I would also say from the perspective of the training system, it is important that TAFE does play a leading role. It is equally important that we have flexibility and a private system that is agile enough to respond more readily to spikes in demand when they happen. I'm not sure we've managed to resolve that.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - What does that mean in practice? What are you saying? Is it a deregulation of the building sector? Is it enabling the construction and building sector to import more labour from time to time? What does that look like?

**Mr POLLOCK** - You can't discount any option. It's certainly a priority for the industry to be able to meet the growing demands for skills and labour locally, because you see the returns from those major construction programs and the big investments in them through the community. That is definitely the priority. That being said, it is also important that there is access to all sources of skilled labour when needed. Certainly, on some of the major construction projects where some of those skills are very specialised, I would also say I think that the markets here is starting to catch

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up. We have seen, for example, the number of apprenticeships in building and construction grow by about 15 per cent over the last 12 months. That is, by comparison nationally, to a growth rate of about 1.5 per cent. So it is ten times the rate of growth that we have seen in new apprenticeships on the mainland, which is a good result. I would not say it is all dire by any means.

There is also perhaps a job for industry to do to better promote the industry as a destination and a long-term career opportunity. That is something that we are certainly working very hard on. It is important that the government assist but I think from a promotional perspective there is also a role for industry to play there.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Thank, Matthew. In your experience what is the average cost of building an affordable home, or do you have any sort of round figure there?

**Mr POLLOCK** - That is very hard to say. There are so many different factors when it comes to building from one site to the other. One thing I would say in there though which is important to note is that the cost of land over time, particularly if you see it over the last 30 years or so, has formed a larger and larger part of the cost of delivering a new house. Some of those numbers are staggering. It really is. If you take, for example, the inflation adjusted cost of building over an extended period of time the major share, and I am talking well over 50 per cent upwards in some jurisdictions, of 90 per cent of the growth in the cost of building a new house is in the cost of land.

**Ms O'CONNOR** - Matthew, take a breath, thanks. I just want to pull you up there. Those things considered, then what is the cheapest you could build a social home, a public housing home? We hear estimates in the range from \$200 000 to \$350 000 and this question basically relates to are we building houses as efficiently with the lowest cost materials that are still quality that we can, or are some sections of the housing construction industry just building the way things have been built for a very long time?

**Mr POLLOCK** - I would not disagree with that estimate, but I would say that over time quality is one, there is compliance with national construction codes, there is compliance with local legislation, there is a desire to make homes energy efficient. All of those things have to be considered when it comes to the lowest cost of building a social or affordable house.

**CHAIR** - Thanks, Mr Pollock. I will pass the call to Mrs Rylah, then Ms Butler.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Are there private training providers in Tasmania, as in not TAFE, that are providing training to apprentices?

**Mr POLLOCK** - Yes, there are.

**Mrs RYLAH** - How many? I do not really mind how many there are. What proportion of apprentices are being trained by private providers?

**Mr POLLOCK** - I would not have those numbers readily on hand. I do know that TAFE still provides the bulk but there are private providers that provide training to apprentices. Particularly you find that they operate in some of the regions where TAFE does not have the presence. The remote areas, very much it is often you will have your private providers and they do a good job of filling that gap because it means they can do assessments in remote areas, which TAFE perhaps doesn't have the flexibility to do so.

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**Mrs RYLAH** - Would you be able, Matthew, to take that on notice and do you have those figures? Would you be able to give the committee some idea of what proportion are privately trained and what proportion are TAFE trained at the moment, or in any version you've got?

**Mr POLLOCK** - I can certainly try to track them down. I don't have them, but I am more than willing to take a look and report back to the committee on that.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Thank you very much.

**Mr POLLOCK** - You're welcome.

**Ms BUTLER** - Hi Matt, it's Jen. I have a question about Master Builders' policy on mandatory inclusionary zoning. Do you guys have a policy on that?

**Mr POLLOCK** - In the past we have not supported that policy. In terms of the detail, it was a little bit before my time. I would have to go back and find some more of that detail. I can certainly say that we've not supported that policy in the past. I believe at a higher level it comes to not necessarily seeing the evidence of it working in practice. There's been some mixed results, is my understanding of that type of policy.

**Ms BUTLER** - Just two more follow-up questions in that line of questioning. When it comes to mandatory inclusionary zoning, could you give some examples of where and why it hasn't worked, hence why Master Builders might have a reluctance towards supporting that?

**Mr POLLOCK** - I suppose if you take the policy to a conclusion over time, how do you keep a particular dwelling as an affordable dwelling? I'm not sure how that would work in practice. I'm not sure if we've seen any policy detail on that. Without seeing the details, it's difficult to support the policy, given that the intention of it is to provide affordable housing. The more powerful solution is to ensure that we build enough houses in the right areas to make housing more affordable. That's taking a more market-driven approach than it is taking a regulatory approach through the provision of affordable housing.

**Ms BUTLER** - I was just going to ask, in a perfect world, if we were to bring the private sector along with the idea of some form of inclusionary zoning, what sort of incentives off the top of your head do you think may entice the private sector to participate in inclusionary zoning?

**Mr POLLOCK** - There's maybe some examples of this at the moment that have been floated at the local government level. I believe that the Hobart City Council is talking about the potential for incentives around the provision of affordable housing in new developments if those developments look to go outside the current sort of planning regime. It might be, for example, looking at providing some sort of incentive for developers if they were to include some affordable or social housing in the development, but then allow them to offset that in another part of the development.

**Ms BUTLER** - Exactly.

**Mr POLLOCK** - With that type of arrangement you could see that it would still encourage investors to do so. I can't speak for them directly, but you would imagine if it's a win-win type situation that you have more engagement from the private sector and private investors to get involved.

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**Ms BUTLER** - Thanks, Matt.

**Mr TUCKER** - Your point there on the state government incentive payments tied to local government performance, I was wondering whether you could expand a little bit more on that? What incentives we should be looking at putting in there for local government?

**Mr POLLOCK** - That has to do with broader supply targets. We can make some reasonably good guesses around what will be the demand for housing in certain areas moving forward. We know over time there are areas where people tend to migrate to and there will be greater housing demand associated with that.

There have been some examples of it in some federal government initiatives. I believe the Western Sydney City Deal had within it some high level sort of housing supply targets as part of that deal. I know it is not the jurisdiction of federal government to be imposing on local governments, but you could see a similar model work whether it is through some sort of broader city-wide master plan or whatever it might be that you can set supply targets which meet expectations around future population growth in regions.

**CHAIR** - Following up from that, your second dot point in your recommendation calls for land release policies tied to housing supply targets. At least one of the witnesses came forward with a suggestion to potentially penalise land banking along the lines of vacant land tax. Is that the type of thing that you are talking about? What would be the carrot if that is a potential stick?

**Mr POLLOCK** - That is a good question. I think what I am trying to draw between the two areas of policies is that land constraints and releasing land for residential construction is very much the first step in the delivery of new housing supply whether that is greenfields or inner city. You saw it in that report I believe that was released today by UTAS that if you were to release vacant blocks within the inner city of Hobart there is potentially 30 000 additional dwellings that you might be able to unlock. That is not to support that, and there is obviously a broader planning considerations in that respect, but land constraints tends to come up as a fairly consistent issue when I am talking to members. When you ask them the question of what gets in the way of building more houses it is this unmet demand that we seem to talk about all the time.

**CHAIR** - That makes sense. In the area of utilities infrastructure, obviously government has relationships with a number of GBEs in this space. Could you talk the committee through any barriers around fast building and construction in the area of social affordable housing? In particular I am wondering if there are time delays and so on in connection to utilities that could be smoothed out with whatever mechanisms. There are costs, I am sure. Do you know what I am talking about? With TasWater, water and sewerage, with power connection, TasNetworks, et cetera, how does all that work in the normal building and construction process, and are there ways to cut some time out of that system?

**Mr POLLOCK** - The best way to answer that question might be to give an example. Something that certainly was quite a significant constraint on the industry only a few months ago was having new blocks connected to the electricity grid. That creates problems, particularly when it comes to completion of the house and being able to offer it to market, but also in construction. You need power to build houses. If you don't, that creates all sorts of problems on its own.

**CHAIR** - Power connection is the first step in terms of the building and construction process?

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**Mr POLLOCK** - It's an important step, yes. You can get around it - you can obviously use generators and other things, but they add costs. In the context of building affordable housing it is perhaps more important. That particular example I was talking about as well was in relation to at the same time there was the introduction of smart meters. There were perhaps greater resources needed to facilitate that roll out. Then within the regional areas particularly, where in order to have somebody come out to install the meter or to provide electricity to the lot, often to make that trip worthwhile they're waiting for a number of different lots to all be ready before they go out. If you're the first one in that particular situation you may be waiting some time.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Matt, my question goes back to a section of your letter where you say that over the next 10 years there is an estimated demand of 52 000. If we divided that by 10 that's 5200 homes over the year and you've said in this year that you've created 2800 dwellings. There is a significant difference between 5200 and 2800. Are you looking at a doubling the size of your workforce or your members' workforce? What are you looking at?

**Mr POLLOCK** - Sorry, just to be clear here, that 52 000 number I believe was in reference to population growth not construction activity.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Sorry, yes, you are right. It was 25 000 divided by 10, which gives you 2.6. So, there's no growth, then, in the industry size if you are required to meet this demand? I am trying to get an understanding of where you're coming from?

**Mr POLLOCK** - I think there's two things. What we're showing here is at current rates we're meeting expected population growth in terms of the driver of future demand. What we're not necessarily meeting is the current shortage of housing, which is what's driving prices up faster than prices of other goods in the economy and creating shortages in the rental market, which has other social issues.

I suppose the point is that 2500 is the absolute bottom. If we go any lower than that then we see that as the absolute floor. If we go any lower than 2500 houses a year we're going to start putting upward pressure on the market again and we're going to see housing affordability get worse.

To make it better we need to do better than that.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Yes, I get that. What do you think needs to happen to the size of your industry or the size of the workforce to deliver sufficient? You are currently delivering 2800?

**Mr POLLOCK** - Yes, thereabouts. The industry is not just there to deliver housing. It is there to build a growing book of renovations work. Some of the forecasts for commercial building activity is based on current projects that are either announced or about to get underway in the pipeline. There is significant growth there and there will be competition for labour and resources for those projects. There is also a growing engineering and civil sector where we expect the value of work done there to increase quite significantly. To deliver on all of those components we really see that the industry needs to grow quite significantly. Over the next five years we could see growth in the number of workers of a few thousand. That is not to replace those workers that will obviously be retiring, leave the industry as well.

**Mrs RYLAH** - You are saying as a back of the envelope number approximately a third plus you have to cover people retiring from the industry for other reasons?

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**Mr POLLOCK** - That is right and if you look at the average age of a tradesperson in the industry here, they are older than the average worker by a few years. People tend to retire earlier in construction. Generally, you have retirement rates of 2.5 per cent in the workforce. In construction it is quite a bit higher than that, particularly in the trades where generally you do not often see tradespeople working past their late 40s or into the 50s. Some obviously do. They enjoy it but for some it is just not possible to do so. It is hard work. That is not necessarily those people who are lost to the industry but they may not be plying their trade and they are the people obviously that physically put the housing up.

**CHAIR** - Mrs Rylah, we need to wind up.

**Mrs RYLAH** - Yes. How do you see innovation in building? We have had other representations from people looking at factory constructed floors, ceilings, et cetera. Do you see that as significant for the industry? Are you for it or against it? How do you see that?

**Mr POLLOCK** - I would hope so. There are certainly opportunities for innovation in the industry. The construction industry has been traditionally a bit of a slow adopter of technology and there are a number of reasons for that. It is the nature of the industry itself. In Australia if you compare the built environment with some other types in the world we are bit unique in the way that we build houses. They are much more tailored or bespoke in design here. That is a bit of a structural challenge in a sense. There are obviously some regulatory challenges, but I would hope over time that it does play a greater role and that there are some innovations that do allow for more affordable construction of housing, particularly in the social and public housing space. A lot of these technologies have been around for a while. As you say prefabricated has been around for decades, [TBC] has been around for decades. We just have not seen it really take off here.

**CHAIR** - We need to wind up. Thank you, Matthew, for your evidence today. I am required just to read a quick statement after you have provided evidence, Mr Pollock.

As I advised you at the commencement of your evidence what you have said to us here today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Once you leave the table you need to be aware that privilege does not attach to comments you may make to anyone including the media even if are you just repeating what you have said to us.

Do you understand that?

**Mr POLLOCK** - Yes.

**CHAIR** - Terrific. Thanks again for the time you put into your submission and for your understanding in the late start and for providing us with some evidence today. We really appreciate that. Thank you for your time.

**Mr POLLOCK** - Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the rest of the committee for hearing me out today.

**CHAIR** - Thank you.

**THE WITNESS WITHDREW.**