

Submission to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan



The inclusion of local government in a National Housing and Homelessness Plan

A 2023 report by Homelessness Australia titled “Overstretched and Overwhelmed” articulates the unprecedented increase in demand for homelessness services across Australia. Services in the City of Swan are also reporting dramatic increases in need that they are unable to meet. This includes an increase in requests for support from women and children.

Consequently, this has elevated the role and involvement of local governments in the space. Local government plays an essential role in ending homelessness, but often lack the appropriate resources and expertise to do so.

The Local Government Actⁱⁱ stipulates that local government can provide services and facilities but not in duplication. The current demand on the homelessness sector means there are multiple gaps in the service system and often these gaps are being filled by local governments responding to the needs of their community.

The City of Swan

The City of Swan is a diverse community located between 10 and 50 km northeast of Greater Perth. It has a rapidly growing population and the largest land area of any of the Western Australian metropolitan local governments, covering an area of 1,042 square kilometres.

In the 2021 census the City of Swan recorded Western Australia’s highest number of people experiencing homelessness, including the highest number of people sleeping rough and in improvised dwellings, and people in supported accommodation.

The City of Swan have undertaken several initiatives to address homelessness, including the employment of a dedicated Homelessness Project Officer, one of the first local governments in Perth to do so. The City’s experience in responding homelessness and the availability of a subject matter expert means the City is well placed to contribute to National Housing and Homelessness Plan.

Case Study: the increased role of local government in homelessness

Recently in [REDACTED] there was [REDACTED] sleeping in their car, [REDACTED]. The family had approached multiple services for support and been turned away as agencies are stretched beyond their capacity. They were desperate to find somewhere to sleep for the night [REDACTED]

Not knowing where to turn next, the family approached the City of Swan’s Community Care services, which provide support for the frail aged, and people living with dementia or disability. Unable to provide accommodation the City’s Community Care staff, who are untrained in crisis accommodation but compassionate and caring, sat with the family and did their best to help them find somewhere to sleep. They rang the City’s Homelessness Project Officer for support who was able to share contact details of multiple services and refuge’s and recommend some safety planning strategies for the family.

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This example highlights the way community members look to local government for support in times of need, especially when support services are unable to assist. The current housing and cost of living crisis means there are many stories like this where untrained and under resourced local government workers are providing critical, crisis support. The City's funding of a dedicated Homelessness Project Officer has helped to build the capacity of staff and increase the City's ability to support people in desperate need.

Defining the role of local government

A national plan must clearly outline the role and responsibility of each tier of Government in line with the plans and strategies already implemented by the states. "Everybody's Business" by Leanne Mitchel is a Churchill Fellowship report that outlines what local government can do to end homelessness. This report draws on research from the United Kingdom, America and Canada and accurately summarises the challenges and expectations local governments face in this space. The case studies and findings of this report will be an important guide for a National Plan that considers the role of local government in housing and homelessness.

Defining the role of local governments in ending homelessness must be done in a way that allows local government to maintain its agility as a system navigator and flexibility to swiftly respond to the needs of their community. This is one of the key strengths of a local government and the value they contribute to ending homelessness.

Another key strength of local government is their local area expertise, which is critical in planning decisions. This knowledge needs to be included in all planning conversations, particularly those pertaining to the current federal housing reform.

Appropriate funding and resourcing

Local governments need to be funded, resourced, and supported to appropriately prevent and respond to homelessness in their community. Homelessness funding for local governments needs to be equitable across the board, so that where someone decides to sleep does not dictate the level of support they can receive.

For example, in Perth there are a range of assertive outreach supports that are highly effective, some are funded by the State Government, some by local governments, however some local government areas have no assertive outreach funding at all. This imbalance adds to the workload and service demand in certain local government areas and creates a large gap in service provision for others.

A National Plan and associated work should recognise the value of local government in the homelessness space. Local Government are key drivers of a collective impact approach and play a critical role as a leader, facilitator and enabler. The close connection to community and local area expertise of local government are currently underutilised by the sector. A National Plan can guide a consistent approach for local governments to navigate this sector and generate adequate resourcing and funding to enable this work.

A grant program such as the former Local Government Partnership Fund for Homelessness in Western Australia would be an adequate interim solution. Grant funding enables local governments to implement local and often innovative solutions alongside service providers. It allows local government to maintain its flexibility and agility to respond to the needs of the community. With multiple funding applications

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across a variety of projects and business units in a local government, grant funding for homelessness can be hard to come by. Therefore, a dedicated fund for local government responses to homelessness will lead to greater collaboration, capacity building and innovation.

Case Study: Local government as a leader and facilitator

The City of Swan has been a homelessness leader, facilitator and enabler for several years, in supporting the Midland Alliance to End Homelessness. This is a group of organisations from across the City of Swan who support people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

The Midland Alliance has two groups; a strategic group who lead a coordinated and place-based approach to advocacy, planning and service delivery across the Midland District. This includes key leaders from the City of Swan, WA Police, St John of God Hospital, Department of Housing, Indigo Junction, MIDLAS, The Anglican Church and the Swan Chamber of Commerce. The Alliance also has a working group is made up of a range of service providers, usually the people who are on the ground working directly with community.

The Midland Alliance to End Homelessness has close relationship to the Midland District Leadership Group, which is a body made up of key state government departments. The City of Swan continues to be a key resource that enables the Midland Alliance to drive a local and collective response to homelessness in our community.

Including the expertise of people with lived experience of homelessness

The National plan and all associated work must be informed and guided by the expertise and stories of people with lived experience of homelessness. Additionally, when people with lived experience are engaged in consultancy they need to be adequately remunerated for their work. Ideally this would be fair and equitable across all organisations and levels of Government, guided by a consistent framework.

Conclusion

In summary, a National Housing and Homelessness Plan provides a critical opportunity to highlight local governments contribution to ending homelessness and to define its role, responsibilities and expectations. In doing so the plan must utilise local governments strengths as a leader, facilitator and enabler and allow it to maintain a degree of flexibility and agility as a system navigator. The national plan is an important starting point to ensure local governments are adequately resourced to lead and facilitate a place-based response to homelessness in their community.

Endnotes

ⁱ Homelessness Australia (August 2023). *Overstretched and overwhelmed: the strain on homelessness services*

ⁱⁱ Department of Justice (1995). *Local Government Act 1995*. Government of Western Australia

ⁱⁱⁱ Mitchel, L (2019). *Everybody's Business What local government can do to end homelessness*. Winston Churchill Trust