

Rentals fail on the basics

Report says landlords must be forced to comply

EXCLUSIVE
Mitch Clarke

Laws are urgently needed to force landlords to prove their properties comply with minimum standards before they hit the market, a new report has found.

Three years since the state beefed up its rental laws, the Victorian Council of Social Services has called on the government to crack down further on dodgy landlords after the report found a huge number of rental properties still failing to meet basic requirements.

Current laws stipulate that renters should inspect properties to make sure they meet those standards, or request repairs or changes before signing rental agreements.

But the social and community sector peak body said the onus must instead be on investors by requiring them to bring in independent assessors to prove their properties met minimum standards.

It also called for the recog-

nised minimum standards to expand to include cooling, insulation, draught proofing and hot water systems.

The report cited community sector workers who sounded the alarm on the staggering number of shoddy properties going to market, which had left renters too scared to raise concerns with real estate agents out of fear of being evicted.

Some renters are knowingly leasing or continuing to live in mould-infested properties due to having no other housing options, the report found.

"(The) housing crisis (is) forcing individuals to move into unsuitable or unsafe housing (eg black mould damage, houses in poor conditions and disrepair) or to face homelessness," one worker said.

In 2021, the state government announced reforms that banned landlords from hiking rent more than once a year. It also implemented higher living standards and specific protections for survivors of domestic violence.

Despite those changes, which it hailed as "some of the best protections for renters anywhere in the world", renters still feel powerless.

"The hardship currently facing renters is staggering," the report stated.

Under the changes being pushed by the VCSS, the government should establish a formula that defines fair rent increases. Landlords should be forced to then proactively explain and justify increases.

Renters currently have the right to ask Consumer Affairs Victoria for a review if they believe their increase is too high, but the report found "market conditions are eroding renters' power to push back".

"While there is a shortage of housing and so many homeless, the landlord has all the power," one worker said.

The report also called for the government to boost resources at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal to clear its huge backlog of disputes.

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