



12 June 2020

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

Inquiry into homelessness in Australia

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) is pleased to provide this submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs *Inquiry into homelessness in Australia*.

ALGA is the national voice of local government in Australia, representing 537 councils across the country. 75% of these councils are located in rural, remote or regional areas of Australia. In structure, ALGA is a federation of State and Territory Local Government Associations. This submission should be read in conjunction with any separate submissions received from State and Territory Associations as well as individual councils.

The undersupply of affordable housing and increasing rate of homelessness is having significant social and economic impacts in our cities and regions. Recent natural disasters (bushfires and drought) and the COVID-19 pandemic are also placing increasing strain on households and their ability to maintain secure and affordable accommodation. Housing stress not only affects low income households but in the current economic environment increasingly middle-income households who now have reduced income.

ALGA notes that there has been a plethora of research reports and National and State based inquiries on housing and homelessness over recent times. This is not a new issue and solutions have been developed through experience and research that address:

1. Supporting individuals and families to avoid becoming homeless;
2. Provision of crisis accommodation; and
3. Providing pathways out of homelessness.

Local governments as the level of government closest to the community, plays an important role in engaging with and planning for the needs of their communities. Whilst social services and social housing provision are predominantly the roles of other levels of government and the community sector, local governments do engage with housing and homelessness depending on issues such as state/territory government requirements, other priorities of council, the nature of housing challenges in the locality, resources and capability.

For example, most local governments operating under State Government planning legislation undertake strategic planning to ensure there is an appropriate supply and mix of housing including affordable housing to meet their community's diverse and changing needs. Some are also required by their State Governments to develop housing affordability strategies.

There is a diverse range of activities that Councils undertake to respond to supporting people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in their communities and this can include:

- Identifying excess land suitable for social housing;
- Developing partnerships with community housing providers;
- Advocacy for and co-ordination with local community service providers;
- Undertaking street counts to provide evidence of the issue;
- Managing public places;
- Provision of storage lockers and facilities to support food kitchens;
- Supporting low cost housing models;
- Navigation of the complexity of the social security system and job hunting through free internet access at libraries;
- Education with the community and business operators; and
- Working with family violence prevention and multicultural organizations

Below are some tangible examples of local governments engaging with homelessness issues:

- City of Salisbury (SA) – *Assistance with Care and Housing Project* which aims to support those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to access appropriate and sustainable housing;
- City of Melbourne (Vic) with the Council to Homeless Persons *Connect Respect* -The program provides training to businesses on how to connect with people experiencing homelessness so that they have the confidence and knowledge to respond in an inclusive and respectful way;
- City of Fremantle (WA) – Solutions based approach to interactions between front line staff and people who are homeless;
- Brisbane City Council (Qld) - *Brisbane Housing Company (BHC)* is a not-for-profit organisation established by Council with the Queensland Government. It provides affordable rental accommodation for people on low incomes;
- Katherine Town Council (NT) – Provides an online listing for accommodation and housing services;
- Tweed Shire Council (NSW) - Council provides Secretariat support to the Tweed Shire Housing and Homelessness Network which aims to build an innovative and integrated housing and homeless service system in the Tweed Shire;
- City of Hobart (Tas) - In early 2019, the City of Hobart established a Housing with Dignity Reference Group to offer an opportunity to people with a lived experience of homelessness to have a voice and a place to be heard.
- Parramatta City Council, Liverpool City Council and North Sydney Council (NSW) – All have developed Homelessness Strategies, Policies or Action Plans; and
- City of Darebin (Vic) - The City of Darebin has recently released its shower access policy, giving those experiencing homelessness entry to recreation facilities.

Homelessness in Indigenous Communities

The reasons for the high rate of homelessness in indigenous communities are complex and linked to the causes of indigenous inequality in education, health, job opportunities and lack of appropriate housing. For example, the rate of homelessness in the Northern Territory is twelve times the national average.

There are approximately 13,720 people in the NT who are homeless, with over 80% of those people living in severely overcrowded dwellings.

In remote communities of the Northern Territory homelessness is driven by overcrowding in public housing. Almost 90% of the homeless population in Darwin are Indigenous.

Local governments in the NT are grappling with social responsibility and economic imperatives, juggling the interests of tourist entrepreneurs with those of the homeless and hungry. Homeless persons are competing for shared spaces such as parks, beaches and urban bushland which causes issues for local governments in managing social expectations of mainstream society and cultural diversity of first nation peoples. Shortage of affordable temporary housing for visitors from community also drives people to parks and open space.

Conclusion

Local governments have an important role in facilitating and supporting measures to address homelessness within and with their communities. Developing long term solutions to housing challenges must involve all stakeholders including local government. Greater coordination of the effort across all three levels of government and with non-government organisations is the short- and long-term answer.

The COVID economic recovery also provides opportunities for innovative solutions to increase the supply of affordable and social housing.

Despite the current housing challenges there is no national housing strategy and no longer a national dialogue between the three levels of government on housing. We hope that the recently announced National Cabinet Reform Committee on Housing will rectify this current policy gap. National Housing and Homelessness Agreements are now determined between the Federal Government and individual state/territory governments without direct engagement of local government.

For these reasons ALGA recommends that:

1. The National Cabinet Reform Committee on Housing, prioritizes the development of a national affordable housing strategy; and
2. There is acknowledgement of local governments' role in housing which could also include appropriate funding to facilitate innovative partnership models for housing.

Please contact Liz de Chastel, Senior Policy Adviser on 02 6122 9443 if you require further information.

Yours sincerely



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