

# Submission to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide this response to the Australian Government's Issues Paper on Housing and Homelessness in Australia.

I am a local government officer based in Melbourne and this submission is drawn from my own work practice responding to homelessness in Australia and overseas and experience in [REDACTED] to investigate how councils can respond to rough sleeping while balancing responsibilities to the wider community.

My report, [Everybody's Business: What local government can do to end homelessness](#) is provided as an attachment to the submission.

## **To begin ... my experience working to end homelessness in local government.**

*In the summer of 2016, literally over the period of just a few weeks, homelessness – specifically, rough sleeping - became a very visible issue in Melbourne.*

*At the time I'd been managing [REDACTED] We were a small group of mainly social workers, neatly enveloped in a section of the council that focused on the welfare of city communities. We delivered a homelessness strategy that committed to develop sustainable pathways out of homelessness and our work was embedded in a protocol aligned to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.*

*When the first complaints started raising – and they were very legitimate concerns – from business owners, residents and visitors about access to property, safety and amenity we responded respectfully and worked, as required, with [REDACTED] city cleaning services, park patrols, building surveyors and local laws teams and with a wide number of homelessness agencies in the city.*

*A few months later, a major city newspaper started a campaign, running front page stories aimed at the council, to take action and clean up the city.*

*What followed over the next year played out in the headlines - a sit in protest by people experiencing homelessness at City Square, a large group and confrontations at Flinders Street Station and a Council introducing a review of the city's local laws - effectively, one of the only tools in their toolbox to address this issue. The laws proposed to limit how people used the streets and potentially fine people for rough sleeping in the city.*

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] Melbourne was a caring city and not one that criminalised homelessness.

[REDACTED] while simple geography often places Councils at the forefront of response, [REDACTED] often ill-equipped to meet the complexities of individual situations and torn by conflicting responsibilities.

*Local government most often gets involved in homelessness response when it hits crisis – when it becomes visible on our streets or in our parks and many people expect [REDACTED] to do something about it.*

*Councils are often held to account for doing too much and for not doing enough.*

*The challenge that local government faces is in the unique role that we play. [REDACTED] one organisation fulfilling many roles, responsible to many different stakeholders.*

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
*[REDACTED] limited access to funds – [REDACTED] available budgets are nothing like what the Federal, State and Territory governments hold. Traditionally [REDACTED] not been the providers of housing and social support, that are key to ending homelessness.*

[REDACTED]  
*[REDACTED] many councils encounter homelessness when it hits crisis, but few are equipped to do anything about it.*

*It was off the back of this experience that I [REDACTED] to investigate how councils can respond to rough sleeping while balancing responsibilities to the wider community. Through this, I have spoken to more than 100 government and sector workers in Australia and internationally, asking them what local government can do to end homelessness.*

*My submission below is drawn from these conversations, my personal experience and observations collected through my [REDACTED]*

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**The National Housing and Homelessness Plan is an opportunity to bring local government to the table.**

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*“When it comes to housing and homelessness, the feds have the money, the provinces have the jurisdiction, and the cities have the problem”<sup>1</sup>.*

Mike Savage, Mayor of Halifax, Canada 2022

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The development of a National Housing and Homelessness Plan is a significant step for Australia in addressing one of our most confronting social issues. No Australian should face homelessness and I commend the Australian Government for listening and working towards a goal where every person has the opportunity to realise the fundamental human right of having a home.

Through this Plan we have an opportunity to define and recognise the role that local government can play in ending homelessness and embed a new approach in prevention, early intervention and service coordination.

By recognising the role that Local Government can play, and opening targeted funding streams for the sector, the Australian government could enable the participation of a key national partner, which through a lack of money and mandate has made limited and inconsistent contribution to date.

The causes and manifestations of homelessness are complex. As the National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issues Paper notes, homelessness can affect anyone and can be caused by numerous factors<sup>2</sup>. We also know from experience that homelessness is a ‘wicked problem’ that cannot be ‘fixed’ in a simple way or solved by the action of one group<sup>3</sup>.

Collaboration is key. And while the Commonwealth, States and Territories hold legislated responsibilities and contribute significant funds towards ending homelessness, local government response has been limited to mostly local urban planning and building approvals.

As an arm of Australia's State and Territory governments, managed under individual Acts, the roles and responsibilities of local government differ from state to state. No matter the location, local government authorities in Australia play a crucial role in their communities, managing infrastructure, services and public spaces<sup>4</sup>.

It is within many of these shared community spaces – on streets, in parks, within libraries or in childcare services, where issues such as homelessness, and associated risks might become evident – where approaches to prevention, early intervention or crisis response could be deployed. But despite this close connection into communities, councils have limited mandate and often few funds to address homelessness comprehensively.

As Australia develops a National Housing and Homelessness Plan<sup>5</sup>, we have a unique opportunity to redefine homelessness prevention and reassess the role of local government in ending homelessness. The Australian Government can lead this and influence how local councils contribute to homelessness response by:

1. Acknowledging in the National Plan, Local Government's role in Australia's collaborative homelessness response.
2. Defining a prevention response that incorporates the contribution that local government can make, which includes:
  - deep local knowledge that will enable better program design and intervention
  - connections into communities that can assist in early intervention by recognising and acting on triggers leading into homelessness
  - being a trusted local partner that can drive collaboration between multiple stakeholders in delivering local homelessness response efforts
  - an ability to lead the local narrative, educate and build community understanding regarding homelessness and housing response efforts.
3. Establishing dedicated funding streams that enable local government response.

My submission to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan responds to three questions outlined in the Issues Paper and provides case studies to illustrate opportunities for consideration.

### **3.1 Homelessness**

#### Question 2:

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?

#### Question 3b:

What actions can governments take to facilitate early intervention and preventative responses?

### **3.2 Homelessness services**

#### Question 3:

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 are at risk of homelessness?

# Responses to the Issues Paper

## 3.1 Homelessness

### **Question 2. 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?**

#### **Local Government preventing homelessness**

Local government possesses untapped expertise, resources and touch points to prevent homelessness and support people who are at risk.

Often, community members will have more personal contact with their local council, than any other level of government and it is within many of these shared community spaces and places, where issues such as homelessness, or homelessness risks might become evident.

Often local government gets involved in homelessness when it hits crisis in a community, but in fact local councils have many untapped levers available to prevent homelessness in the first place.

locally built prevention approaches can identify touchpoints, help staff - especially those whose jobs are customer facing but not homelessness specific - to identify risks and trigger points in the community. Homelessness teams working within local government can then help guide interventions, bring multiple stakeholders together and help collectively establish crisis responses as needed.

International experience supports this. Newcastle City Council in the UK, whose prevention responses have been academically evaluated<sup>6</sup> and internationally awarded<sup>7</sup>, demonstrates how local councils are uniquely placed to implement prevention and early intervention activities. While the role and structure of UK local government is different to Australia, and in places like England, Scotland and Wales, local authorities have a legal duty “to take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness”<sup>8</sup> there are many elements of this approach that could inform efforts and be replicated in Australia.

#### **International Case Study 1: Councils focusing on prevention**

*The City of Newcastle in the UK demonstrates the unique and successful role that local councils can play in homelessness prevention and early intervention.*

Through their *Active Inclusion*<sup>9</sup> program, Newcastle successfully demonstrates how Councils can proactively connect across communities and utilise their existing service systems and networks to improve homelessness response.

The Council has invested heavily in prevention activities and reducing rough sleeping numbers by using local government touch points - their housing connections, as well as health, employment and financial management services for early intervention.

By providing a large number of non-housing related staff (including councillors and volunteers) with training to help identify and respond to residents who may be at risk of homelessness, they have opened up the opportunity to take action before a person loses their home or job or experiences family breakdown. Academics, [REDACTED] have identified actions like these as *primary prevention*<sup>10</sup>.

The council delivers *secondary prevention* activities, maintaining information databases and providing specialist information and advice on key issues, like housing, debt and welfare. Finally, *crisis activities* catch residents who have not previously been identified as at risk.

In addition, Newcastle fills a collaboration role in the community, working with residents and local services to develop citywide consensus and partnership on homelessness response. They routinely monitor and review the situation at a local level, to demonstrate impact and change as well as identifying opportunities for improvement and innovation.

Between 2014-15 and 2019-20, Newcastle's efforts prevented more than 24,000 households from becoming homeless<sup>11</sup>.

### **Question 3b. What actions can governments take to facilitate early intervention and preventative responses?**

#### **Supporting people at risk of homelessness**

With a wide number of responsibilities, from collecting rubbish and keeping streets clean to caring for parks, or providing maternal and child health services, local councils are in effect, many businesses in one.

A result of these diverse operations and wide reach is that local government has many touch points into a community – and these may be utilised to support people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

It may not be in their job title or standard job description, but customer-facing staff like librarians, customer relations officers, park rangers, local laws officers, who work out in the community every day, may be great allies in identifying people at risk of, or experiencing homelessness and referring people on to appropriate services. Author of *Whole Person Librarianship*, [REDACTED] notes that just as librarians help patrons access information, when it comes to offering social support “relationships are the new reference collection”.<sup>12</sup>

#### **International case study 2: Libraries responding to homelessness**

*As an arm of local government, a growing number of public libraries in the United States, and around the world<sup>13</sup>, are demonstrating that they can be effective spaces to connect, engage and respond to the needs of people at risk of, or experiencing homelessness.*

Through the nature of their jobs, librarians are likely to have many opportunities to observe and sometimes get to know individuals and, importantly, build trusting relationships that can be invaluable when connecting with people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Formal social work programs, placing trained professionals to assist staff and customers at service points like libraries are proving to be extremely effective tools to address homelessness.

[REDACTED] established the San Francisco Library's social work program about 15 years ago. She works with a group of trained peer-educators – people with a lived experience of homelessness – who connect with visitors, offer assistance and referrals into support services.

Similarly, a drug and alcohol peer navigation program in the Baltimore library is a collaboration between the local council, public library and a local training organisation. Peer navigators participate in formal training programs and gain qualifications as part of the program. In addition to providing drug and alcohol support, the peer navigators are known in the local community for their work helping people to apply for jobs, addressing food insecurity and arranging transport for health appointments.

Library social work programs are gaining traction in Australia and could offer more than 1700 alternative connection points through our public library system across the country.<sup>14</sup>

## 3.2 Homelessness Services

### **Question 3. 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 are at risk of homelessness?**

#### **Local government driving coordinated approaches**

Local councils are well-placed collaborators, connected with many partners in local communities and holding a level of trust that other levels of government may find hard to attain.

In homelessness response, internationally and in Australia, many councils are running multi-stakeholder programs, like service coordination, and providing the backbone for other network responses. Importantly, many are engaging people with lived experience to advise, improve and participate in service delivery.

Effective local responses to support people who are experiencing or are at risk of homelessness will draw on many partners and, importantly, the input from many government departments. Responding to the intersectional nature of homelessness these collaborative efforts may provide a medical, mental health or drug and alcohol response, ensure street safety and amenity, liaise with businesses, or take responsibility for people exiting institutions.

Local government is in a strong position to bring these parties together, to focus in on a local area and establish unique local responses.

Additionally, because homelessness is not limited within municipal boundaries, it makes sense for multiple councils to work together.

Opening opportunities for collaboration between councils can enable greater reach in supporting people experiencing or at risk of homelessness and might save money through the ability to establish economies of scale.

#### **International case study 3: National Government enables homelessness collaboration**

*Keeping in mind that political and legal systems are different, the UK and US provide examples of how national government can support local government and state authorities to work together on homelessness response.*

The Greater London Authority (GLA), under the Mayor of London, works across 32 London boroughs and the City of London. The GLA oversees many cross-city homelessness response programs such as StreetLink, a rough sleeper referral service; No Second Night Out, which provides immediate accommodation for people sleeping rough, and CHAIN (Combined homelessness and Information network), a multi-agency database of people sleeping rough.

Across England, Combined Authorities are set up through national legislation to allow two or more councils to collaborate and take collective decisions across council boundaries. Ten Combined Authorities have been established across the UK. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority brings together 10 local councils to work collaboratively on homelessness. Together they have created a homelessness prevention strategy, co-produced with people with lived experiences of homelessness, and those who work with them.<sup>15</sup>

In the US, the Interagency Council on Homelessness is a federal agency solely focused on preventing and ending homelessness and streamlining national response. The Council is obliged by law to develop and deliver the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness. They work with state and local government to set policy and implement at the local level.

This system aims to counter an extremely fragmented response to homelessness with disconnections between healthcare systems, housing, criminal justice, education, job training and placement. The Council works very closely with mayors all around the country, helping to build knowledge and skills as they respond to homelessness in their local areas.

### **Local government leading the homelessness narrative**

Local Government is in a strong position to use local information and expertise to educate community, businesses, partners and elected members, breaking stereotypes, raising awareness, framing issues and leading the conversation about homelessness.

Councils can also use their local knowledge and data to advocate for change, direct goodwill efforts and ultimately influence how a community responds to homelessness.

Mayors and Councillors are in a strong position to lead the public narrative about homelessness and could assist Commonwealth, State and Territory efforts to build and influence public sentiment, which is often divided and can be a major barrier in delivering homelessness and housing response.

### **International case study 4 – Changing the Homelessness Narrative**

*Local government workers in Canada have used close connections to communities to change perceptions and attitudes about homelessness.*

With close connections into communities, councils are well positioned to use local experience and expertise, to educate community, businesses, partners and elected representatives about homelessness, breaking stereotypes, raising awareness, framing issues and leading the conversation.

Local elected officials can hold significant influence in their community and in Canada, the former Mayor of Edmonton, Don Iveson, demonstrated how effective leadership at the local level could be, tackling the local homelessness situation with a sense of urgency, fostering cross community collaboration and leading a strong plan to increase housing and end homelessness. As a result, in less than nine years, his team almost halved homelessness in their local community.<sup>16</sup>

In Australia, the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors (CCCLM) has proven its ability in thought leadership and to advocate on homelessness nationally, utilising the collective power of Lord Mayors and First Ministers from across the country.

Armed with a clear mandate and funds to take action, more mayors from all across the country could do the same, representing more experiences and building local support and networks to take action on homelessness.

The fact however remains that local government could also go the other way, which has been demonstrated by a number of councils attempting to enforce bans and enacting laws to eliminate homelessness rather than find lasting solutions<sup>17</sup>.

# Recommendations

## 1. Recognise the role of local government in homelessness prevention and response.

Australia's new National Housing and Homelessness plan should recognise the contribution that local government can make in homelessness prevention, early intervention and crisis response.

This includes the ability to:

- **Know the local situation, collect data and create information sources.** These can assist community and homelessness services to better understand a local homelessness situation, enabling better program design and interventions
- **Connect into communities and recognise early indications and triggers into homelessness.** Through established programs and services, many council staff are well placed to identify triggers and assist people who are at risk of homelessness.
- **Drive local homelessness coordination.** Councils have strong connections and are trusted local partners, able to coordinate multiple stakeholders in delivering local homelessness response efforts.
- **Lead the homelessness narrative.** Using connections into the community, local government is well positioned to educate and build community understanding regarding homelessness and housing response efforts. This can eliminate misinformation that may lead to oppositional stances.

However, recognition is not enough. Noting that the experience and capacity of local councils differs across the country, any recognition needs to be backed up by the provision of funding streams.

## 2. Establish funding streams to enable local government response:

Currently, few funding streams are available to support local government efforts in homelessness response. Noting that the experience, capacity and need differs across the country, a flexible funding approach is needed to allow councils to respond in ways most appropriate to local circumstances.

The Australian Local Government Association's 2022-23 pre-budget call<sup>18</sup> to establish a grant program for affordable and social housing can be extended to include Federal Government grants aimed at addressing local homelessness action. Even small investments, such as \$100,000 per year, could make the difference between a council choosing to stop the flow of local people into homelessness or doing nothing and moving into crisis response further down the road, which can be more costly.<sup>19</sup>

Established funding streams through a dedicated grants program for local government would help councils deliver responses that will reduce homelessness in a local area and could focus on supporting:

- data collection efforts to fully understand a local homelessness situation
- the creation of information sources that can help members of the community understand and connect into services appropriate to their needs
- running information campaigns to educate and build community support for homelessness and housing response efforts
- internal staffing and training to grow knowledge and build preventative capacity
- funding for assertive outreach that incorporates homelessness as well as alcohol and other drugs and mental health services
- staffing social worker and lived experience positions in libraries and at other customer facing locations
- establishment of service coordination activities to ensure a joint-up local service response
- internal training and communications activities in the local community.

Ongoing funding opportunities for local government homelessness response efforts could also be explored through the Financial Assistance Grants program.



CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP - LEANNE MITCHELL

# Everybody's Business

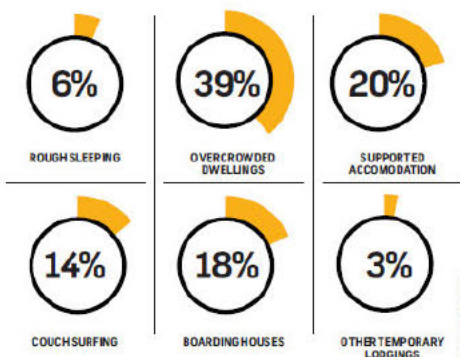


## THE SITUATION

# 122,494

people estimated homeless in Australia

- Australia has no agreed definition of homelessness and no national plan.
- Social housing stock is low across the country.
- Major parts of Australia cities and regional areas are feeling the impacts of homelessness.
- Major funding agreements on housing and homelessness are held between federal and state governments.
- Local government has no defined role in responding to homelessness.
- Communities often expect their councils to 'do something' about homelessness.



## The challenges councils face

The pressures of managing multiple responsibilities and interests. Sometimes areas of responsibility conflict.

A lack of mandate and no guidance regarding the role councils can play

Limited access to funds

A focus on crisis and missing upstream prevention opportunities

Response activities are siloed, limiting the ability to respond effectively

Navigating politics and political cycles that don't necessarily align with the timeframes needed for effective homelessness response

Balancing the use of public spaces

## The challenges government workers face

Staff carry high workloads and receive relatively low pay

Balancing the needs and rights of people experiencing homelessness against responsibilities to the wider community

Building an understanding and managing expectations regarding homelessness and response activities

Navigating the politics and community expectations of politicians

Making hard decisions and fighting for them can be a challenge in a bureaucratic establishment



*"Homelessness is just an experience and not who you are... it is not a criminal activity, not a misfortune. It is people who are going through an experience at a point in time"*



## AT A GLANCE OF ALL PEOPLE ESTIMATED HOMELESS ON CENSUSNIGHT 2021:

23% were aged between 12 and 24

14% were children under 12

44% were women

One in five was Indigenous

## GUIDELINES

# What can local government do?

### KNOW YOUR LOCAL HOMELESSNESS SITUATION

- **Collect local data:** Know your local homelessness situation. Collect data in your area and use that to make your decisions about what to do next.
- **Listen to your community:** Take time to listen and learn from your community. Know what they are doing and build your approach with them.
- **Establish a shared definition of homelessness:** Work with your partners and agree on how you jointly define homelessness. This will help align your work.

### LEAD THE NARRATIVE AND DRIVE COLLABORATION

- **Nurture community alliances:** As a council, carefully consider your role in local collaborations. If the opportunity arises step back and let the community lead.
- **Embrace lived experiences:** Look to people with a lived experience of homelessness to partner in and inform your work. They will bring a perspective and an ability to connect that you may not be able to access in other ways.
- **Involve all parts of government:** Consider which government partners will be most important to you in addressing homelessness locally and bring those people together.
- **Collaborate to address welfare, safety and amenity:** Establish coordinated partnership responses with agreed goals and well defined roles and responsibilities.
- **Communicate and educate for better outcomes:** Councils have the connections and the means to change perceptions of homeless. Make the time to tell the story.

### ORGANISE YOUR APPROACH AND YOUR WORKFORCE

- **Build a collaborative strategy:** Develop a homelessness strategy, but make sure it is not just yours. A genuine approach to collaboration will see



better outcomes for the whole community.

- **Lead good giving initiatives:** Be prepared to have tough conversations with your community about on street giving. Conversations about alternative ways of helping can redirect goodwill and see better outcomes for people experiencing homelessness.
- **Structure your teams for success:** Working in homelessness is hard. Support your staff by establishing a clear understanding of your goals and shared values.
- **Involve your mayor and senior management:** Equip your mayor and councillors with knowledge and information and involve them in your homelessness efforts to tell your local story and build support for your efforts.
- **Rethink and realign budgets:** Tight budgets may become the fundamental barrier to councils taking action on homelessness. Look for funding opportunities internally and assign funds where you can. Some lobbying of State and Commonwealth to increase their funding.

### ACT TO PREVENT AND END HOMELESSNESS

- **Know what you can do to influence housing supply:** Use planning powers in control and direct influence over your housing supply. Ensure collaboration between council planners and homelessness service staff to align efforts and create more opportunities.
- **Refocus prevention:** Make the most of the community connection points that councils hold and build organisational wide responsibility for upstream interventions that prevent homelessness.
- **Bring in your libraries and other customer service staff:** Recognise the value of your colleagues who work with your community but are not the homelessness 'experts'. With the right training and support they can help identify and respond to homelessness.
- **Know what you can offer in crisis response:** Local Government is in a good position to convene on the ground crisis response. Know where you can add value and take an informed, human rights approach that considers the needs of all members of your community.

Full report available at: <https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellow/leanne-mitchell-vic-2019/>

## Recommendations for local government

- **Make homelessness everyone's business.** Utilise Local Government's ability to connect across sectors and bring together a community, recognising that not one group or person can solve a complex problem like homelessness. Rather, a collective approach will yield better results. This also recognises that there are diverse views about homelessness, and negotiation may be required to find acceptable ways to work together.
- **Focus on homelessness beyond rough sleeping.** While street homelessness is the most visible and vulnerable experience of homelessness and obviously requires action, local government is equipped to respond to a broader experience of homelessness.
- **Recognise what you can do to prevent homelessness.** Through its structure and close connection to community, Local Government can play a much wider role in homelessness prevention. Take time to identify what factors will most likely lead to homelessness in your community. Identify the customer service points - where connection with people at risk of homelessness might take place and connect with them before they hit crisis point.
- **Educate and change the narrative.** Building understanding and empathy will go a long way. Local Government is in a good position to get the story straight on homelessness, its origins and how it impacts individuals, families and the broader community. Use your close connection to the community to educate people on the causes and impacts of homelessness on individuals and the community at large.
- **Take your seat at the table.** Lobby Commonwealth and State Governments to recognise Local Government's unique offering in responding to and ending homelessness. Future national and state level homelessness plans should include local government as a key partner. To kick this up, funds need to be made available to local councils to coordinate data collection, prevention and collaboration efforts.

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