

Regional Local Government Charter Homelessness and Social Housing Group

Joint Submission

Inquiry into homelessness in Australia

'There is a range of services available to support people who are homeless or at risk, and the Committee is particularly interested in hearing from communities around Australia about approaches that are working well, and ideas for improvement.'

Terms of Reference

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs will inquire into and report on homelessness in Australia. The inquiry will have particular regard to:

1. The incidence of homelessness in Australia;
2. Factors affecting the incidence of homelessness, including housing-market factors;
3. The causes of, and contributing factors to, housing overcrowding;
4. Opportunities for early intervention and prevention of homelessness;
5. Services to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including housing assistance, social housing, and specialist homelessness services;
6. Support and services for people at particular risk of homelessness;
7. The suitability of mainstream services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness;
8. Examples of best-practice approaches in Australia and internationally for preventing and addressing homelessness;
9. The adequacy of the collection and publication of housing, homelessness, and housing affordability related data; and
10. Governance and funding arrangements in relation to housing and homelessness, particularly as they relate to the responsibility of Local, State, Territory and Federal Governments.

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Kulin Nation and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.



Local Government Charter Homelessness and Social Housing Group – submission

The *Regional Local Government Charter Homelessness and Social Housing Group (Charter Group)* applauds the government for conducting this inquiry into homelessness in Australia. The *Charter Group* welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry.

The Charter Group comprises 12 councils from the middle and outer ring suburbs of south and east metropolitan Melbourne. Our combined residential population is over two million. The councils are Bayside, Casey, Cardinia, Frankston, Greater Dandenong, Knox, Manningham, Monash, Maroondah, Mornington Peninsula, Whitehorse and Yarra Ranges. The group is supported by the Municipal Association of Victoria, the Department of Health & Human Services, Eastern Region Group of Councils and Eastern Affordable Housing Alliance. Our work has sparked interest among other Victorian local governments.

Initiated by Monash Council, the Charter Group formed in late 2019 to make a difference for the 22,000 Victorians experiencing homelessness, as over a third of these (7,916¹ Victorians) are in our council areas. As a group we highlight the regional issues associated with homelessness; advocate for systemic reforms to prevent homelessness risks from occurring; and work to improve our responses when they do.

Our advocacy platform is in the form of a *Regional Local Government Homelessness and Social Housing Charter (Charter)* (Appendix 1). The Charter prioritises three levers to reduce homelessness, including to:

1. Work in partnership with federal and state government, public and private sector partners to increase the supply of social housing and respond to homelessness in south and east Melbourne.
2. Scope land within our region with the potential to be re-purposed for the development of social housing.
3. Advocate for inclusive housing growth, including through mandatory inclusionary zoning.

Our definition of ‘homelessness’ aligns with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and Council to Homeless Persons’ (CHP) definitions. Both definitions reflect contemporary practice that recognises that homelessness is more than rooflessness. This maintains that: *the experience of homelessness is not just about not having a home – along with rough sleepers it includes every person who is in a dwelling that is inadequate; has no tenure; has a short and non-extendable tenure; or does not allow them to have control of, or access to space for social relations*².

This definition recognises that rough sleeping only makes up around 7 per cent of homelessness, and the remainder is ‘hidden homelessness’ which is common across the eastern and southern region of metropolitan Melbourne. Hidden homelessness includes those in: supported accommodation for the homeless, boarding houses, severely overcrowded dwellings, and temporary staying with other households or in other temporary lodgings³.



We acknowledge the complex range of factors that can lead to homelessness and recognise that access to safe and secure housing is one of the most basic human rights and a fundamental aspect of public health infrastructure.

Federal and State Governments have the primary responsibility for the housing system including the prevention of homelessness, but we recognise that a role in the system, albeit limited, is open for local government. The Charter Group is clear that the Australian Government has multiple levers available to create and resource the conditions necessary for an effective and systemic response to reduce homelessness, including working with State Governments, where needed, to:

- Increase the focus on homelessness prevention
- Commit to national, state and regional targets to increase provision of social housing in Australia to meet the current shortfalls
- Identify and fund best practice models of social housing and housing support geared towards specific needs and opportunities at a local and regional scale
- Leverage National Housing and Homelessness Agreements⁴ with the States and Territories to increase social and affordable development opportunities and use of government land
- Immediately review the ongoing JobSeeker payment level and policy ending JobKeeper payments to minimise impacts of housing stress and increased risk of homelessness
- Develop an Australian Housing and Homelessness Strategy
- Encourage nation-wide rental reform in the interests of affordable housing.
- Identify alternative ways to generate and maximise housing and homelessness support revenue streams
- Create incentives for private investment in affordable housing (to rent and buy) through taxation, low / no interest loans, long term peppercorn leases / gifting of surplus government land and other measures
- Review Ministerial responsibility for homelessness to better support the new Strategy and the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH), currently sitting with the Minister for Families and Social Services

We believe that through a ‘joined up’ commitment across three levels of government we will begin to systemically and comprehensively prevent and remove a number of the systemic pre-conditions that increase homelessness risks, and address the escalating rates of homelessness in Australia. To do so effectively, the approach will (and must) address the most glaring homelessness issue - the vast under-supply of available social and affordable housing suitable for people on very low incomes, and for those most vulnerable to homelessness⁵.

The Charter Group has responded to a number of the Terms of Reference for the Australian Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia and sets out its recommendations and responses below.

Please note that the data was collected *prior to the COVID-19 pandemic*.



TOR 1: The incidence of homelessness in Australia

Recommendations:

That the Australian Government:

- Recognise that a 'one size fits all' solution is not appropriate to address homelessness in Australia, and instead generates a range of tailored solutions for people experiencing homelessness which takes their vastly different needs into account
- Prioritise consideration of family law and school retention levers to reduce the incidence of, and impacts on women and children experiencing, or at risk of homelessness due to family violence
- Include the national definition of homelessness that reflects the ABS/CHP definitions into the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement⁶

Link to Charter

Context: *In Victoria 44,152 households are waiting for social housing. In south east and east Melbourne, the situation is dire as 32% of Victorians experiencing homelessness and 40% of people on the social housing waiting list live in this region.*

Discussion

Our discussion focuses on the dynamics and incidence of homelessness in the south and east of Melbourne, which differ from the rest of Victoria due to local socio-economic and locational factors. This highlights the different homelessness challenges local areas face and how different groups of people are impacted - a reminder that a one size fits all approach will fail to adequately frame the problem and deliver effective solutions.

Two data sources are available to local government to determine local homelessness rates. They are the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data (point in time data collected every five years); and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) service data collected monthly. While not without limitations, when used together, these data sets can provide a good indication of the numbers, drivers and types of homelessness in our region and local areas. Their limitations are discussed further in TOR 9.

According to 2016 ABS Census data there are 7,916⁷ people experiencing homelessness in our region, representing one-third of all homelessness in Victoria. We consider this to be an undercount as regional metadata shows up to four times more homelessness than 2016 Census data. For instance, 2016 census showed 546 people as homeless in Frankston, whereas specialist homelessness service data showed that 2,000 people accessed homeless services for the same period.

AIHW data provides a clearer sense of the real-time incidence and types of homelessness in a local area than the ABS census can. According to AIHW data the types and rates of homelessness vary dramatically across our region, warning against a 'one size fits all' solution to address homelessness.



Pattern of homelessness

The nature of homelessness across the region shows significant variation. Frankston and Mornington Peninsula have the highest rates of people sleeping rough; whereas there are more people living in severely overcrowded dwellings in Dandenong, Manningham, Casey and Cardinia. In the Yarra Ranges more people are couch surfing; while boarding houses are the predominant form of shelter for people experiencing homelessness in Maroondah, Whitehorse and Monash. In Knox, and Maroondah more people are in supported homeless accommodation, although Maroondah also has a concerning number of people sleeping rough in suburban streets and squats.

Homelessness services must be delivered in a way that are responsive to these local circumstances.

Women and children are over-represented in our region

Women and young children are the most over-represented homeless cohort across our region, however each local area demonstrates differences in how this homelessness manifests. This is largely due to the causal factor of family violence which is discussed in TOR 2. In 2017/18 women and girls represented 61 per cent of people accessing specialist housing support services. Homelessness is a gendered issue for all age groups in our region (except for children aged 0-9 years, who typically accompany their female parent to these services) as shown in Table 1.

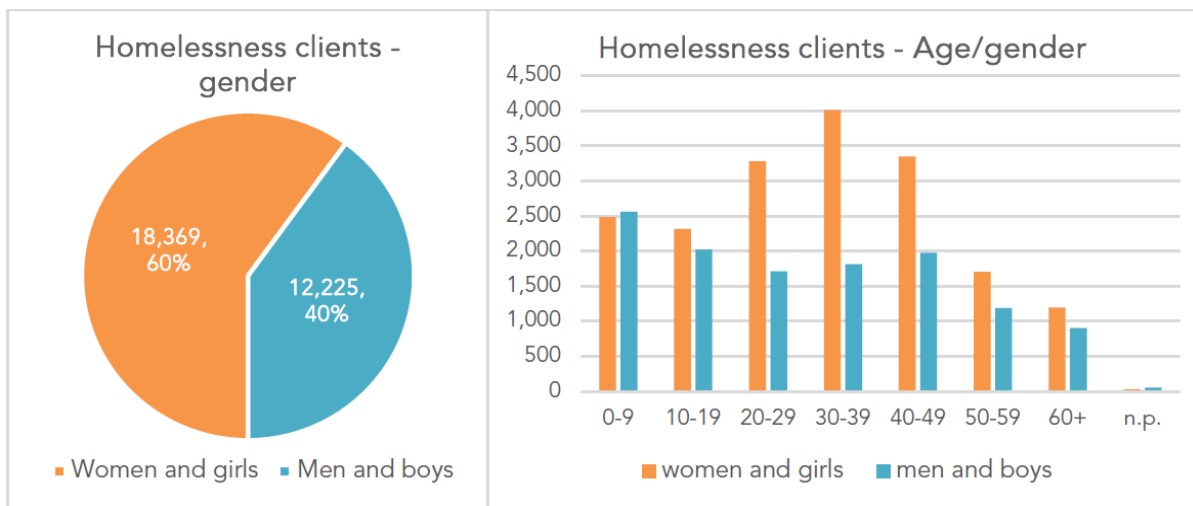


Table 1 AIHW Specialist Homelessness data 2017-2018 south and east region-wide.

A significant area of concern is the incidence of very young children experiencing homelessness. Children (0-9 years) present as the second largest homeless cohort after women (20-49 years), larger than for men of any age.

First time homelessness is also a gendered issue in Melbourne’s south and east

We have large numbers of women and children who come into contact with homelessness service providers for the first time. They would not be described as ‘chronically homeless’ but are vulnerable



families who, with the right transitional, supported accommodation, will not enter and get stuck in the highly traumatising ‘homelessness system’⁸.

A very high number of clients who receive homelessness services in the south and east region were not homeless the month before. AIHW 2017/18 data shows of the 24,734 clients that received Specialist Homelessness Service provision, 18,037, or 74%, were registered as ‘not homeless’ the previous month. Again, this is a highly gendered dynamic for our region with 14,869 of the 24,734 (61%) clients being female (Table 2.)

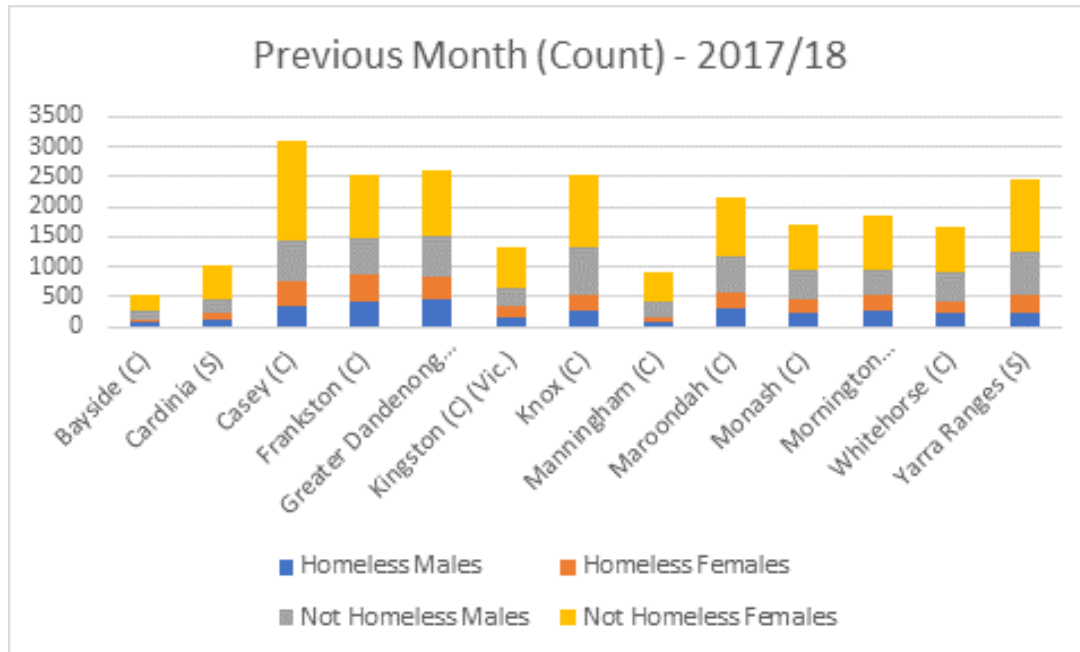


Table 2 monthly count homelessness services - gender and status

This represents a reversal of the dynamic prevalent in Melbourne CBD and other inner metropolitan Councils, where the number of those experiencing repeated or chronic homelessness (i.e. those who were homeless the month prior) outweighs the number of those who were previously housed (735 of 1,448, or 51%).

Further, the gendered dynamics of homelessness are clearly reversed in our region, as of the 1,448 clients in Melbourne CBD, 61% were male (compared to 61% female in the south and east).



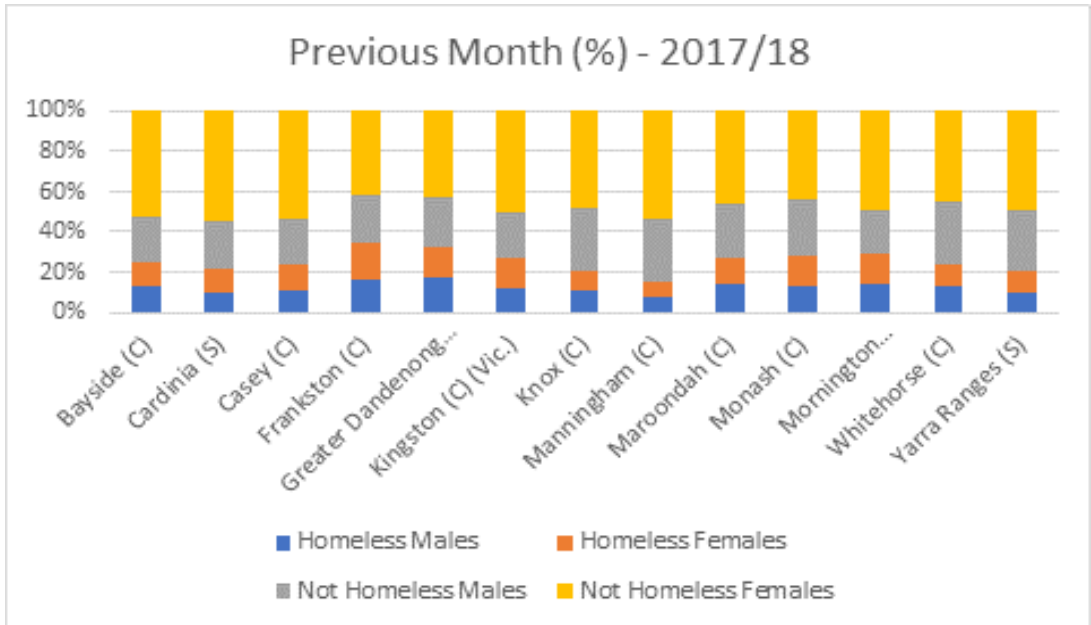


Table 3 Proportion and gender previous month homeless

Hidden homelessness & rough sleeping is rising - 20% of Victoria’s rough sleepers are in our region

Rough sleeping includes all kinds of living without access to conventional dwellings such as sleeping in cars, derelict buildings, tents, swags and other types of improvised shelter. Historically rough sleeping has been concentrated in and around the CBD and major activity centres. The Charter Group is concerned with the increasing incidence of hidden homelessness and rough sleeping in outer metropolitan suburban areas. The dramatic rise of people who are rough sleeping in our region is evidenced by our region having 20 per cent of all of Victoria’s rough sleepers in 2016⁹.

COVID-19

The doubling of funding of Housing Establishment Funds (HEF) and Private Rental Access Program (PRAP) in Victoria due to COVID-19 has provided both emergency accommodation and the ability to move people into long term housing in the private market since April 2020. This has demonstrated that most people sleeping rough would respond well to a ‘Housing First’ model which would have a significant impact on reducing primary homelessness and rough sleeping.

We lack suitable forms of housing/shelter for single person households

There is a stark deficit of affordable housing in our region. We lack properties suitable for lone person households causing increased reliance on unsuitable forms of housing and shelter for very low income households. Reliance on Rooming House accommodation is increasing across our region. Again we are overrepresented in Victoria, with over a third of Victorians who live in rooming houses, and 37 per cent of Victorians who reside in overcrowded conditions being concentrated in our region.



Evidence suggests that long stays in shared accommodation results in poor health, wellbeing and educational outcomes for children. The lack of autonomy with respect to shared accommodation presents significant health, wellbeing and safety risks for tenants. It is typical for shared accommodation include AOD users, prison leavers, people with a mental health condition or a disability, and (in some areas) parents' families with children. These environments are highly stressful for adults, because living in close proximity with many highly vulnerable people creates its own challenges and stress, and because people can't move on with their lives while they don't know where they will be living longer-term.

COVID-19

One of the biggest hurdles Homelessness Services in our region has faced during COVID-19 is finding appropriate accommodation in the rental market for single adults. This has resulted in all single adults being placed in motels for long periods which is unsustainable for the agency and the people who are homeless.

TOR 2: Factors affecting the incidence of homelessness, including housing-market factors

Recommendation:

That the Australian Government:

Social and economic factors

- Increase JobSeeker by \$95 dollars a week (Newstart & Youth Allowance base rates) in line with ACOSS' 2020 recommendations
- Immediately review how JobKeeper payments will be wound back to minimise impacts of housing stress and the increased risk of homelessness
- Recognise the direct link between family violence and homelessness and the specific needs of this cohort in the design and delivery of homelessness services, supports and housing
- For young people, invest in more Youth Foyers, supported youth accommodation and transitional housing for young people and their families throughout Australia
- Prioritise mental health services and fast track options for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness

Housing market factors

- Introduce a National Housing and Homelessness Strategy, with a holistic and long-term vision for improved connection and efficiencies in homelessness prevention; early intervention and response; including a plan for an additional 500,000 affordable dwellings across Australia over 5 years to meet the current shortfall
- Incentivise the provision of social and affordable housing through financial incentives for private provision of affordable housing, including build-to-rent and rent-to-buy initiatives
- Identify and fund best practice models of social housing and housing support, geared towards specific needs and opportunities at a local and regional scale



- Introduce an additional clause into the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA)(2018) and associated Schedules, to require all States and Territories to:
 - a) Introduce mandatory *Inclusionary Zoning* within state level planning schemes/provisions either directly or with local councils. This will:
 - commit Australia to national, state and regional targets to increase provision of social housing in Australia to meet the current shortfalls
 - support new social and affordable housing development
 - enable local government to enter into local agreements with developers without these being overturned by state level administrative tribunals (VCAT in Victoria)
 - ensure there are fit for purpose properties coming onto the market for targeted at risk cohorts (such as women and children fleeing family violence)
 - fund local government pilots to build capability and deliver inclusionary zoning in a quicker, more efficient and scalable way
 - b) Encourage innovation and diversity in social and affordable housing, such as shared equity/community land trusts by providing government owned land under a long-term lease

Link to Charter

*The Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) recommends that the **most powerful action local governments can take** to reduce homelessness is to support the delivery of homes that people can afford. For the lowest income households most vulnerable to homelessness, this means the provision of social housing.*

The housing ‘bottleneck’ keeps individuals and families trapped in homelessness and suffering negative health outcomes and trauma.

Regional commitments - Advocating together for inclusive housing growth including mandatory inclusionary zoning.

Discussion

The social, economic, and physical housing-market factors impacting the incidence of homelessness are linked. The main factors are rising rents in the private rental market and the inadequate supply of social housing.¹⁰ AIHW data shows that the key drivers of homelessness across our region are *housing issues and financial reasons* (50%), and *domestic and family violence* (38%)¹¹.

Pathways into and out of homelessness are neither linear nor uniform. Individuals and families who experience homelessness may have little in common with each other, aside from their need for adequate housing. This may be due to a lack of income, poor support networks, family violence, an adverse life event or other health issues¹².

Income - low income households are at risk of homelessness

Poverty is unequivocally linked with homelessness. Financial vulnerability is the highest determinant of homelessness risk for individuals and households. Very low-income households are at greatest risk of homelessness due to the lack of affordable properties. While income levels differ across the region and the ABS Census 2016 identified all LGA’s in the Charter Group as having more households



with a combined household income of less than \$650 p/w compared to Greater Melbourne (16.7%) ranging from 17.2 per cent¹³ of households in Bayside, to 27.4 per cent of households in Frankston¹⁴.

Domestic and family violence rates in our region are among Melbourne’s highest

Victoria Police’s Crime Statistics Agency data shows that in areas in our region family violence rates are among the highest in metropolitan Melbourne. This is true for areas within Frankston, Casey and Greater Dandenong¹⁵ where the highest rates of family violence police call outs in Melbourne were recorded from 1999 to 2018¹⁶. This is a gendered issue in our region as 80 per cent of all family violence incidents are perpetrated on women¹⁷.

Specialist housing services have experienced an increase in the number of women presenting who are escaping family violence and need assistance in leaving their relationship. These women often leave relationships with no housing, work or superannuation. Without a rental history they are often unable to rent in the private rental market. Family violence can quickly translate into homelessness for many women and children in our region and is our second highest single cause of homelessness.

Women and children experiencing the trauma of fleeing a violent relationship should not be placed in situations that result in the added trauma of homelessness.

COVID-19

A Monash University study has revealed that the COVID-19 lockdowns have seen an increase in women reporting family violence for the first time by over 40%. This study has exposed the widely suspected concern from the sector that family violence is far more prevalent than what is being reported. This is a significant increase on the statistics presented in this document.¹⁸

Early exposure to homelessness makes it more likely later in life

Nationwide there has been a 284 per cent increase over the past five years in the number of school students attending Specialist Homelessness Services¹⁹. Evidence suggests that early exposure to homelessness makes a repeat episode more likely later in life and heightens the risk of chronic homelessness²⁰. This of grave concern for the Charter Group, noting the elevated rates of early childhood exposure to homelessness currently trending across our region. Young people need to be supported and protected in their formative years, so they have the best opportunity to develop personally and socially. Trauma during childhood can have long lasting effects on an individual’s future circumstances.

Educational attainment – early school leavers can be disadvantaged

One-third of homeless adults have a high school attainment below year 10²¹. School engagement is recognised universally as a protective factor for young people, with youth homelessness and early school leaving being intimately related. Additionally, more years of schooling lead to higher lifetime incomes, calculated in Australia to be 10 per cent more for each additional year of schooling after nine years.²²



Timely access to mental health services can prevent homelessness

People experiencing homelessness have complex and interconnected needs, and mental health issues often play a role. In 2018, 17,772 Victorians who presented at homelessness services cited mental health as one of the reasons they needed help. A study of more than 4,000 homeless people in Melbourne found that 15 per cent were experiencing mental illness before becoming homeless, and a further 16 per cent had developed a mental illness since experiencing homelessness²³. We support the argument advanced by Justice Connect that to effectively end homelessness, we must make mental health a priority²⁴.

The transitioning of community mental health outreach services to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has been a significant factor of people experiencing homelessness. Participants in programs like Personal Helpers and Mentors services (PHaMs) and Partners in Recovery (PIR) were completely cut off in the Southern Metropolitan Region during the rollout of the NDIS. Many clients still cannot access appropriate support to address their homelessness, expressing confusion about eligibility for and access to NDIS.

System reform is needed to provide continuous support for homeless clients transitioning to NDIS and prevent prolonged periods of homelessness while waiting for support. Anecdotal reports from specialist homelessness services advise that up to 12 months is needed to transition eligible homeless clients onto a NDIS support package, yet they are not funded long enough to effectively transition eligible clients.

Housing market factors – we lack suitable, diverse and affordable housing

Housing market factors continue to contribute to increased rates of homelessness.

Homelessness is rising in areas with a shortage of affordable private rental housing and higher median rents. This is most acute in the capital city areas of Sydney, Hobart and Melbourne²⁵. Across Australia, the supply of affordable private rental housing is statistically associated with the variation in homelessness rates.

Affordable housing is calculated on the weekly rent for open market private rental properties. These are deemed affordable where rent is no greater than 30 per cent of total household income²⁶. In metropolitan Melbourne the proportion of new affordable private market lettings decreased to 7 per cent in December 2019²⁷. In our region, this proportion was as low as 0.5 per cent in Bayside²⁸. Nine councils in our region recorded fewer than 5 per cent affordable private rental properties in December 2019.

There is an undersupply of single bedroom dwellings in our region to support the high proportion of lone person households in our region. Between 15 per cent (Casey) and as many as 27 per cent (Frankston and Mornington Peninsula) of properties are tenanted by lone person households in our region. Whereas the total supply of all 0-1bedroom properties (including bedsits) ranges from represents 2.8% in Greater Dandenong, down to 0.6% in Casey. On average, the supply of 0-1 bedroom properties for our region represents only 1.3% of all housing stock (or 27,634 properties)



compared to 3.5% for metropolitan Melbourne. What's more, according to the Victorian Government's Quarterly Rental Report – March 2020, only 3.1% of the total supply of 0-1 bedroom properties (only **884** dwellings) were deemed affordable for low and very low income earners across our whole region ²⁹.

This means more people are unable to find a home, and more lone person low-income households' cycle between marginal accommodation (like rooming house or overcrowded dwellings) and homelessness.³⁰

The housing market in Australia is principally privately owned, driven by competitive market forces, and stimulated by years of government subsidies, landlord tax breaks, and interest rate cuts. Rapid population growth, and increased housing demand, coupled with rising unemployment rates places Australia in a perfect storm for increased homelessness. Affordable housing solutions for lower income households must be prioritized.

Anglicare identified that of the 69,485 properties listed for rent in Australia on March 23, 2019 only one property was affordable to a person receiving Youth Allowance and two properties were affordable for a single person on Newstart³¹. In 2017 The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) identified less than 0.5 per cent of rental properties were affordable to people solely on Newstart or Youth Allowance in metropolitan Melbourne, and that people solely on disability or aged pensions were only marginally better off. Low-income families are also under enormous pressure with housing affordability; 10 years ago 30 per cent of rental properties in metropolitan Melbourne were considered affordable to struggling families, however, it is now just 5.1 per cent³².

Housing market factors – social housing shortfalls are pronounced

Social housing refers to housing owned by State Government or not-for-profit community housing providers and only rented to very low-income households or those who receive Centrelink payments. Social housing rents are capped at 25 or 30 per cent of household income³³ and in most cases is among the only form of housing a Newstart recipient can afford.

Social housing is critical infrastructure for homelessness prevention and early intervention for low-income households. There is a critical shortfall of social housing. Social Housing supply is reducing while demand grows. Victorian *social housing* shortfalls are worse than the private rental affordability figures above. Social housing is only 3.42 per cent of all dwellings. As at October 2019 there were 44,152 Victorian households on the wait list for social housing, including 17,717 households in the south and east of Melbourne³⁴.

Research commissioned by the Victorian State Government in 2016-17 in response to the Royal Commission into Family Violence has identified the scale of demand of social housing over the next 20 years, based on population growth. It outlines:

- 1,700 more social housing homes are needed *each year* over the next 20 years to maintain social housing at its current 3.5% share of the total homes in Victoria. This is an increase of over 30,000 social homes over the next two decades.



- Double this amount of social housing homes is needed over the next 20 years if lower income households, currently facing housing stress in the private rental market, are to have affordable housing³⁵

Experts agree when it comes to homelessness – social housing is the best solution³⁶. Social housing shortfalls are pronounced, and 15,200 dwellings are estimated to be needed each year for the next decade to meet current very low and low-income household need³⁷ in our region.

Housing market factors – Inclusionary Zoning should be mandatory nationally

The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) developed an ‘Understanding Inclusionary Zoning Brief’ in 2017 to demonstrate how land use planning systems can be leveraged to deliver more social and affordable housing through voluntary or mandatory Inclusionary Zoning (IZ).³⁸ IZ requires a proportion of multi-dwelling developments to be affordable (ideally 10%) and social housing (ideally 5%). It is voluntary in many jurisdictions across Australia – including Victoria. The Charter Group asserts that mandatory IZ is key to redressing the critical shortfall of social and affordable housing in Australia.

There are many successful examples of mandatory IZ. In our region progress has been slow as changes to state-wide Victoria Planning Provisions only enable site by site negotiation to occur. Direct funding to groups of councils to ‘prove up’ IZ provisions in a number of development contexts is required to support state-wide implementation. A Ministerial Advisory Committee and Panel Report³⁹ identified that such a local approach is appropriate to address a gap at state level (as for Environmentally Sustainable Design). IZ provisions, while not without urban design and implementation challenges, show promising results and increase affordable housing such as in London and New York⁴⁰. South Australia (SA) and the ACT have adopted clear policy directions regarding affordable and social housing, and SA has made IZ mandatory⁴¹ resulting in steady increases in social and affordable housing since the policies were introduced. In other jurisdictions, particularly the US and UK shared equity/community land trust models are widely used to supply social and affordable housing.

Since 2018 the Victorian Government has encouraged councils to negotiate directly with developers via Section 173 agreements under the State *Planning and Environment Act 1987*. This has led to an ad-hoc and inefficient approach that has failed to address unmet housing need or deliver any sizeable numbers of affordable dwellings.

Embedding mandatory IZ requirements into the Commonwealth State NHH, with targets will commit planning authorities nation-wide to deliver affordable and social dwellings efficiently and at scale across Australia.



TOR 3. The causes of, and contributing factors to, housing overcrowding

Recommendation:

That the Australian Government:

- That the Australian Government review eligibility and maintain adequate funding of the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) Program to provide housing security and reduce overcrowding particularly while asylum seeker status is being assessed

Link to Charter

Councils seek systemic change to increase the supply of permanent, safe, appropriate and timely housing for the most vulnerable members of our community and to embed 'Housing First' as a key foundational principle, fundamental for health, recovery and safety

Discussion

Overcrowding in our region is particularly prominent in Greater Dandenong, which is also the municipality with the highest number of asylum seekers in the region. Overcrowding can be conceived of as a community response to preventing people being forced into rough sleeping.

The Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) Program provides vital support to individuals and families living in the Australian community while they await a decision about their refugee status. It provides help with the basics of life like housing, food, clothing, medical services and the costs of putting kids through kinder and school. It also provides access to counselling and mental health support. Cuts that have been announced to this Program are likely to create even greater risks of homelessness for asylum seekers.

The Federal Government has a responsibility to provide support to people until they get the outcome of their asylum claims and can move forward with their lives in a positive way.

TOR 4: Opportunities for early intervention and prevention of homelessness

Recommendation:

That the Australian Government:

- Prioritise the urgent delivery of new crisis/emergency accommodation in south and east Melbourne that is fit for purpose and meets the needs of the regional cohorts, including single parents with young and infant children
- Adopt a 'Housing First' approach for chronically homeless people that is client centred, recognises the right to a home and prioritises housing with dedicated homelessness, health and social support services
- Lock in and leverage the significant reduction in rough sleeping due to COVID-19 housing initiatives
- Increase the focus on homelessness prevention



Link to Charter

Councils seek systemic change to increase the supply of permanent, safe, appropriate and timely housing for the most vulnerable members of our community and to embed 'Housing First' as a key foundational principle, fundamental for health, recovery and safety

The **Housing First model** is a strategic response to homelessness that prioritises permanent and stable housing for people experiencing homelessness (AHURI, 2018)

Discussion

Homelessness and rough sleeping rates are growing in our region.⁴² A long term plan with a sustained, coordinated and flexible response by a secure housing and homelessness sectors is necessary to prevent and respond to homelessness. This requires coordination between all tiers of government and the service systems. Attributes of such as system are discussed below.

Early intervention is almost impossible in our region

The *Housing First model* is widely supported by homelessness experts in Australia and overseas as effective in addressing cyclical and chronic homelessness. 'Housing First' recognises that housing is a human right, and that client support is separate and not conditional to housing⁴³. 'Housing First' is an approach to quickly connect individuals and families experiencing homelessness to permanent housing without preconditions or barriers to entry (such as sobriety, treatment or service participation requirements) and service support as long as it is required. It recognises that safe and stable housing are a pre-condition to being able to address the factors leading to homelessness.

The approach is widely documented, and its impacts have been independently assessed. It effectively cuts through the various silos and gaps inherent in our governance and service system and is more cost effective over the longer term⁴⁴.

In 2017 the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services committed \$9.8M to strengthen sector capacity to transition rough sleepers into permanent housing solutions. Nine 'rough sleeper hot spot' areas across Victoria were nominated to receive this funding (including 3 of the 13 LGA's within the Charter Group) and to deliver a two year Towards Home pilot⁴⁵. The pilot, showing considerable success across our region employs 'Housing First' principles including assertive outreach and multi-disciplinary, long term housing support to transition people from sleeping rough into housing options. Coupled with dedicated housing this model shows significant promise to reverse homelessness and rough sleeping.

In our region only one *emergency accommodation* service supports 2 million residents and the estimated 7,916 people experiencing homelessness. This single service manages four family units, nine single units, two rooms for couples and three women only places, and is clearly inadequate. Early intervention is unlikely for other than a small handful of cases. Emergency accommodation providers and Specialist homelessness services in our region are often unable to assist people, or can only offer costly, inappropriate (and often unsafe) accommodation such as motel rooms and rooming houses. The only emergency accommodation provider located within our region, advised



that the demand for their service is far beyond their capacity to support, noting that in 2019 over 500 women were turned away, unable to be assisted by their service.

Prevention is key for first time homelessness impacting families in our region

The continual growth of housing prices and limited supply of rental creates a significant housing affordability issue for low-income people and families. Welfare recipients are in significant danger of becoming homeless due to the increasing disparity between the cost of living and benefits. In Melbourne over the past 10 years rental costs have increased by approximately 60 per cent, while welfare payments have increased only 20 per cent⁴⁶.

For us, there is a disproportionate number of clients accessing homelessness support for the first time or receiving homelessness services who were not homeless the month before. The Charter Group asserts that this cohort should not be growing faster than others and effective Commonwealth interventions could stem the flow of these at risk families and individuals into the homelessness system. At risk families require funded, transitional supported accommodation to prevent them entering, or getting stuck in the highly traumatising and harmful ‘homelessness system’.⁴⁷ This system is described in the Crisis in Crisis report prepared by North and West Homelessness Networks⁴⁸.

Integrated and universal services play a key role in prevention

Universal access to support services together with available, affordable housing can act as a preventative ‘circuit breaker’ for those at imminent risk of falling into homelessness and help some people keep housing once it is obtained.

Service planning, funding, and policy development is critical to preventing and ending homelessness by supporting people to manage financial, mental health, family violence, medical or drug and alcohol issues. Integrated, and innovative collaborative models must be strengthened and partnerships with other human service providers encouraged so that homelessness early intervention is fully integrated and a shared responsibility.

This will improve system response and reduce system level failures to prevent people from falling through gaps and into homelessness to begin with. This can be driven through stronger, more coordinated mainstream housing, economic, taxation, welfare and foreign investment systems.

TOR 5: Services to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including housing assistance, social housing, and specialist



homelessness services; TOR 6: Support and services for people at particular risk of homelessness; TOR 7: The suitability of mainstream services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness

Recommendation:

See TOR 2 & 4:

Link to Charter

Purpose: Address the urgent need for increased social housing and a more effective, integrated and supported homelessness service system

Principle: Shared responsibility, accountability and success. We will partner together, leverage our strengths and be accountable to the commitments of this Charter

Discussion

We have discussed the importance of early intervention and integrated universal services in preventing homelessness (see TOR 2 & 4). We also highlight the inadequacy of emergency accommodation in our region to support early intervention and deliver a 'Housing First' approach.

We note the critical importance of tailored and mainstream support and services and the value of these interventions for people at risk of homelessness and commend the comprehensive efforts of our local service system.

Our greatest concerns relate to the lack of accountability for the supply of affordable housing; access to land for crisis and social housing; and that supply shortages drive the use of motels or other inappropriate housing for emergency accommodation. The Charter Group is concerned that this approach can increase the trauma and placing increase the demands on the localised service system.

Our focus is to prioritise our effort where local government may achieve large-scale change, which we believe relates to the increased provision of social and affordable housing.

TOR 8: Examples of best-practice approaches in Australia and internationally for preventing and addressing homelessness

Recommendation:

That the Australian Government:

- Provide seed funding and financial incentives to enable innovative solutions and increase private investment in affordable housing
- Identify alternative ways to generate and maximise housing and homelessness support revenue streams
- Leverage the use of Government owned land through innovative housing models

Link to Charter



Purpose: Address the urgent need for increased social housing and a more effective, integrated and supported homelessness service system

Principle: Housing as Core infrastructure: We recognise the ability of local government to influence an increase in social housing in our region.

The planning of social and affordable housing supply and specialist homelessness services.

Discussion

Networks matter

The Charter Group is a recent example of a network coming together at a regional scale for common impact. It is innovative, and unusual as it is CEO driven, regional in scale and enables collaboration to improve the homelessness service system and reduce barriers to increase the supply of affordable housing in the south and east of Melbourne. As previously described, there is a significant local variation in the manifestation of homelessness both regionally and locally and networks play a key role aligning effort.

At the local level, the Mornington Peninsula Shire supports a Mornington Peninsula Housing Network to link the work of local charities and Specialist Homelessness Services and other local health and welfare agencies. The Network also has a Multi-agency case review group focussing on an integrated assertive outreach approach to people who are rough sleeping. This local government involvement provides a unique opportunity to understand the gaps in the system and advocate for solutions.

Seed funding matters

Another example of a promising initiative, worthy of scaling up through Federal Government seed funding or pilot funding is the *Activation of Private Rentals for Social Housing program*, an Australia first initiative trialled at Greater Dandenong in 2019. This program aimed to ‘activate’ unoccupied properties in the municipality. The initiative utilised Council’s knowledge of occupied/unoccupied properties on the municipal rates base and then engaged owners of unoccupied properties to encourage them to offer their properties for social and affordable housing. Forty owners demonstrated interest and were linked to Homeground Real Estate and WAYSS Housing services, resulting in 6 homes becoming available for transitional housing for women and children experiencing family violence funded by the Victorian State Government. While these numbers seem comparatively small, the initiative demonstrates an alternative means of incentivising the release of existing private market properties for use as social and affordable housing.

Learn from best practice in other jurisdictions

Options to achieve an increased supply of affordable housing of interest include:

Community Land Trusts: The Community Land Trust (CLT) model involves creating a not-for-profit entity to acquire and hold land for community benefit and provide secure affordable access to housing (and sometimes commercial and community services for residents). The CLT acquires land by purchase, or through donations of land, land and buildings, or money to purchase land. This land



is held in perpetuity (for instance, on a 99-year lease) so that it can always be used for affordable housing. Access to this land is often limited to very low- to moderate-income households. The Cities of Sydney and Port Phillip are in the process of developing an Australian model of a Community Land Trust⁴⁹.

Council land and redeveloped public housing are not the only sources of free or low-cost land and buildings. In Vancouver, there are also local and senior government supports that build partnerships with churches with surplus land, including 400 units on four United Church sites. Encouraging partnerships and ‘asset bundling’ among not-for-profit groups in order to access better financing terms and serve a broader segment of at-risk populations are within the remit of local government. A target of 1,200 units over 10 years using this mechanism is feasible for Monash, especially working in concert with other Greater Melbourne councils through establishment of a CLT.

Build-to-rent: With vacancy rates (DHHS, 2019b) well below the 3 per cent required for a healthy rental market (Kerr, 2018), Melbourne needs more well-located, affordable, purpose built rental dwellings to serve low to moderate-income households and prevent them ‘crowding out’ lower cost private rental options.

One idea being tested to scale up build-to-rent in the Greater Vancouver municipality of Burnaby is rental-only zoning in areas close to trains and other frequent public transit⁵⁰. As part of legislative reforms, developers who demolish rental buildings would need to construct low-cost replacement units, and all new multi-unit developments would be required to provide 20 per cent affordable rental. Preserving low-cost rental is much less expensive than building new low-cost rental, so mechanisms to preserve and expand low-cost market rental should be advocated for by governments as part of planning reform.

TOR 9: The adequacy of the collection and publication of housing, homelessness, and housing affordability related data

Recommendation:

That the Australian Government:

- Improve access to current data to support policy development and service planning
- Facilitate the AIHW providing interactive data at postcode and LGA area geographies
- Support the delivery of National street counts at regular intervals as undertaken by the City of Melbourne
- Work with State government to collect and release authoritative homelessness and housing data annually relevant to each Local Government Area, including progress against regional social housing targets

Link to Charter

Purpose: Address the urgent need for increased social housing and a more effective, integrated and supported homelessness service system



Principle: *Housing as Core infrastructure: We recognise the ability of local government to influence an increase in social housing in our region*

Discussion

Access to data is critical for councils to effectively influence the amount of social housing in their local area and to facilitate effective, place-based service provision. There are two data sources available to local government to determine local homelessness rates: the ABS Census data (point in time data collected every five years); and AIHW service data collected monthly. These data sets are used together to provide a good indication of the numbers, drivers and types of homelessness across our region, however they have a number of limitations.

The key limitations relate to:

- Lack of an agreed homelessness definition
- Under/over estimation due to inability to determine if people counted are homeless
- Under counting as people are missed
- Many homeless people not seeking out support services and counted in that way
- ABS census is a point in time survey with significant change possible between each census
- Youth, family violence and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations are poorly estimated

These limitations result in costly local data collection (such as Street Count⁵¹), gaps in knowledge for planning and a lack of evidence to justify investment.

Access to data is a key planning tool and evidence is required to justify changes to policy and regulatory settings. Guidance and direction is lacking from government regarding sources of data, methodologies and assumptions that should be used to understand and project housing need and future demand. This is inefficient, and councils must purchase data and commission specialist research and analysis in parallel that does not aggregate across councils. Councils must then justify their approach to establish housing targets, and for housing strategies impacting land use planning schemes.

TOR 10: Governance and funding arrangements in relation to housing and homelessness, particularly as they relate to the responsibility of Local, State, Territory and Federal Governments.

Recommendation:



That the Australian Government:

- Seek immediate commitment from National Cabinet to prioritise the delivery of social and affordable housing through COVID-19 stimulus and recovery programs
- Leverage National Housing and Homelessness Agreements⁵² with the States and Territories to increase social and affordable development opportunities and use of government land
- Improve accountability for housing and homelessness portfolio areas by strengthened governance by reviewing Ministerial responsibility for homelessness to better support the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH), currently sitting with the Minister for Families and Social Services
- Recognise that local government can add value to the planning of social housing and homelessness services and should have a dedicated opportunity to provide input
- Ensure access to funding for capital expenditure on public, social and community housing to address inadequate income generated from rents

Link to Charter

Principle: Shared responsibility, accountability and success. We will partner, leverage our strengths and be accountable to the commitments of this Charter.

Regional commitment: Working in partnership with federal and state government, public and private sector partners to coordinate our approach and deliver meaningful outcomes to increase the provision of social housing and respond to homelessness in south and east Melbourne

Principle - Urgency, innovation and collaboration. We recognise and commit to act on the urgency of the situation which has been compounded by COVID-19

Discussion

All levels of government, with the community and private sector must play a role in addressing housing and homelessness issues in Australia.

Accountability is clearly shared. When accountability is not shared it too often becomes ‘no ones’ responsibility because no one level of government or actor can address the issue alone.

In this context we all must play a role and the operating environment must be collegiate, flexible and outcome focussed. A focus on outcomes enables a shared goal to drive action and progress to be measured, analysed and adjusted as required. Untied flexible funding under the NHHA is also required.

Concluding remarks

The Charter Group advocates strongly that homelessness policy, strategy and services need to reflect and respond to local and regional circumstances and be informed by specific insights gained through operating at a local and regional level.



Homelessness is much more than rough sleeping. The particular and urgent needs of women, families and youth in our area *cannot* be met with the emergency and social housing available. This situation represents and perpetuates a failure to prevent those who are experiencing homelessness for the first time becoming entrenched in homelessness.

Early intervention, the provision of social and affordable housing and a coordinated service response are critical to meet the needs of local populations.

Early intervention and a 'Housing First' response maximise the economic and social return on our collective investment.

¹ ABS Census 2016

² Council for Homeless Persons definition: <https://chp.org.au/homelessness/>

³ Council to Homeless Persons 2019, 'Making a Difference – Effective Local Government Responses to Homelessness', commissioned by Monash Council October 2019, p.2

⁴ National Housing and Homelessness Agreement <https://www.dss.gov.au/housing-support-programs-services-homelessness/national-housing-and-homelessness-agreement>

⁵ *Making a Difference – effective local government response to homelessness*, Council to Homeless Persons, commissioned by Monash Council, October 2019

⁶ See http://federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/other/other/NHHA_Final.pdf

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics Census 2016 – *Homeless Estimates Special Report*

⁸ See <http://www.nwhn.net.au/Crisis-in-Crisis.aspx>

⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics Census 2016 – *Homeless Estimates Special Report*

¹⁰ Council to Homeless Persons 2019, 'Making a Difference – Effective Local Government Responses to Homelessness', commissioned by Monash Council October 2019, p.1

¹¹ Council to Homeless Persons 2019 'Making a Difference – effective local government response to homelessness', , commissioned by Monash Council, October 2019

¹² S. Gaetz & E. Dej, *A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention*, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, Toronto, 2017, p. 16

¹³ See <https://profile.id.com.au/bayside/household-income-quartiles>

¹⁴ See <https://profile.id.com.au/frankston/household-income-quartiles?BMID=20>

¹⁵ Crime Statistics Agency Victoria, Family Violence Incidents by Local Government Area, 2018/2019

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/domestic-violence/family-domestic-sexual-violence-in-australia-2018/contents/summary>

¹⁸ See

https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/Responding_to_the_shadow_pandemic_practitioner_views_on_the_nature_of_and_responses_to_violence_against_women_in_Victoria_Australia_during_the_COVID-19_restrictions/12433517

¹⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018. Specialist Homelessness Services Collection Victoria, 2016

²⁰ See <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features20March+Quarter+2012>

²¹ Ibid.



²² See https://publiceducationfoundation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Issues-Paper_What-Price-The-Gap.pdf

²³ Council to Homeless Persons (CHP), *Productivity Commission Issues Paper, The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health*, Submission 145, April 2019

²⁴ Justice Connect, *Creating a fairer and stronger community for Victorians experiencing mental illness, homelessness & housing insecurity*, Submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, July 2019

²⁵ L. Henriques-Gomes, "Homelessness becoming concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne", *The Guardian*, 30 May 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/australianews/2019/may/30/homelessness-becoming-concentrated-in-sydney-and-melbourne-studyfinds>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Rental Report December Quarter 2019*, Victorian Department of Health and Human Services 2019

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ See <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/publications/rental-report>

³⁰ Council to Homeless Persons 2019, 'Making a Difference – Effective Local Government Responses to Homelessness', commissioned by Monash Council October 2019, p.1

³¹ Anglicare Australia (2019) Rental Affordability Snapshot National Report <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/our-work/research-reports/the-rental-affordability-snapshot>

³² DHHS, (2017) Rental Report: December Quarter <https://dhhs.vic.gov.au/publications/rental-report>

³³ *Making a Difference – effective local government responses to homelessness*, Council to Homeless Persons, commissioned by Monash Council, October 2019

³⁴ Stimulus Paper – Housing Targets for Regions: How Feasible is this for Melbourne's South and East, Professor Carolyn Whitzman, PhD, Fellow, Planning Institute of Australia, October 2019.

³⁴ See

http://www.nwhn.net.au/admin/file/content2/c7/A%20crisis%20in%20crisis%20doc%20final%20040219_1550142202053.pdf

³⁵ Department of Health and Human Services, Victorian Government 2017, 'Victoria's Social Housing Supply Requirements to 2036', p.3, <https://www.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-06/Victorias-social-housing-supply-requirements-to-2036.pdf>

³⁸ AHURI Final Report No. 120, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/120>.

³⁹ Advisory Committee and Panel Report, Environmentally Efficient Design Local Policies, April 2004 [http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/Environmentally_Efficient_Design_AC_Report\(1\).pdf](http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/Environmentally_Efficient_Design_AC_Report(1).pdf)

⁴⁰ *New directions in planning for affordable housing: Australian and international evidence and implications*, Gurrán, N., Milligan, V., Baker, D., Beth Bugg, L., Christensen, S. (2008) AHURI Final Report No. 120, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/120>.

⁴¹ AHURI Final Report No. 120, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/120>

⁴² Australian Bureau of Statistics Census 2016 – Homeless Estimates Special Report

⁴³ DHHS Towards Home <https://www.housing.vic.gov.au/other-housing-projects>

⁴⁴ <https://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/campaigns/housing-first-australia>

⁴⁵ DHHS Towards Home <https://www.housing.vic.gov.au/other-housing-projects>



⁴⁶ See <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/publications/research-papers/send/36-research-papers/13840-housing-affordability-in-victoria>

⁴⁷ See <http://www.nwhn.net.au/Crisis-in-Crisis.aspx>

⁴⁷ T. Walsh, *Homelessness Legislation for Australia: A Missed Opportunity*, UNSW LawJl 30; 2014, 37(3) UNSW Law Journal 820 <http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/UNSWLawJl/>

⁴⁸ See http://www.nwhn.net.au/admin/file/content2/c7/A%20crisis%20in%20crisis%20doc%20final%20040219_1550142202053.pdf

⁴⁹ Crabtree, Louise and Twill, Jason (2019) *Foundations of Equity: A Metropolitan Land Trust Policy*. Sydney: City of Sydney. Retrieved 1 November 2019 from https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/314159/Foundations-of-Equity_A-metropolitan-land-trust-policy.pdf

⁵⁰ Gawley, Kelvin (2019) "Burnaby passes bold rental-only zoning plan to protect, create housing," *Burnaby Now*, May 28, 2019. Retrieved 8 October 2019 from <https://www.vancouverisawesome.com/2019/05/28/rental-only-zoning-housing-burnaby-bc/>

⁵¹ City of Melbourne Street Count <https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/community/health-support-services/social-support/what-we-are-doing/Pages/streetcount.aspx>

⁵² National Housing and Homelessness Agreement <https://www.dss.gov.au/housing-support-programs-services-homelessness/national-housing-and-homelessness-agreement>

