

Alternative Submission Form – Workskil Australia

Guided questions

You can choose not to answer any question by leaving the space provided blank.

1. How can governments and community service providers reduce homelessness and/or support people who may be at risk of becoming homeless in Australia?

When answering this question, you might like to consider:

- What is most contributing to homelessness in urban, regional and rural or remote areas?
- What short, medium, and long-term actions can governments take to prevent homelessness or to support people who may be at risk of becoming homeless?
- What types of homelessness supports and services do we need more of? For example, earlier intervention, crisis support, mental health supports, etc
- How can services be better coordinated to support people who are experiencing homelessness and more effectively respond to those at risk of homelessness?

To reduce homelessness and support people who may be at risk of becoming homeless, earlier intervention is key. Cost of living pressures, loss of employment, domestic violence and ill health are some of the key factors leading to homelessness – when customers are experiencing the pressures outlined above they are often connected to organisations specific to the pressure – for example if a customer loses employment and claims a benefit they are generally engaged with an Employment Services provider – currently the support which can be offered to customers via organisations which are not housing specific is often quite limited – this in turn places increased pressure on already over-subscribed homelessness services where the priority is primarily those individuals who are already homeless or deemed to be of the highest need.

From our perspective as an Employment Services organization, what we see is that in some cases a customer who may have required lighter touch assistance to sustain their housing or address a short-term crisis slips into homelessness due to an inability to access the supports they required. This, in turn, can result in a longer period of housing instability, a multitude of flow on effects and can have a negative impact upon the ability of the individual to re-engage with employment and turn their situation around.

There are several initiatives that could be implemented to support at risk individuals to avoid homelessness and manage housing instability such as:

- ***Improved education relating to tenancy rights and responsibilities to better enable individuals to identify when a private rental situation is not being addressed in line with the Residential Tenancy Act for the jurisdiction.***

- **Tenancy sustainability financial supports like WA's Private Rental Aboriginal Assistance Loan – any solution implemented would need to be accessible by all residential tenants with a valid lease. Any solutions should be National and not limited to a particular demographic or location.**
- **Additional funding for Tenant Advocacy services is required to better enable individuals to obtain timely support to address tenancy issues early and prevent unnecessary escalations and evictions.**
- **Greater funding is required for crisis accommodation triage contact lines such as the Victorian Access Points, EntryPoint Perth, Homeless Connect SA etc. as customers in immediate need are often unable to get through and obtain assistance in a timely manner due to the volume of need.**

Regarding homelessness services, many service users experience co-occurring barriers such as mental health, substance use challenges, domestic violence and physical health concerns – sometimes these barriers are a result of the individual experiencing homelessness and sometimes these barriers pre-date the homelessness. Regardless of which barriers occurred first, co-occurring barriers can create additional challenges in circumstances where customers are accessing crisis or transitional accommodation where the service is not set up to manage all the needs of an individual. While it is not realistic to expect that all services will be able to manage every eventuality, consideration needs to be given to funding services which are more specialized and can accommodate a combination of barriers. Another key area of challenge is pets, where customers have pets, it is often quite tricky to get the customer accommodated due to the inability of services to accept pets, for customers who present homeless with pets there is often a deep connection to their animal and the animal is often described as 'the only thing I have left'. A reluctance to separate from the pet or the fact that there is nowhere safe and affordable for the pet to go often leads the customer to choose sleeping rough or in a car with their pet rather than parting ways. There are potential negative impacts regardless of which pathway the individual chooses, for example – parting ways with the animal may negatively impact mental health which can snowball to impact job readiness and so on while electing to remain with the animal and unhoused may negatively impact physical health as a result of rough sleeping.

Service coordination is a key area of concern both for service users and organisations who endeavour to support customers to address their housing challenges. Presently, there is no straightforward way to ascertain availability of crisis or transitional accommodation in any jurisdiction without often making a number of phone calls which is often a time consuming exercise – for those in need this can be overwhelming and frustrating, they may not have the phone credit to make multiple calls and sitting on hold for extend periods can also be stressful particularly if this is something which they are needing to do over and over again. Unclear and complicated processes and referral pathways also contribute to additional stress which negatively impacts mental health. A resource similar to the Online Homelessness Service Portal being built in WA would better enable visibility of options for service users and support organisations.

In addition to earlier intervention, we need an increased and more broadly distributed portfolio of crisis and transitional accommodation. In metropolitan areas, crisis and

transitional accommodation is often heavily condensed toward the inner metro / city area. This often leaves individuals who are outside this area with a choice between moving to obtain short term accommodation and leaving behind all organic support networks and stability or staying where they are and not receiving any housing related supports. Requiring individuals to travel well beyond their local area for housing supports also has the potential to detrimentally impact on employment and the likelihood of the customer to achieve economic and social self-reliance. Many individuals experiencing homelessness may not drive / have a car, the additional distance to travel may make it incredibly difficult to maintain employment in turn limiting an individual's ability to independently improve their situation.

2. How can governments, across all levels, best work with communities to support better housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

When answering this question, you might like to consider:

- What cultural, social and economic factors need to be considered?
- What might be the benefits of having a separate plan (or separate schedule to any new housing and homelessness agreement) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

The needs of individuals identifying as Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander will vary greatly across our diverse nation and, consequently, local consultation will be key. A consideration widely acknowledged is the preference of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals to live as close to their Country as possible, while this is not true for every individual, consideration should be given to this when determining locations where additional housing will be built or procured with the view to be able to provide this as an option. Depending upon the location, the features and construction of the house may need to be carefully considered – for example, a house in a more remote part of Australia which is intended to be occupied by a larger, more traditional family group comprising extended family may need to be more robust to sustain greater wear and tear, have additional facilities such as multiple bathrooms, larger commercial style kitchens, multi-purpose spaces which can supporting the fluctuating needs of the household etc. Housing in other locations may be more typical of standard public housing stock in terms of size and inclusions and this may be perfectly suitable in some circumstances.

In situations where large family groups are residing together due to need or preference consideration should be given to features which will reduce costs of living and maximise livability such as solar to reduce electricity costs, water tanks to maximise water efficiency /reduce bills. Consideration also needs to be given to processes surrounding maintenance – for customers of any background who may be residing in areas with limited phone or internet reception or where English is not their first language or where digital literacy is a challenge maintenance reporting processes can be unmanageable. As such, alternative options are required to enable fair and equitable access to necessary maintenance and support. This may include an ability to have a support organization process a maintenance report on the

customer's behalf or proactive maintenance management and actioning of maintenance by the housing provider.

A separate plan or schedule may be beneficial where the separate plan or schedule is underpinned by the primary plan and overlays additional considerations which would not apply as part of the mainstream agreement rather than a materially different plan overall. For example, considerations relating to housing within Aboriginal Communities may be included in a separate plan or schedule as the requirements for the situation in question would be expected to be markedly different from mainstream housing and would not be applicable to areas outside Aboriginal Communities.

3. How can all levels of governments, along with housing organisations, institutional investors, not-for-profits, and private industry, improve access to social housing, which includes public housing and community housing?

When answering this question, you might like to think about:

- What changes can be made to the current social housing system to improve outcomes for tenants and/or improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the social housing sector?
- What actions are needed now to ensure there is social housing available for people in need?
- Are there longer term policies that need to be considered to support social housing over the next 10 years?
- How can governments ensure social housing is built in the right locations (considering environmental, socio economic and cultural factors) and will meet current and future needs of social housing tenants and the broader community?

To improve access to social housing, outcomes for tenants and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the social housing sector there are several things which can be done.

Improve transparency relating to expected wait times for public housing regions across the country by using something like the interactive dashboard managed by NSW Communities & Justice. In addition to number of applications for the region and anticipated wait times the dashboard should also include details of the number of properties within a region and the number allocated / tenanted in a particular region over the past 12 months. The interactive dashboard in each jurisdiction should be updated at least quarterly to provide applicants with a clearer picture and allow them to make informed decisions when submitting or updating their applications.

To ensure there is social housing available for people in need Government will need to obtain properties at a faster rate than they can currently be built, as such, Government may need to consider a mainstream market purchase option to utilize existing homes or a head leasing arrangement to enable a larger proportion of

individuals on the wait list to be housed in the short term which will in turn alleviate some of the pressure experienced by crisis and transitional accommodation services.

To avoid a longer-term continuation of the insufficient social housing supply currently being experienced it is necessary that there be a requirement for Government to commit to continual construction / purchase to keep pace with projected need. For example, if it is anticipated that the need for social housing will grow at 6% per year over the next 10 years construction or purchase activities should meet or exceed expected demand after any property disposals are accounted for. Should the Government find themselves in a position where they have surplus stock in a region which is unable to be filled, they could utilize a tender system to select a real estate agency and have the property filled via the mainstream rental market in the same way that Defence Housing Australia do in circumstances where they have surplus stock.

To ensure that current and future social housing meets the needs of key stakeholders it will be crucial for government to utilize the data available to them pertaining to need such as that available through public housing applications, SHS data, feedback from varied support organisations including Community Housing Providers, employment data and information available through local councils.

4. What should governments, private industries, the not-for-profit and community sectors focus on to help improve access to housing and housing affordability in the private market?

When answering this question, you might like to think about:

- What actions should government take now?
- Are there longer term policies that need to be considered to support an accessible and affordable housing market in the next 10 years?
- How would supply, demand and affordability challenges need to be addressed in regional, rural and remote areas?

To improve access to housing and housing affordability the Government needs to consider innovative options and expanding effective pathways. As a country we have spent an extended period treating housing as an asset class with which to achieve the creation of wealth. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that residential property investors are largely in search of the best possible return on their investments, in the short term it is unlikely that we will be able to change that but there are ways to capitalize on it. For example, an expansion of the ATO Tax Ruling being utilized by HomeGround Real Estate in partnership with Community Housing Providers may enable a middle ground where a larger proportion of affordable housing is provided without requiring property owners to completely forgo financial benefits. Given that a number of these tax rulings are already in existence further broadening this should be a quick way to potentially unlock available housing.

Longer term, policies need to be considered where all new developments regardless of size or location include a reasonable proportion of affordable housing to support

the anticipated level of need. Consideration also needs to be given to implementing a structure relating to maximum allowable rent increases like the structure utilised in the ACT in addition to modifications to Commonwealth Rent Assistance to more accurately consider the level of support required by low-income earners when it comes to being able to sustain a tenancy in the mainstream rental market.

To better manage supply, demand and affordability considerations in regional, rural and remote areas consideration must be given to the reality that these areas often represent less desirable regions for investors due to the comparably lower rate of return and increased development and maintenance costs. Partnership arrangements between government and not-for-profit developers like the model being utilized by Nightingale could be leveraged to undertake developments in these areas. Close relationships across all levels of government and the local community will be key for early identification of need and forward planning.

5. How could governments work better with industry, community services and other organisations to improve housing outcomes for all Australians?

When answering this question, you might like to think about:

- How could governments work better with your industry or organisation?
- How should communities be involved in initiatives to improve housing and homelessness in the future?

Governments could work better with industry, community services and other organisation to improve housing outcomes by acknowledging that although an organisations core business may not be housing many other organisations will see the precursors to a housing crisis present before they reach crisis point such as employment services agencies, real estate agencies, counsellors, schools.

Employment services organisations such as ours are in a position where we can work closely with customers to connect them to meaningful employment and to identify and address barriers customers may be experiencing. There are several enabling features which could be put in place to better position organisations such as ours to support customers regarding housing.

- ***An expansion of housing related expenditure allowable under the employment fund to include a provision to contribute toward arrears with the view to sustaining the tenancy. This expenditure could be capped at a pre-determined amount and only accessible a set number of times during a period.***
- ***An ability for Employment Services agencies to have referral rights to accommodation options where customers can ordinarily not self-refer.***
- ***Funding to support customers to be educated re: tenancy rights and responsibilities.***
- ***Funding for specialist support roles within employment services to assist customers to address and overcome housing related barriers.***

Communities need to be consulted early and often to identify initiatives which would make a meaningful difference in their local area. For example – the solution to housing and homelessness matters may look significantly different for a rural area with a seasonal agricultural workforce which places pressure on supply short term than it would from a metro area where the key challenge is not supply but rents which have risen beyond the point where vulnerable low-income residents can afford them.

6. How can governments, the private and community sectors, help to improve sustainable housing and better prepare housing for the effects of climate change?

When answering this question, you might like to think about:

- What is the role of housing and homelessness supports, policies and programs in responding the climate disasters?
- How can housing policies and programs support people who have been displaced due to climate disaster?
- How can governments support hazard resilient housing and housing modifications for new and existing housing?

When building new public, affordable or community housing or renovating existing stock a key consideration should be to ensure that the process leads to a product which is as sustainable, livable, and efficient as possible. Consideration should be given to aspects such as energy saving and generation features, water saving and capture features, insulation, and sound proofing among others. These aspects make properties more appealing to residents as they are more cost-effective homes to run and can, in turn, assist residents to move toward improved financial wellbeing and reduce reliance on emergency relief services. Development or modification of dwellings should consider the ‘best fit’ for the area rather than having a singular definition of what constitutes sustainable and hazard resilient housing. In some cases, developing or modifying homes to be more sustainable and hazard resilient will require greater upfront expenditure than existing methods, consideration should be given not only to upfront costs but the long-term benefits that can be achieved.

In circumstances where climate or natural disasters are experienced the housing and homelessness supports system should be expected to have a level of surge capacity to support. To ensure this, it will be necessary for policies and procedures to be in place to detail what circumstances trigger the availability of this surge capacity as well as how it will work, the nature and level of support, how support timelines are determined etc. The existence of policies and procedures which detail the supports available will provide individuals who find themselves in this situation with a level of clarity as to how they can reasonably expect to be supported during times of crisis.

7. Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

We advocate for a 'harmonised' approach to legislation, funding, reporting, portals, etc to improve consistency, reduce administration costs and increase the likelihood of success for those capable to be able to cross jurisdictions.