

3. Q&As

Community housing allocations framework – consultation draft

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1. What is the *Community Housing Allocations Framework*?

The *Community Housing Allocations Framework* is the authoritative source of allocations policy and guidance to registered housing agencies (RHAs) that participate in the Victorian Housing Register (VHR) managed by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). It includes a target for social housing allocations to Priority Access Group applicants on the VHR.

2. Why is the framework needed?

We all need to do our bit to provide more housing for those most in need.

The framework provides a consistent way of ensuring more social housing is allocated to the most disadvantaged Victorians, and for measuring and reporting participating RHAs' annual allocations performance against the target.

The Government has stated in *Homes for Victorians* that RHAs' eligibility to participate in the new social housing funding initiatives will be conditional on them allocating at least 75 per cent of their social housing vacancies to the Priority Access Group on the VHR.

3. What's in the framework?

The framework outlines a range of key terms and policy parameters for defining, measuring and reporting participating RHAs' annual allocations performance. The most significant parameters are:

- a. RHAs will be able to opt in to the VHR (although not opting in will mean forgoing eligibility for *Home for Victorians* initiatives and new Director of Housing leases).
- b. Allocations performance will be measured only in relation to 'targeted social housing' (see the proposed definition for 'targeted social housing' in the framework).
- c. Targeting social housing will be agreed with each participating RHA. 'Targeted social housing' will include all Director of Housing owned properties leased to RHAs.
- d. For agencies that have properties other than 'targeted social housing', the framework proposes an adjustment factor to be applied to acknowledge and encourage Priority Allocations to other housing. This will be further discussed with individual agencies where required.
- e. The target will measure new annual allocations from the VHR, not the pre-existing tenancy profile of participating organisations.
- f. In making allocations from the VHR, participating RHAs will be able to apply additional criteria in line with their mission statement to support particular community or disadvantaged groups.
- g. Any Priority Allocation from the Priority Access Group at Appendix 1 of the framework will count towards the target, with no requirement for sub-targets for particular Priority Access Group categories. Applicant information – protected by strict privacy obligations – will help participating RHAs meet obligations under the performance standards, allowing the allocations to be fair, transparent and responsive to housing need and length of wait among other factors.
- h. Allocations will be monitored annually through VHR-generated data. For organisations with low volumes of allocations, reporting will be triggered at a cumulative annual threshold of 12 or more allocations.
- i. Compliance will continue to be through the existing performance standards under the *Housing Act 1983* as well as contracts and agreements with the Director of Housing.

4. How can the current allocations targets in our agreements with DHHS be changed?

Joining the VHR will remain entirely voluntary. RHAs that decide to join the VHR will be required to agree to be bound by the target and other requirements of the framework under a VHR participation agreement. The VHR participation agreement will supersede the allocations targets within existing contracts with the Director of Housing, including the *Protocol for the referral of public housing applicants to housing associations*, leases and historical funding agreements.

Importantly, RHAs will not be compelled to opt into the VHR. However new partnership contracts under *Homes for Victorians* and leases on Director of Housing properties will be conditional on participating in the VHR, and this will include agreement to comply with the framework. This means that only RHAs that participate in the VHR will be eligible to access future funding and other opportunities.

5. Which properties will be included in the allocations target?

The government wants to maximise housing opportunities for the Priority Access Group on the VHR.

This means that determining which properties will be included in the target (see the proposed definition for ‘targeted social housing’ in the framework) is one of the key matters on which DHHS is seeking comment from the community housing.

It is expected that all long term Director of Housing owned properties, including those leased to RHAs, will be included in the target. This will mean that for a number of RHAs determining which properties are in the target will be relatively straightforward.

For other RHAs, additional factors may be relevant. These may include the nature and level of government contribution to a property, and the form of any financial or other interest the Director of Housing may have including under section 107 of the Housing Act, first mortgage and a fixed and/or floating charge registered with Australian Securities and Investments Commission. DHHS welcomes sector comment on the proposed definition of ‘targeted social housing’, the factors that may be relevant, and the reasoning behind them.

Following finalisation of the framework DHHS will work through ‘targeted social housing’ with individual RHAs where required. DHHS will use land title information to better understand the extent of each agency’s housing assets. Housing organisations will be given the opportunity to validate this information before a starting point is mutually agreed.

Properties to be included in the target will be detailed in each RHA’s VHR participation agreement. Participating RHAs will be required under the terms of the VHR participation agreement to keep their asset list in the VHR up to date.

6. Are allocations to rooming houses included in the allocations target?

Yes. Allocations to rooming houses are included in the target. Community managed rooming houses are categorised as long term housing. Applicants living in rooming houses may also be in the Priority Access Group on the VHR. This could occur where a rooming house tenancy is not appropriate for the tenant’s wellbeing. In this case the RHA may lodge and approve a VHR priority transfer application.

7. Are allocations to specialist disability accommodation (SDA) included in the allocations target?

No. The process of offers to SDA will remain separate to the VHR.

A new DHHS policy '*Offering Residency in Specialist Disability Accommodation - Policy and Standards*' has been developed to satisfy both the requirements for admission in accordance with a process determined by the Secretary (as required under the *Disability Act 2006*) and the new way of working to offer residency in a SDA dwelling under the National Disability Insurance Scheme. This policy and standards outlines the department's minimum requirements to offer residency within SDA.

More information about SDA is available at <http://www.vic.gov.au/ndis/getting-ready/service-providers.html>.

8. What about the properties we lease from the Director of Housing?

It is expected that all long term Director of Housing owned properties, including those leased to RHAs, will be included in the target. The leases on Director of Housing properties that DHHS has agreed with RHAs already contain allocations targets. Most leases require the RHA to allocate all vacancies to tenants who are eligible for public housing.

To ensure that the Director owned housing assets support the Government's objective to allocate more social housing to the most disadvantaged Victorians all Director of Housing owned properties that are leased to agencies will, over time, move to the VHR and be included in the allocations target.

When a RHA joins the VHR, the VHR participation agreement will supersede the allocations targets in the existing leases and require the properties to remain in the VHR. For RHAs that do not plan to join the VHR, as their leases expire DHHS will re-lease these properties to participating RHAs.

To assist organisations that plan to opt-in to the VHR early, DHHS will make available dedicated, time-limited resources. More information on this support is at Question 12. *What assistance will DHHS provide for agencies wishing to opt in?*

DHHS is committed to actively working through the implications of new allocations and other conditions of leases with RHAs and the Housing Registrar to ensure a smooth transition to the VHR.

9. What happens if my organisation later decides to opt out of the VHR?

Participating RHAs may opt out of the VHR in one of two ways: they may apply to the Director of Housing to opt out; or the Director of Housing may decide to withdraw a participating RHA's access to the VHR.

Withdrawing from the VHR may have implications for RHA-owned, State-funded assets acquired since the date of participation in the VHR, and for the management of State-owned assets including leases. The Director of Housing will develop a compliance and enforcement plan once the framework has been finalised to clarify the potential implications for RHAs of withdrawing from the VHR.

Agencies that are not current participants in the VHR (whether they have opted out or never joined) will also be ineligible for future funding opportunities. These requirements will be contained in the VHR participation agreement and in documentation about future funding opportunities.

10. What if my organisation fails to meet the allocations target?

The *Performance standards for registered agencies* under the Housing Act require that RHAs comply with both the standards *and* contractual relationships with the Director of Housing. Allocations targets are currently contained in the funding agreements and leases that RHAs hold with the Director of Housing. When an organisation joins the VHR these targets will be superseded by the VHR participation agreement.

Once the framework has been finalised, the Director of Housing will develop a compliance and enforcement plan that is transparent about a graduated response to non-compliance with the VHR participation agreement. The Director of Housing will continue to provide allocations performance data to the Housing Registrar for annual performance monitoring, review and reporting under the performance standards. This will happen in the same way that RHA data on the *National affordable housing agreement*, the *National partnership agreement on remote Indigenous housing* and the interim *Protocol for the referral of public housing applicants to housing associations* is currently provided. The Housing Registrar may use this information to follow up compliance issues with RHAs.

11. Are there any special arrangements for organisations with a small portfolio and low turnover?

Yes. DHHS acknowledges that for RHAs with small numbers of vacancies, a single allocation decision could have a significant impact on its annual performance figures. A threshold arrangement will apply so that RHAs with low numbers of allocations each year are not disadvantaged by annual performance monitoring.

The framework includes a rule that smooths the monitoring and reporting of the performance of the smaller participating RHAs, by establishing an annual threshold of 12 or more allocations for reporting. Compliance against the target will be monitored but not reported for RHAs with fewer allocations in a year than this. Instead, these allocations will carry over to the next year, and performance will be calculated and reported once cumulative allocations reach 12.

12. What assistance will DHHS provide for agencies wishing to opt in?

RHAs will be able to opt in to the VHR from any time after DHHS has extended its opt-in invitation to the sector. However DHHS has made available dedicated, time-limited resources to assist the organisations that decide to join the VHR early.

DHHS staff will work in partnership with each individual participating RHA to determine the correct placement of all applications currently on the agency's waiting list onto the VHR.

Agencies will have access to funding to cover back-filling of agency staff who have been taken off-line for this work. Participating RHA staff who are nominated to work in the VHR will be invited to attend training so that they have the knowledge and understanding to operate effectively and legally in the VHR.

Training will be offered in:

- how to use Housing Integrated Information Program (HiiP) (where the VHR sits)
- how the VHR operates, VHR categories; eligibility criteria; roles and responsibilities of different organisations in the VHR and the application of the VHR operational guidelines

- information sharing, privacy and the application of the human rights charter in the VHR.

A help line will also be established to support participating RHA staff with operational policy and system queries.

13. Where does the framework fit into Victoria’s social housing policy?

Waiting times for social housing for the most disadvantaged Victorian households have increased. To address this issue, more social housing needs to be built, and a concerted effort needs to be made to ensure a greater proportion of social housing is prioritised to the most disadvantaged Victorians.

Through *Homes for Victorians* the Victorian Government is committing unprecedented levels of funding to support the community housing sector to grow its social housing stock.

The Government has announced that RHAs’ eligibility to participate in the new social housing funding initiatives under *Homes for Victorians* will be conditional on them participating in the VHR and allocating at least 75 per cent of their social housing vacancies to the Priority Access Group.

The VHR is the way applications for long-term social housing will now be managed in Victoria. It brings together public and community housing applications so people only need to apply once for social housing.

Complying with the framework will be one of the requirements of RHAs that decide to join the VHR. The 75 per cent requirement will be included in the framework. Participating in the VHR will also bring other requirements, for example in relation to eligibility for social housing applicants, privacy, and training for employees authorised to access the VHR.

More information on applying eligibility criteria can be found in the operational guidelines that underpin the VHR, which can be accessed through the [Funded Agency Channel](http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/funded-agency-channel) at <www.dhs.vic.gov.au/funded-agency-channel>.

14. Why should my organisation opt in to the VHR?

There are a range of benefits for organisations who opt in to the VHR. Importantly, participating RHAs will be eligible to:

- apply for *Homes for Victorians* opportunities totaling \$799 million in additional homeless and housing support and \$2.1 billion in financial instruments
- apply for future government funding for social housing
- enter and renew Director of Housing general leases
- access Tenancy Plus for their tenants, with packages to help support tenancy sustainability, manage arrears, and reduce evictions and abandonment.

In addition the VHR will improve organisations’ operational efficiency by:

- allowing them to access a single database of social housing applicants in Victoria to find suitable applicants and allocate vacant properties
- removing the need for agencies to maintain their own waiting list and application process
- removing the current interim *Protocol for the referral of public housing applicants to housing associations* process
- reducing manual annual reporting to government
- enabling access to real time allocations performance data

- potentially reducing vacancy turnaround time – agencies will be able to access a larger volume of potential tenants for vacancies and drill-down to identify suitable candidates based on housing need and agency mission.

15. What happens if my organisation decides not to opt in to the VHR?

The VHR is changing the way long-term social housing allocations are managed in Victoria by creating a single intake and allocations system for social housing vacancies. This will bring a range of benefits for applicants and RHAs.

While there is no obligation for RHAs to join the VHR, participation will ensure Victorians can access the broad range of social housing options available in a transparent and fair manner. This is why the Victorian Government has linked RHAs' participation in the VHR to eligibility for the *Homes for Victorians* social housing initiatives.

For RHAs that decide not to participate, current allocations requirements contained in current contracts will continue to apply for the foreseeable future. The interim *Protocol for the referral of public housing applicants to housing associations* will continue in relation to current funding agreements. Lease and other agreements with the Director of Housing will continue until expiry, when DHHS will re-lease these properties to participating RHAs if the current RHA has decided not to join the VHR. Non-participating RHAs would also continue to provide fully manual annual reporting to government and be required to maintain their own waiting lists.

New partnership contracts under *Homes for Victorians* and future Director of Housing leases will be conditional on participating in the VHR, and this will include agreement to comply with the framework. This means that only RHAs that participate in the VHR will be eligible to access future opportunities.

16. How will my organisation's allocations be assessed, monitored and reported against the target?

The Priority Allocations Target is a minimum of 75 percent of annual allocations in 'targeted social housing' to Priority Access Group applicants on the VHR. Performance will be measured by looking at the Priority Allocations in the year to 'targeted social housing' as a percentage of the total allocations to 'targeted social housing'.

All Priority Allocations are included in the calculation regardless of whether the property allocated to the Priority Access Group applicant is classified as 'targeted social housing'.

For agencies that have properties other than 'targeted social housing', the framework proposes an adjustment factor to be applied to acknowledge and support Priority Allocations to other housing. This will be further discussed with individual agencies.

The VHR will help participating RHAs to track their allocations performance with real-time access to allocations data.

The VHR will also create an accurate and transparent allocations dataset for the Director of Housing to provide to the Housing Registrar for annual performance monitoring, review and reporting under the standards. This will happen in the same way that RHA data on the *National affordable housing agreement*, the *National partnership agreement on remote Indigenous housing* and the *Protocol for the referral of public housing applicants to housing associations* is currently provided.

17. Will participating RHAs be forced to take applicants from the top of the VHR?

No. With more than 12,000 households in the Priority Access Group across Victoria, agencies will be able to use the VHR's search and sort functionality to identify households that are most suited to each 'targeted social housing' vacancy. However RHAs must meet obligations under the performance standards that ensure allocations are fair, transparent and responsive to housing need and length of wait (where relevant) among other factors.

Any Priority Allocation from the Priority Access Group at Appendix 1 in the framework will count towards performance against the target. The Priority Access Group includes all new priority access applicants and most of the transfer priority access applicants. Applicant information will be available on the VHR under strict privacy conditions to help RHAs to meet their obligations and preferences.

In making allocations from the VHR, RHAs will be able to apply additional criteria so they can continue to meet the housing needs of the disadvantaged Victorians who are included in their organisational mission such as Aboriginal clients, people with disabilities, women experiencing family violence or people who are homeless.

18. Are current tenancies affected?

No. The target will not apply to current tenants or tenancies. It will only be applied when properties become vacant and new tenants are needed. No current tenancies will be affected by the introduction of the allocation target.

19. Will rental housing co-operatives be treated differently?

DHHS acknowledges co-operatives' concerns about the suitability of VHR applicants from the Priority Access Group to meet co-operative selection criteria and training requirements. RHAs retain the option to apply agency-specific tenant selection criteria and will not be required to allocate a co-operative property to a household that does not meet the co-operative's selection requirements.

As well as co-operatives having access to a significantly larger pool of applicants through the VHR, the low turnover smoothing rules for performance reporting is likely to apply to all co-operatives registered in their own right as housing providers.

20. What support is available for tenants?

DHHS funds a range of services to support at-risk tenancies which may be accessed on the basis of need. A brief description of each of these is provided at the Appendix to this document.

The Social Housing Advocacy and Support Program currently provides case management and support to public housing tenants to maintain their housing and prevent homelessness.

DHHS is introducing a new Tenancy Plus program to provide tenants of participating RHAs and public housing with tailored support to help maintain their tenancy in situations where this is breaking down or at risk of breaking down. Tenancy Plus will make available support packages for the tenants of participating RHAs to help support tenancy sustainability, manage arrears, and reduce evictions and abandonment.

21. Who has been consulted on the development of the framework?

The consultation draft framework reflects significant sector input, drawing on ongoing consultation with key organisations since late 2015.

More recent and intensive engagement has focused on the Housing Registrar and key organisations represented on the VHR Senior Leadership Group including Aboriginal Housing Victoria, Launch Housing, the Council to Homeless Persons and the Community Housing Federation of Victoria.

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Available at <http://www.housing.vic.gov.au>

Appendix – DHHS funded support services for at-risk tenancies accessible on the basis of need

Service type	Who is targeted	Description	Where to go for more information and access
Tenancy Plus	Tenants of the registered agencies that participate in the VHR	Early intervention to help new tenants, particularly those with high needs, to get established in their new home and support to intervene when a tenancy is at risk and advocate on a tenant's behalf.	DHHS will release further details about the Tenancy Plus program shortly.
Family Violence Flexible Support Packages	Victims of family violence	Packages to pay for a range of outlays including: rental or relocation costs, furnishings, clothing and books for children or security measures to improve safety at home	http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/about-the-department/documents-and-resources/policies,-guidelines-and-legislation/flexible-support-packages-guidelines
Flexible Packages for Child FIRST and Family Services	Children, young people and their families	Flexible packages of support for children, young people and their families to support the implementation of Child and Family Action Plan	http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/for-service-providers/children,-youth-and-families/family-violence2
Homelessness services	People at risk of homelessness	A range of supports intended to keep people in housing including or get them into housing if they are homeless	http://www.serviceseeker.com.au/
Housing Establishment Fund	People at risk of homelessness	Flexible funding to assist homeless people to access crisis, longer-term or alternative housing options, or to assist them to maintain their existing housing	http://www.serviceseeker.com.au/
Private Rental Brokerage	Households who are able to sustain private rental housing with time limited support	Private rental assistance is intended to prevent or end homelessness and housing crisis by sustaining people in private rental through rapid rehousing, supporting at risk households and assisting the move from crisis, transitional or social housing	http://www.serviceseeker.com.au/
Bond Loan Scheme	Individuals that are in need of help to get into private rental	An interest-free loan for private renters from the Department of Health and Human Services to help cover the cost of a rental bond	http://www.housing.vic.gov.au/help-get-private-rental