

Hutt St Centre is a place of connection and support, where people facing homelessness are empowered to rebuild their lives, rediscover their identities and reconnect with those who love them.

We walk alongside people on their journey toward homefulness—a word we use to describe the feeling of safety, control and confidence that comes with having a place to call home. When people walk through our doors we help fulfil their immediate needs, like a shower, a meal, and a charged phone, while our 20+ visiting services provide support ranging from medical check-ups to financial counselling. And with a focus on the future, we connect people with housing, education and employment opportunities to build the skills and confidence to change their circumstances for good.

We believe in a society that grants all people an equal chance to live a full life. And until that happens, Hutt St Centre will continue to be the voice for systematic change. Through our active advocacy, our fundraising initiatives, our unrelenting support and our culture of ingrained respect, we are bringing an end to the injustice we see in our city.

We welcome the opportunity to participate in the consultation on the National Housing and Homeless Plan. Our submission includes responses to some of the questions posted as a part of the consultation process, but also observations from a specialised homelessness service provider perspective.

Questions for consideration Homelessness

What are the different challenges for people experiencing homelessness in urban, regional, and rural areas?

Cost of living pressures are impacting many in all communities, but access to supports may be a great deal more difficult in non-metropolitan areas. A challenge is, particularly in states such as South Australia, that many services are located in the capital, and regional centres do not have the population to support a series of specialised interventions. A paucity of public transport impacts many. Examples for this are the Barossa Valley and the Riverland areas of SA. Neither of these significant regional areas have any public transport options whatsoever, and with fuel becoming increasingly expensive access to supports is inevitably impacted.

What short, medium, and long-term actions can governments take to help prevent homelessness or to support people who may be at risk of becoming homeless?

Affordable housing is the basic requirement to help prevent homelessness, but an investment in bricks and mortar requires a commensurate investment in support services to ensure enduring homefulness. Homefulness is a word that means the feeling of safety, control and confidence that comes with having a place to call home.

Australia is currently experiencing a housing crisis, acknowledging that this will pass. Historically low vacancy rates linked with a runaway housing market and incredibly expensive utilities are creating an affordability dilemma that is impacting many. For those in our community receiving income support, affordable private rental options do not exist, therefore public or community housing is the only accessible accommodation.

Hutt St Centre

end homelessness

Reflecting upon the seventy years that Hutt St Centre has provided a service to those experiencing homelessness all responses need to be empathic and client centred. All services, government or non-government, need to have an unconditional positive regard for the people accessing support. Homelessness is not due to any deficit in an individual, it is more often situational, and currently Australia is in a housing crisis.

How can the homelessness system more effectively respond to those at risk of, or already experiencing homelessness?

A didactic approach to increase understanding about housing options is critical. The way in which private rental properties are applied for has changed significantly over the past few years. Most real estate agencies require ID, references and an ability to apply on line. For those experiencing homelessness these requirements are impossible to achieve. One option is for the private rental market to review its processes and advocate for those without the resources so often required. Developing a series of programs and groups providing support to people at risk of homelessness in a competitive housing and rental market is crucial. Additionally, agencies such as Home Start, an SA government agency supporting the community into home ownership, needs ongoing support and investment.

A critical response to this question needs to focus on the relative lack of housing options, particularly at this moment in time. The impact of a lack of housing options means that homelessness services are having to say “no, we have no housing” a lot more frequently than previously. This lack of ‘throughput’, that is clients accessing housing, means that the length of support is significant. In a more buoyant cycle of the housing market where demand was less than supply the duration of support was often shorter. Homelessness services therefore need the ability to flex up when demand for services increases.

How can governments capture better evidence on ‘hidden’ or ‘invisible’ homelessness (e.g. couch surfing, living in a car and overcrowding)?

For many years Adelaide services used to conduct the “Homeless Head Count”. Once a year, over two nights, a survey was undertaken of all rough sleepers in the city of Adelaide by roving groups of volunteers exploring all areas of Adelaide’s central business district, and this initiative transformed into the By Name List.

The state Departments of Education and Child Protection have roles to play in regards to youth homelessness, and this often relates to couch surfing. Educators and other statutory bodies have a legislative requirement to quantify levels of child and youth homelessness and respond accordingly. Sharing this information, and in SA this is often through the Information Sharing Guidelines, will enable a greater level of awareness of need.

Questions for consideration Homelessness Providers

What are the main challenges in addressing chronic and repeat homelessness?

Hutt St Centre

end homelessness

A significant number of people experiencing homelessness present with multiple and complex needs, for example enduring mental health issues and/or alcohol and other drug dependencies. These co-morbidities often have an impact upon a person's ability to find and retain accommodation. Therefore any National Plan to address Housing and Homelessness would benefit from an holistic approach to supports. That is, without specialised mental health and alcohol and other drug services the likelihood of successful tenure is often limited.

One of the most pressing challenges to address chronic and repeat homelessness is access to suitable accommodation, acknowledging that this will require significant investment over a long period of time. Suitable accommodation means choice. Suitable accommodation means emergency accommodation. Suitable accommodation means appropriate transitional accommodation. Suitable accommodation also means accommodation options for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This means options with ability to accommodate larger kinship groups and layouts and designs that support a communal approach. Suitable accommodation also means supported accommodation, staffed by skilled and suitably experienced and qualified workers. Finally suitable accommodation needs to be in areas of social desirability. The concept of social role valorisation links wellbeing and resilience for people caught in a lower socio-economic set of circumstances with the opportunities of those living in suburbs or areas with greater access to services and supports.

What are the medium and longer-term steps that can be taken to ensure we have a more consistent and coordinated service system to support people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness?

A number of local Adelaide initiatives have been developed to support people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. These include the By Name List and the Adelaide Zero Project. The By Name List is a shared excel document that names each and every rough sleeper in Adelaide and enables their journey into homefulness to be measured and quantified. Adelaide was also one of the first jurisdictions in Australia to commit to functional zero homelessness. Functional Zero is when the number of new people accessing homelessness services, usually for a specified period of time, is less than or equal to the number of people who exit homelessness through being housed.

The Aspire service provided here at Hutt St Centre supports people through medium and long-term case management and assistance. It is an individual and flexible program, that connects people with sustainable housing, employment and community. The client group focused on through Aspire are those with regular contact with both health services and justice services (or corrections). As a comprehensively evaluated model, Aspire is an example of a locally developed and innovative model to address long-term and chronic homelessness.

Further, two years ago the homelessness service space in South Australia underwent a transformational change. A series of Alliances was developed, each with a focus on a specific region or cohort. The Alliances comprise a number of agencies who now work in close consort to provide comprehensive supports to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. As a service delivery model the increased partnerships that the Alliances developed have enabled a more comprehensive response to need and a reduced 'competition' between Alliance partners.

What are the best specific early intervention approaches to prevent someone becoming homeless?

Hutt St Centre

end homelessness

A key aspect of early intervention is age relevant strategies. Responses to head off episodes of homelessness should include increasing the literacy about housing and homelessness in schools. An example of this is an initiative from Glen Osmond Primary School's Wellbeing Student Action team and their 'winter sleepout' activity. A group of students, teachers and support officers participated in a fund-raising activity that included spending a night sleeping on cardboard sheeting under one of the school's verandas. This was followed by a presentation from one of Hutt St Centre's workers about the broader impacts of homelessness. Through incorporating this topic in the curriculum the next generation will have a greater awareness of homelessness and what supports exist to ameliorate it.

There is an increasing understanding of the antecedents of homelessness, and although each person has their own unique circumstances leading to an experience of homelessness, there are some common traits, including, but not limited to: connections to child protection services; family and domestic violence, and the impacts of 'difference' in a family or community (such as sexuality, gender etc.). Addressing these widely understood and shared precursors to homelessness will reduce the critical inflow of people, of any age, into the homelessness sector.

Within service delivery there are interventions with a demonstrable impact on preventing homelessness. These include the provision of a 'duty' service. This means having a place-based response able to respond to immediate need. Acknowledging that there is a role for a telephone or web-based response, particular after hours or in remote regional areas, face-to-face engagement has been demonstrated to expedite a person's journey through homelessness.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that economic participation has a critical role to prevent homelessness, even in an environment of increasing casualisation of the workforce. Here in South Australia we have a current unemployment rate of 3.6% (Sept 2023), and earning does buffer against the headwinds of excessively high utility costs, and interest rates that are regularly creeping up. There is a cohort of people for whom economic participation is difficult, disablism and racism exist and present insurmountable barriers for many people in need.

Additional comments regarding Zoning and Planning

In the South Australian context there have been a number of major infrastructure developments that have impacted housing. Several developments have been particularly impactful, and raising this as a topic for further consideration is based upon the consequences of road building. The compulsory purchase of homes has been significant in a number of investments in new or faster roads. The Darlington Interchange, but more impactfully, the North South Freeway through Adelaide, have dislocated communities and displaced hundreds of people. Further, South Road in Adelaide has seen a great deal of more affordable homes and units over the years, but with the construction of the North South Freeway swathes of affordable homes have been demolished. This reduction in housing stock, particularly for renters has been significant. There is a need, therefore, for a lens to be cast over future infrastructure developments that focuses less on the car and reduced commuting times and more on the impact of cutting communities in half and reducing (affordable) housing stock.

Additional comments regarding Climate Change

Hutt St Centre

end homelessness

As we reach an era when there is greater commitment to the concept of climate change, we face another summer of potential higher temperatures. Adelaide is one of the most vulnerable major cities in Australia for heatwaves. Here in Adelaide there has been an increased frequency of heatwaves (for us that is days over 35°C) since the 1950s, often with fatal consequences. The impact upon those experiencing homelessness is significant, with an increase in the number of Code Red days (hot weather) and Code Blue days (cold and/or wet and/or windy weather). For those experiencing homelessness these events mean more people access services and emergency accommodation, and greater staffing levels are required to meet demand.

Accommodation options will increasingly need to be better designed to maintain comfortable living conditions. There are examples of affordable and well-designed housing (for example Adelaide Workers' Homes, <https://www.adelaideworkershomes.com.au/news/the-launch-of-the-bill-johnson-estate/>), but there are a great many commercial offerings that will prove unsustainable.

Conclusion

Hutt St Centre values this opportunity to participate in the consultation process for the National Housing and Homeless Plan. Our response to the questions reflects our considered experience. The needs of the more marginalised, particularly those experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, requires a nuanced response, and one that recognises the commonalities of all Australians, but acknowledging difference.

A home is more than just four walls and a roof. It's a right that everyone deserves.
