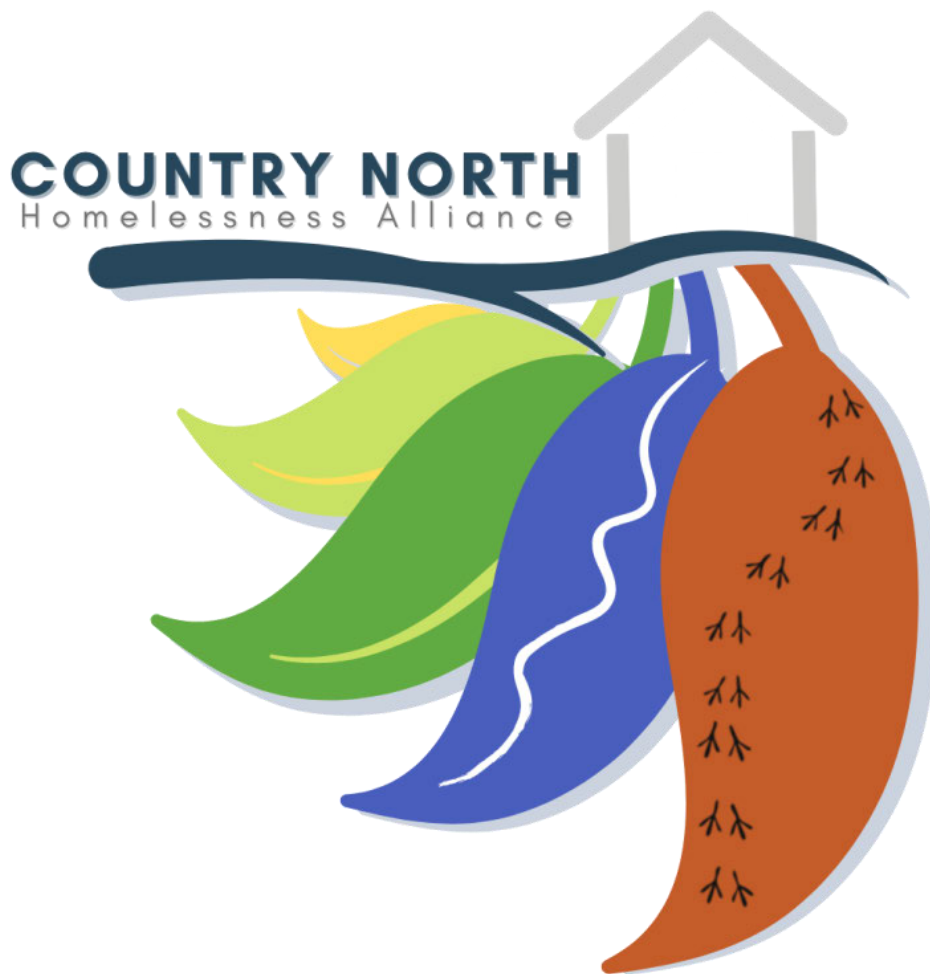


# Submission:

National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issues Paper

October 2023





OFFICIAL

# National Housing and Homelessness Plan

## Country North Homeless Alliance Submission

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### About the Country North Homelessness Alliance

In 2021 the South Australian homelessness sector underwent a major reform, culminating in the establishment of four homelessness alliances and one statewide domestic violence alliance.

Country North Homelessness Alliance (CNHA) was borne out of that reform and is a partnership of 5 non-government organisations, each with a wealth of experience in delivering community services to country people.

The CNHA footprint covers a vast area, encompassing three South Australian state government regions - the Yorke and Mid North, Eyre and Western and Far North. As specialist homelessness service providers, Alliance partners work tirelessly to support individuals and families who are experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of entering into homelessness in diverse regional and remote settings.

In the 2022/2023 financial year, a total of 1670 individuals engaged with our services and of those, 39% reported being without adequate shelter. For this cohort of people, case management focussed on addressing personal barriers preventing access to suitable housing (often crisis or short-term) and sourcing suitable longer-term housing outcomes, with the main goal being to assist with an exit from homelessness.

The remaining 61% of people presented as being at risk of entering into homelessness due to residing in unstable accommodation or being at risk of having their tenancy terminated. The case management approach applied is quite different from that of supporting people who are unsheltered, and the focus lies in building the capacity of the individual to develop essential life skills and the ability to independently maintain a home, thus preventing eviction and entry into homelessness.

While CNHA has nomination rights into a number of supported short-term housing options, the alliance is a homelessness service only and membership does not include a housing provider.





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### Introduction

The Country North Homelessness Alliance (CNHA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the release of the Government's National Housing and Homelessness Plan (NHHP) Issues Paper.

The NHHP needs to be an ambitious plan to end homelessness in Australia. This can be achieved by adopting a collaborative, informed and staged manner that embraces the setting of new policies, targets and actions that address the systemic causes of homelessness. Such an approach requires the government to adequately resource both homelessness and other human services to deliver effective prevention, early intervention and emergency responses. Additionally, the government must take a long-term approach to the investment and policy settings that stimulate the development of affordable housing, particularly in rural and regional areas.

For the NHHP to effectively address homelessness across the country it must engage in a co-design process to capture the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people living with a disability, culturally and linguistically diverse people, members of the LGBTIQ+ community and those with lived experience of the homelessness system. Having true joint ownership, authority and responsibility in policy design, decision making, and evaluation will ensure the plan delivers positive long-term sustainable outcomes for our diverse communities.

Current homelessness service funding levels are inadequate and have not been indexed appropriately for many years. Services have been forced to reduce staffing due to inflationary pressures and wage and superannuation increases. The government's rate of indexation and supplementation is totally inadequate and results in the service being unable to deliver critical prevention and early intervention programs. It also results in services having to turn away clients.

### Challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness – A South Australian rural and regional perspective

In rural and regional South Australia homelessness and other wellbeing support services are sparsely located across a large geographical area, limiting physical access points for those in need. The CNHA, which operates across the South Australian Government regions of Yorke and Mid North, Far North and Eyre and Western, has services located in seven of the major population centres. Whilst phone and video conferencing support are available, the combination of distance and inadequate case management funding makes it exceptionally difficult to support and accommodate every person who is in crisis, let alone prioritise prevention and early intervention activities. It is next to impossible to provide timely and adequate ongoing support to people located outside of the major centres, in particular those living in remote and isolated communities.

CNHA has witnessed a sharp increase in the number of people who have approached our services in 2022-2023 (140) that could not be assisted, predominately due to lack of





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immediate housing solutions. This number is twice what it was in 2021-2022 (70)<sup>1</sup> and reflects both an incredibly tight rental market and a sector operating at full capacity and under pressure.

A recent RealEstate.com search identified there were only four Port Pirie properties available for rent with an average price of \$330 per week. This equates to 71% of a single person's entitlement to JobSeeker (\$749.20 pfn) and Commonwealth Rent Assistance (\$184.80 pfn). An affordable rent payment is considered to be 30% of a person's income. This leaves many tenants in the precarious position of trying to navigate how to meet their basic needs with only \$274 per fortnight remaining for discretionary spending after rent. Such financial stress significantly increases the risk of homelessness, financial hardship and other social and wellbeing issues.

Access to affordable housing in the CNHA region is further exacerbated by fluctuations on accommodation demand due to infrastructure projects such as road repairs and upgrades, wind turbine developments and industrial maintenance. Contractors purchase and rent local homes as well as utilise cabin parks and hotels leaving the community with limited long and short-term housing options. Access to emergency accommodation is also impacted when hotels and cabin parks are full.

Low levels of housing availability impact the whole homelessness system as bottlenecks are created and people are unable to transition through the system from crisis to transitional to long-term housing whether that be rental or home ownership.

Sourcing housing options for youth, particularly for people under 18, is even more challenging as traditional forms of housing and crisis accommodation are generally not age appropriate and do not easily enable service provision to ensure high levels of safety and support.

Our client-focused staff work tirelessly to support and address the needs of all of their clients however, the impact of high case management loads coupled with complex client needs takes its toll on our workforce. The inability to support every person who presents impacts on the wellbeing of frontline staff who are often faced with the difficult task of informing people in need that there is no service capacity or access to housing.

### Prevention and Early Intervention

In order to reduce and eliminate homelessness we need to move from a crisis intervention response to one that is focused on prevention and early intervention. The homelessness system must have the resources and flexibility to provide preventative interventions as soon as homelessness risk factors are identified. Intensive tenancy support, and living skills education as well as facilitated connection to services, education and community groups are other early intervention access points that can reduce the risk of homelessness occurring.

When we continually deal with people who are in crisis we minimise our opportunities to undertake prevention and early intervention activities that stop homelessness and re-





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entry into the homelessness system. A crisis approach also creates significant cost pressures on other service systems such as acute health, child protection and justice services. With 32% of our clients presenting with mental health, 7% with AOD and 9% with a disability<sup>1</sup>, a holistic service approach is critical. Unfortunately, our clients do not always have access to these extra services in a timely manner and often find themselves on long waiting lists that exacerbate the impact of their circumstances. In some instances, it is a criteria for eligibility into these services that the person must first be in stable housing. Unfortunately, this approach may result in the client not being able to achieve this service entry requirement and return to or prolong their experience of homelessness.

A number of people who experience homelessness have been released from prison or hospital with nowhere to go. This is a preventable form of homelessness that must be addressed by the government and these services.

We need a whole of system approach to addressing ending homelessness. This includes financial wellbeing, health (physical and mental), family wellbeing, affordable housing, discrimination, education, legal system and racism. Service referral barriers need to be removed so educators and practitioners refer to homelessness services as soon as concerns are identified.

Local councils should also be encouraged to be part of a systems approach to ending homelessness. They are in a unique position to support and build healthy connected communities by working collaboratively with their local community service providers, health services and education institutions.

### Homelessness Service Responses

The NHHP needs to shift the focus from crisis management to one that prioritises effective prevention and early intervention strategies. Homelessness services must be adequately resourced to ensure they connect with people before, or soon after they experience a risk factor associated with homelessness. This forward-looking approach will gradually lead to lower rates of homelessness.

Services need to be underpinned by best practice models that ensure people's experience of homelessness is brief, exposure to further harm is minimal (or non-existent) and they don't return to homelessness. These models should have the flexibility to be individualised and acknowledge that different cohorts such, as youth, families, singles, and over 55s all have different needs.

A greater understanding of the factors contributing to people becoming homeless, and in turn, greater investment in preventative services and connection between homelessness services and other sectors is required. For example, we know that experiences of trauma and involvement with child protection services can be factors in young people becoming homeless and having a limited ability to live independently. So, to prevent or limit the impact of homelessness, there is a need for greater investment in building partnerships between homelessness services and child protection departments







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to improve outcomes for young people. Increased investment in supported independent youth accommodation facilities, mental health, Drug and Alcohol, education, and employment sectors is also required.

The interplay of violence, substance abuse, poor mental health and homelessness was highlighted in a recent Uniting Country SA survey of 12 people who have had multiple engagements with homelessness services. One of the respondents █████, who is unable to secure private rental accommodation, has been couch surfing, in share houses, living with partners and in emergency accommodation on and off for a number of years. She has found it difficult to connect with AOD and mental health services due to her poor mental and physical health, service waiting lists, unstable housing conditions and financial hardship. Once accommodated in a women's shelter she was connected to a range of support services, secured employment and is on the Housing SA waiting list. █████'s circumstances could have been significantly different if both homelessness and health services were better resourced in our region and interventions occurred early in her journey.

Current program funding allocations are not growing at the same rate as inflation and service costs hence many specialist homelessness services are reviewing service their provision capacity and what cuts may be required. These funding pressures further reduce the opportunity for prevention and early intervention work to occur.

A Housing First approach ensures people experiencing long-term homelessness are provided with housing plus additional long or short-term support to meet their needs. This approach is favoured over the staircase model which sees people move slowly from crisis to transitional to long-term properties. Crisis accommodation is intended to be for short periods of time but when there are few long-term viable exit points people get stuck in the system and are unable to make the transition to long-term sustainable housing. The CNHA Alliance Property Report shows the average number of nights spent in crisis accommodation is 332 nights (11 months), Supported Housing Properties is 547 nights (18 months), Transitional Housing Properties is 474 nights (16 Months) and Long Term (Common Ground, Pt Augusta) 1838 (61 months).

The benefits of the Housing First model are a more successful tenancy and improved health outcomes, higher employment and training success and they are more engaged in their community<sup>2</sup>. This approach requires a change to the way in which social and community housing is allocated and must be underpinned by adequate resourcing and enabling policy settings.

From a South Australian perspective, state level reforms of the public/social housing programs need to occur, particularly in the supported program areas such as transitional and supported stimulus. The reforms should include:

- The development of consistent rent models across the South Australian Housing Authority and community housing sector. Currently, there are at least four different rent models in use.
- Using the housing first approach, look at support packages following the client/tenant rather than the actual property as is the case now.





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### Housing

The government needs to provide the right policy frameworks and resources to stimulate the long-term growth of social and affordable housing in both rural and regional areas. This includes incentives to encourage investment from a broad range of philanthropists and investors. In regional and rural South Australia, we need to see increased levels of investment stimulations in affordable rental and affordable purchase options.

Other trauma informed and growth focused initiatives that would help generate positive housing outcomes for people in the CNHA service region are:

- Permanent emergency accommodation options that are family-friendly and suitable for children are made available, in addition to expansion of other longer-term options. Options could include a range of stand-alone houses, self-contained units as CNHA members view hotels as inappropriate for people requiring emergency accommodation for longer periods of time.
- A housing first approach to minimise the disruption in people's lives and provide a sense of security and community.
- Housing developments that meet the needs of specific cohorts such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people living with a disability, older people and large families.

### Conclusion

The NHHP should strive to end homelessness across Australia by adopting a whole of system approach, this includes

- Policy settings that are evidence informed and contain homelessness reduction targets
- Developing systems process to improve and strengthen actions to end homelessness over time
- Including lived experience in reviews and decision making
- Adopting a housing first model
- Adequately funding service to deliver effective prevention, early intervention case management to help people sustain their tenancy and engage with additional support services
- Providing resourcing, frameworks and incentives to kick start the development of fit for purpose social and community housing in regional and rural locations.

### References

1 – South Australian Housing Authority Specialist Homelessness Service Alliance Contract Management Report 2021-2022 and 2022-2023.

2 - <https://www.mercyfoundation.com.au/our-focus/ending-homelessness/housing-first/#:~:text=Housing%20First%20is%20an%20approach,connections%20or%20better%20health%20care.>

