



1 December 2023

Department of Planning and Environment

Locked Bag 5022

Parramatta NSW 2124

To whom it may concern,

Re: Proposed rezoning of Explorer Street, Eveleigh

On behalf of the Greens, we welcome the opportunity to make a submission in relation to the proposed rezoning of Explorer Street, Eveleigh, which we note will affect public housing on Explorer Street, Aurora Place, and Station Place (“the Explorer Street estate”). We regret that this is the unfortunate basis on which we write to you today.

The Greens have always been strong and clear about defending and extending public housing statewide and firmly believe that a robust public housing system is the best way to address the worsening housing affordability crisis and growing inequality in our city. As local representatives, we have been closely involved in tenant-led campaigns to save public housing facing demolition and redevelopment in Waterloo, Redfern, and Eveleigh.

Over the years the Newtown Electorate office has worked in partnership with local services, community groups, and housing justice advocates to ensure that public housing tenants are supported and their voices heard within processes that affect them.

Against this backdrop and following significant discussion with tenants at the Explorer Street estate over many years, we strongly oppose the rezoning plans proposed for the area. We reject the premise that current tenants should be evicted, the current homes demolished, and the current public land used for private development. This submission outlines in detail the key grounds for our objection, which includes the impact on overall public housing stock, unacceptable negative impacts on existing tenants, and what we consider to be serious shortcomings in the consultation process to date.

Background

In December 2020, the former NSW Coalition government announced a proposal to redevelop Explorer Street as part of their “Communities Plus” model. Under this proposal, the existing 46 homes on the site would be demolished and the site redeveloped as approximately 425 apartments, of which 30%, or around 130 dwellings, would be social housing. No details were provided in relation to the proposed size of the apartments.



Following a groundswell of organised community opposition - which was supported by the Newtown Electorate office - to the proposal, it appeared to be put on hold and few updates were given over the following two years. Then, in December 2022, the then-Perrottet Government announced that Explorer Street was to be included in the “Rezoning Pathways Program”, which would allow it to be rezoned and a proposal similar to the initial “Communities Plus” plan delivered without requiring council permission.

Since the March 2023 election and change in government, our office and local community have maintained a keen interest in the future of Explorer Street. In Parliament Question Time in May, I requested an update from the Premier on the status of Explorer Street and whether his government would seek to continue the state-led rezoning process set in motion by the Coalition government. Unfortunately, no answer was provided at this time.

In July 2023, our office attended a community meeting hosted by local residents’ group REDWatch, at which Department of Planning and Environment and Land and Housing Corporation representatives confirmed the plans to proceed with state-led rezoning.

It is our understanding from the Department of Planning and Environment website that Explorer Street, Eveleigh, is now considered a “priority growth area” and subject to a rezoning proposal that would see the existing family homes demolished. We understand that if realised, the proposal would see up to 400 new dwellings delivered on the site, of which approximately 120 would be social and 80 affordable. We note that the proposed total number of dwellings and, specifically, social dwellings falls short of the figures proposed under the former Communities Plus plan. Furthermore, we note that no public housing is included in the proposed redevelopment.

Since the rezoning plans were confirmed, our office has engaged with local resident action groups, housing justice activists, and residents at the Explorer Street estate to understand the community position on the plans. In November, we doorknocked the public housing dwellings and spoke directly with residents about the plans; insights from this community engagement and prior conversations with locals at events have been used to inform this submission.

In making this submission, we wish to acknowledge the residents at the Explorer Street estate who are facing serious housing stress and uncertainty about their future. We also wish to acknowledge local community groups REDWatch, Friends of Erskineville, Alexandria Residents’ Action Group, and Action for Public Housing, all of whom have also engaged substantially in this community engagement process.



Grounds for opposition

Impact on existing Explorer Street tenants

We are deeply concerned by the significant impact the redevelopment will have on the 98 people who live in the 46 dwellings currently at Explorer Street. We understand that of the existing dwellings, 37 are three-bedroom units, eight are four-bedroom units, and one is a five-bedroom unit.

We have doorknocked and connected with residents and locals at the Explorer Street estate over many years. Most recently, in early November 2023, we door knocked residents at Explorer Street to hear their thoughts and concerns in relation to the proposed rezoning directly. In all but one of these conversations, residents expressed strong opposition to the plans and a deep desire to remain in their homes. Understandably, several residents were distressed by the prospect of being forced to leave their homes and communities, even if the right to return was guaranteed.

In speaking with residents, we learnt that the majority are families, some of whom have multiple generations living beneath one roof. Many told us that they had moved into their home at, or shortly after, its completion in the early 1990s, and had lived there ever since. Others told us that they had previously lived in public housing elsewhere, including in Millers Point and Glebe, but been relocated to Explorer Street when their previous homes were redeveloped or sold.

Most residents at the Explorer Street estate are strongly supportive of increasing public and affordable housing. However, many understandably expressed concerns that existing public housing tenants - many of whom have complex needs - faced being uprooted from their homes and communities in order to deliver this increase.

They also told us that they were a close-knit neighbourhood with deep, long connections to the local area including ties to:

- Local schools and universities;
- Local sports clubs;
- Doctors and other healthcare providers in the area;
- Family and friends who live nearby; and
- Churches and other religious organisations.

We share residents' grave concerns that these ties would be disrupted, if not entirely severed, in the event of redevelopment and associated relocations.



Premise of the project

In principle, the Greens reject the notion that the construction of new public and social housing must be funded through asset recycling and the demolition of existing public housing dwellings. We also strongly reject the proposition that the demolition of public housing is necessary to deliver an uplift of private housing supply. With more than 57,000 approved applicants on the public housing waiting list and social housing amounting to only 3.8% of all dwellings in Australia,¹ there is no excuse for demolishing existing public housing. We note that in the CS03 allocation zone, in which the Explorer Street estate is located, there are presently 1,203 approved applicants on the general social housing waiting list and a further 351 on the priority waiting list.

Furthermore, there is no justification for privatising and selling off the majority of homes on a site that is currently 100% public housing. Even if public housing is replaced with a larger quantity of public or social housing in the long run, there is no denying that demolishing existing dwellings results in a short-term contraction of much-needed public housing stock. This loss of stock is particularly concerning against the backdrop of research suggesting that over 144,000 low income households in NSW currently have unmet housing needs.² Given that the construction of new public housing has all but ground to a halt in NSW, the Greens are deeply concerned that dwellings are being demolished at a faster rate than they can be replaced.

An instructive example of demolition outpacing new construction is the Arncliffe public housing estate, where 260 public homes have been demolished to make way for a mixed-tenure high-density development. The first public housing tenants at Arncliffe were relocated in December 2015, yet new homes are not expected to be delivered until early 2024; this is a more than 8-year delay that has seen 260 public homes removed from the total pool of public dwellings but not replaced.

The Greens anticipate that delays of this nature can be reasonably expected in the context of future public housing estate redevelopments, particularly given the current labour and material shortages affecting the construction industry.

¹ AHURI, What is the right level of social housing for Australia?, 6 July 2023, available at [https://www.ahuri.edu.au/analysis/brief/what-right-level-social-housing-australia#:~:text=In%20the%2040%20years%20between,\(from%202021%20ABS%20Census\).](https://www.ahuri.edu.au/analysis/brief/what-right-level-social-housing-australia#:~:text=In%20the%2040%20years%20between,(from%202021%20ABS%20Census).)

² City Futures, Quantifying Australia's unmet housing need: A national snapshot, November 2022, available at <https://cityfutures.ada.unsw.edu.au/documents/699/CHIA-housing-need-national-snapshot-v1.0.pdf>



Lack of appropriate “temporary” accommodation

As noted above, we understand that all dwellings at Explorer Street have three or more bedrooms and 52% are occupied at capacity. According to FACS data on the social housing waiting list for the CS03 allocation zone, in which Explorer Street is situated, the estimated wait time for a property with three or more bedrooms is more than 10 years.³ We note that the Social Infrastructure and Social Impact Assessment (‘SISIA’) accompanying this proposal concedes that:

“...the existing dwellings (3-4 bedroom town houses with a carport) are very unusual in the inner city.”⁴

Given this shortage of family homes in the allocation zone, we are deeply concerned that families who would be relocated from Explorer Street in the case of redevelopment would struggle to find appropriate temporary accommodation for the duration of construction works. We are particularly concerned that the many First Nations families who currently reside at the Explorer Street estate and require an additional bedroom for the purpose of cultural practices will be left with extremely restricted alternative accommodation options.

We note that demand for transfers in the area is already high, and likely to be exacerbated by the impending relocation of tenants from the nearby Waterloo estate: it is unclear whether there are existing LHC properties to which Explorer Street residents could be relocated, or if headleases would need to be secured. Given that rental vacancy rates in the inner west are currently at 1.2%,⁵ we are seriously concerned that the prospects of securing a headlease within the area would be severely restricted.

Right of return

We understand that Department of Communities and Justice policies grant tenants the right of return in the event that their public housing dwelling or estate is redeveloped. It is important that a right of return be formally mandated through appropriate instruments. A ‘right’ of return cannot be said to genuinely exist if it is the form of commitment that can be easily withdrawn or changed, for example only in the form of a letter rather than a policy, planning instrument, or a condition of a planning decision.

³ NSW Department of Communities & Justice, Expected Waiting Times, available at <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/help/applying-assistance/expected-waiting-times>

⁴ WSP, Social Infrastructure and Social Impact Assessment: Explorer Street, Eveleigh, September 2023, p. 59, available at https://shared-drupal-s3fs.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/master-test/fapub_pdf/NSW+Planning+Portal+Documents/Explorer+Street+-+Social+Infrastructure+and+Social+Impact+Assessment.pdf

⁵ SQM Research, Residential Vacancy Rates - Region: Inner West, available at https://sqmresearch.com.au/graph_vacancy.php?region=nsw-Inner%20West&type=r&t=1



We were also alarmed to read in the SISIA that “even if it is a preference to return, returning to the property may not be a possibility for some households, depending on the future dwelling type and bedroom mix”.⁶ The SISIA then proceeds to outline the proposed bedroom mix of the redevelopment as 129 one-bedroom, 192 two-bedroom, and 72 three-bedroom properties. It is not clear at this stage how many of the lattermost will be social housing.

Further, the SISIA assumes that residents may not choose to return to the estate and, as a result, appropriate housing for all current tenants is not proposed to be a requirement of any future development.

Given the mismatch between the current bedroom mix at Explorer Street and the proposed bedroom mix, we are concerned that in the case of redevelopment many residents will effectively be denied their right of return.

Flawed community engagement process

In our conversations with Explorer Street residents, it was apparent that the community engagement and consultation process conducted to date was severely lacking. While most residents were aware of the proposed rezoning, many only learned of this through word of mouth from their neighbours; at the North of the estate, on Aurora Place, every home door knocked reported they had not received any government information in relation to the proposal. Speaking with other residents it was clear that there was a need for access to information in languages other than English, and that translation services would be critical for any meaningful consultation process to occur.

In line with the Compact for Renewal co-designed by Shelter NSW, Tenants’ Union of NSW, and City Futures Research Centre - which we note is cited at length in the SISIA - one of the principles of estate redevelopments is a:

“Commitment to real engagement, including a commitment to provide quality information about the project and regularly updates about the project and timeframes.”

It is unacceptable that this commitment does not appear to have been met in engagement with Explorer Street tenants to date. It raises questions about the legitimacy of this consultation. It is critical that significant improvements are made when it comes to communication with tenants before this process progresses any further.

There are real risks to people’s health and well-being as a result of the looming threat of eviction - this needs to be taken seriously.

⁶ As above n. 4.



On the basis of the flawed community engagement process alone the rezoning should be refused, with any future plans for the site requiring an appropriate and genuine community engagement process to be implemented. It should be a minimum requirement of any future consultation that existing tenants have received information, and that this information is in a format that clearly explains the implications of the rezoning.

Conclusion

For the reasons outlined above, the Greens stand with the Explorer Street community in strongly opposing this proposed rezoning. Beyond the haphazard community engagement process that has taken place to date, we are deeply concerned that the proposal would in the short-term add further stress to an already overstretched public housing system. We are also of the belief that the displacement and dislocation of residents from the close-knit Explorer Street community as a result of the rezoning and ensuing redevelopment would be wholly unacceptable and result in serious harm to those impacted.

We ask that you please consider the above in assessing this rezoning proposal and strongly urge you to consider an alternative solution to increasing public housing in the inner city and across NSW that does not require the demolition of existing public dwellings.

Thank you for considering this correspondence.

Yours sincerely,

Jenny Leong MP
Member for Newtown

Clr Sylvie Ellsmore
City of Sydney