

Statement

The Hon Richard Wynne MP

Minister for Planning

Minister for Housing



Thursday, 17 December 2020

STATEMENT ON VICTORIAN OMBUDSMAN HOUSING REPORT

The Victorian Government acknowledges the report from the Ombudsman, and thanks the residents and community members in the North Melbourne and Flemington public housing estates for sharing their experiences as part of this process.

The decision to place these estates into lockdown was a difficult one, and we recognise that it was a very challenging and difficult time for residents. We also understand that it was an integral action in helping to slow the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) in our state.

The Ombudsman has made a number of findings and recommendations, which the Government will take the time to consider. However, the Government rejects the opinions or findings regarding the lawfulness or legitimacy of the emergency response. The Government has at all times acted lawfully and within the applicable legislative framework.

We are disappointed that the comprehensive response provided by the Department of Health and Human Services, which carefully explained the lawfulness of the emergency response, has not been adequately considered and is attached only as an appendix to the final report.

The report also fails to acknowledge that the Department has already actioned several of the Ombudsman's recommendations relating to outbreak planning and preparedness, in addition to significant reform work to respond to any potential future outbreaks.

Throughout this global pandemic the Government has made incredibly difficult decisions guided by data and health advice – but at the forefront of every single one of them was the safety and wellbeing of Victorians.

The decision regarding the Flemington and North Melbourne estates was no different. The alternative of seeing the virus spread further and endangering the lives of residents and the surrounding communities was simply not acceptable.

This decision also acknowledged the particular vulnerabilities within these communities. With over 3,000 living across the estates – almost 300 residents are over 70 years old and a significant number have a wide range of other health conditions – the consequences of not acting would have been catastrophic.

On 1 July, there were 17 active cases of the virus across the nine towers in Flemington and North Melbourne. In just three days that figure doubled to 34 cases. This was a rate of community transmission unseen before in Victoria.

In the face of a highly infectious and deadly virus – and with public health officials likening the towers to “vertical cruise ships” – we acted swiftly while at the same time activating a range of supports for residents.

There is no doubt that by acting quickly this lockdown saved lives, and that was our highest priority. We make no apologies for saving lives – but we do acknowledge the very real distress experienced by residents.

The immediate response was not perfect – particularly in the very beginning when processes were being established – but there were hundreds of people working day and night to ensure residents were safe and had access to food and medical care.

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Once testing of residents was completed five days later, it emerged that almost 200 residents had coronavirus. As a result of the lockdown, we were able to stop the acceleration of cases, driving down numbers at a time when the rest of Victoria was recording hundreds of new active cases each and every day.

In the days following the lockdown, we implemented lessons we had learnt at Flemington and North Melbourne in other public housing estates and other high-risk accommodation settings including Supported Residential Services.

During the pandemic, we also invested in a raft of preventative health measures to help keep public housing tenants at all high-rises across Melbourne safe.

This included on ground Health Concierges to help residents with supports and referrals, hand sanitisers installed at every foyer and every floor, increased deep cleaning and cleaning of common touch points in high-rise buildings five times a day. We've also conducted extensive coronavirus testing at all public housing high-rises.

To help ensure more Victorians have the security of a home, the *Victorian Budget 2020/21* includes a massive \$5.3 billion Big Housing Build – the largest single investment in social and affordable housing by any government in Australia's history.

The Budget also includes \$155 million to continue coronavirus preparation and prevention measures in public housing – including testing, cleaning, security, food and material aid, and community services for residents.

Almost \$7.5 million is being invested to support public housing tenants in North Melbourne and Flemington with improved health and safety outcomes and increased local employment and training opportunities.

Our new Paving the Way Forward program is working with residents to identify and respond to their priorities around their home, neighbourhood and the services they receive. The new project will be designed with residents, local government and housing sector partners.

To date, more than 40 jobs have been created for North Melbourne and Flemington residents as part of on-the-ground work in these communities, along with specific roles dedicated to cultural in-reach, leading to a better understanding of the experiences, issues, ideas and aspirations of these culturally-diverse communities.

We thank every single public housing resident, particularly those in the Flemington and North Melbourne housing towers, for their support and sacrifice in tackling this public health emergency. It is only through continued vigilance throughout the state that we've stayed at zero cases and are moving to a COVIDSafe Summer, enabling Victorians to spend the warmer months with our loved ones.