



GLEN EIRA
CITY COUNCIL

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Improving standards for rooming houses

Glen Eira City Council is calling on the State Government to reform standards for rooming houses, improve arrangements for the monitoring and control of standards, and reduce the exploitation of vulnerable residents.

ROOMING HOUSES

Rooming houses are residential properties where rooms are available for rent for four or more people who share common facilities, such as bathrooms, kitchens and laundries.

Rooming houses offer accommodation for many low income and disadvantaged members of the community, particularly for those who cannot access, afford or sustain a tenancy in the private rental market.

The number of rooming houses operating in Glen Eira has almost doubled in the past five years. Currently there are 49 rooming houses registered with Council that accommodate approximately 500 vulnerable residents.

The demand for local rooming house accommodation in Glen Eira continues to increase due to a range of influences, including a shortage of affordable housing, a shortage of emergency accommodation, an increasing cost of rental accommodation and Glen Eira's proximity to public transport and major entertainment precincts.

There are increasing concerns from neighbours, the community and authorised officers regarding the safety of local rooming houses.

THE PROBLEM

Vulnerable residents:

- can be exploited by rooming house operators;
- are often subjected to unacceptable standards of provision of facilities such as toilets and indoor living spaces; and
- lack security for their own spaces in rooming houses.

Nearby residents are:

- subjected to antisocial behaviour from time-to-time, partly as a result of poor standards; and
- confused about who has responsibility for policing and ensuring rooming houses and their occupants are good neighbours.

There are multiple agencies monitoring and controlling rooming houses:

- local councils are responsible for registering dwellings as a rooming house;
- Consumer Affairs Victoria is responsible for regulating the relationship between the operator and residents, enforcing minimum standards for rooming houses and licensing;
- the Department of Health and Human Services is responsible for managing the welfare of residents in the case of a rooming house closure and imminent homelessness; and
- Victoria Police deals with many of the crime and antisocial related issues often associated with rooming houses.

These arrangements make it confusing for rooming house operators, residents and the broader community to understand the rooming house requirements. It is also difficult for residents and members of the public to understand which agency can deal with their concerns.

Important inconsistencies also exist in rooming house legislation. For example, building inspectors have limited powers of entry to inspect a rooming house, and must only enter the property during reasonable daylight hours with the consent of the owner/operator or with a search warrant. This makes it difficult for building inspectors to undertake their role in a timely manner. However, environmental health officers do have right of entry under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008*.

The current minimum standards for rooming houses are also insufficient and create a number of issues. This includes the lack of provision for common living areas which results in residents congregating in front and rear yards of properties where they sometimes engage in antisocial behaviour.

Many rooming house residents express concerns about their safety. The vulnerability of many rooming house residents means they can be easily exploited and intimidated as they generally do not have any alternative housing options.

Rooming house residents often fear for their health and safety due to increased likelihood of conflict caused by unsuitable tenant mixes and dominant individuals or groups claiming ownership over communal areas.

FACTS

In recent years, there has been a decline in housing affordability in Glen Eira, adding further pressure on people to find alternative forms of accommodation, particularly those with low or single incomes.

The Department of Health and Human Services' rental report 2018 shows that on average, only 1.3 per cent of rentals in Glen Eira were considered affordable, compared to 3.4 per cent for the Southern Metropolitan region and 3.9 per cent for Victoria.

Some vulnerable groups living in rooming houses should be living in more appropriate and suitable accommodation, particularly families with young children, women escaping domestic violence, people with chronic health and mental health issues, the elderly and recent arrivals.

Rooming house operators determine occupant accommodation costs and on average, a single occupant is charged approximately \$170 to \$250 per week, which is not affordable for people on Centrelink incomes or for those who have low-income work. There is also reported exploitation from some rooming house operators in relation to emergency funding provided to residents.

THE ASK

Council is calling on the State Government to take action on the following items.

1. Establish one agency with legislative mandate to enforce a single set of standards for rooming houses in Victoria.
2. Increase the powers of entry of authorised officers so that the condition of the property can be inspected and conditions reviewed.
3. Increase the current minimum standards for rooming houses to better protect and improve the health and wellbeing of rooming house residents including:
 - a minimum of one toilet for every five residents;
 - a requirement to provide adequate communal indoor social space;
 - minimum safety and security standards in rooming houses, including the provision of secure key locks on all doors and visitor control; and
 - controls for medical waste disposal facilities that are available in rooming houses for residents to use safely and minimise harm to other residents.
4. Safe access provisions for authorised officers and support workers to ensure that rooming houses are inspected appropriately and that the residents receive access to required social, legal and health support.
5. Review of the existing emergency funding requirements and the introduction of tighter controls to reduce the exploitation of residents and funding by rooming house operators.
6. Increase supply and funding for social and affordable housing in the Glen Eira community.

COMMUNITY BENEFIT

Appropriate and fit-for purpose social and affordable housing contributes towards improved social inclusion, mobility and access to jobs for vulnerable members of our community.

Improved access to rooming houses by authorised officers will ensure rooming house operators comply with relevant standards. Greater access to support workers will improve outcomes for vulnerable residents and will reduce the exploitation of residents.

Vulnerable members of our community will have access to safer, more secure and cleaner accommodation that meets the needs of rooming residents and surrounding communities.

MORE INFORMATION

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