



Yarra City Council Submission to the Federal Government's Green Paper "*Which Way Home: A new approach to homelessness*". June 2008.

Introduction

Yarra City Council acknowledges the strong positive correlation between a government's respect for human rights and its success in addressing homelessness and poverty, and encourages the Australian Government to resolve homelessness within a human rights framework.

The City of Yarra is an inner urban municipality adjacent to the City of Melbourne and covers just less than 20 square kilometres. With a population of 73,501¹ Yarra is characterised by; polarised income levels, employment rates, tenancy security and relative advantage.

Weekly household incomes in Yarra in 2006, for example, show 18.1% earn less than \$500 per week, whereas 19.9% earn more than \$2500 per week. These factors, and Yarra's inner city location, proximity to the CBD, the location of a number of community health and welfare services within the municipality, the presence of over 8000 public housing residents (the highest of any municipality in Victoria), and the historical presence of large numbers of rooming houses account for Yarra's higher than average rates of homelessness.

As stated in the *Council Plan 2008 – 2012*, "Council is committed to addressing disadvantage and inequality in our community, and seeks to ensure that resources and services are provided equitably between local government and other tiers of government, and are distributed effectively to those in need in our community."

Council's Affordable Housing Statement and Strategy 2004-2008 is based on the principle that housing is a fundamental human right and acknowledges the need for a range of affordable housing options as a key factor in maintaining the diversity of the city.

This principle informs Council's submission to the Green Paper as Council is keenly aware that the lack of exit points and housing options for people experiencing homelessness impacts on the ability of people to 'get out' of homelessness. As Johnson et al (2007) point out, being housed locates people physically and symbolically in the mainstream and emphasised their 'normality'².

¹ ABS 2006 Census

² Johnson et al, 2008, p. 175

A high proportion of Yarra's population lives in insecure and marginal accommodation. According to Council's Homelessness Services Study conducted in 2003, our rate of homelessness is estimated at 5 to 6 times the rate in the Melbourne metropolitan area with an estimated 1200 of the 3500 homeless people in inner Melbourne as reported in the 2001 census. There are 48 rooming houses with 845 beds, this is now only the remnant of an historically numerous rooming house sector in Yarra.

The Homelessness Services Study pointed to the high levels of disadvantage in Yarra, including a higher rate of disability support and recipients of sole parent benefits compared to other areas of the state. The Study found that over a five week period 348 people sought accommodation from Yarra agencies, with 36% needing long term accommodation. The majority (70%) were males, and 82% were singles. The predominance of single males is thought to reflect the target groups and services of participating agencies.

Housing stock has reached critical levels of low affordability in Yarra, with an estimated total of just 13 dwellings which are affordable to households on the lowest three income deciles (below \$46,300 earnings per year) for purchase ³).

Key Issues for a New Approach to Homelessness

A) Housing need in City of Yarra

Within the municipality there are a number of groups who are at risk of homelessness, including Indigenous people, young people, singles, families with children, older persons and people with a disability, mental health, alcohol or other drug problems, or those experiencing family violence. One group that Council has identified as potentially of critical concern is older people.

There will be an increase in population across the City per each five year cohort of people 65+ yrs during 2006 – 2016. Information provided in Council's River of Life Positive Ageing Strategy (2007) noted that age cohorts will increase by:

50- 54 yrs	13.8% +
55- 59 yrs	4.7% +
60 – 64 yrs	22% +
65- 69 yrs	40.1% +
70-74 yrs	29% +
75-79 yrs	17.6% +
80-84 yrs	22.1% +

Research conducted by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) in 2007 states that people aged 65 yrs and over in low income rental households in Australia will more than double by 2026, from 195,000 in 2001 up to 419,000 in 2026. The greatest projected change is in the 85yrs and over age range, where the number of low-income renters will almost triple from 17,300 to 51,000 in that time ⁴.

³ Johnson et al, 2008, p. 175

⁴ Parity June 2008 Vol. 21, Issue 5, p. 11

This is supported by Howe's (2003) research that estimates 20% of older people do not own their home and rent, mostly in the private sector. Howe states "that the proportion of people over 65 yrs of age in private rental, compared to public housing, has increased through the 1990s".⁵

Given the statistics quoted above, it can be predicted that many older Yarra residents will be experiencing housing insecurity as they age over the next 10 years. Whilst many residents in Yarra are wealthy "there is a great divide between the circumstances of older owners and private renters in our society and that the main message for government policy is that the highest priority should be given to obtaining housing for those who don't have secure tenure when they reach retirement age".⁶

Recommendations

1. That older people who rent in the private sector be acknowledged as a special Group, and be targeted for assistance, acknowledging the future scale of this problem if it is not addressed now.
2. That improved regulations be introduced to provide:
 - a) security of tenure;
 - b) affordable rent with cost tied to CPI;
 - c) accommodation availability;
 - d) accessible, purpose designed for suitable access and is adaptable as a person ages;
 - e) well maintained accommodation;
 - f) energy efficient design;
 - g) convenient location;
 - h) links to aged care services; and
 - i) tenant/resident participation.

B) Developing an integrated response

As stated in the Green Paper, cross-government and cross-sector approaches achieve the best results⁷. Yarra is fortunate to have some local examples of the efficacy of a cross-sectoral approach to issues of homelessness, in particular a local community health centre working with Council, Centrelink, local homelessness agencies and the Victorian Government to deliver programs based on a social model of health.

Local health providers noted that health is not strongly picked up in the Green Paper, which does not consider the health impacts of homelessness and the direct health results of sleeping rough, including physical injuries, dental health and mental illness.

Yarra is characterised as a municipality with a range of SAAP and other homelessness agencies that provide specialised programs and services for people who are experiencing homelessness.

⁵ Howe AL, 2003. "Housing an older Australia; more of the same or something different?"

⁶ Green Paper p. 42

⁷ Ibid. p. 59

Council is in agreement with findings from the Council to Homeless Persons' consultation around Victoria that 'the Green Paper did not do justice to the work of SAAP' and 'did not recognise the extraordinary work being done by the homelessness sector workers and mainstream services such as education, health and employment' to achieve 'some really inspiring and successful integrated services that they said were delivering results despite being under greater pressure than ever'⁸.

A local service provider remarked on the resources required to develop cross-sectorial responses and the lack of recognition and support from governments to undertake successful partnerships. The specialised skills within the existing SAAP service system are essential to inform an integrated response to homelessness.

At a recent meeting of a Council-convened housing and homelessness network, local service providers stressed their opinions of SAAP as successful on its own terms, particularly considering the lack of exit points, limitations on service periods and lack of funding. Council is therefore strongly supportive of any option that recognises and strengthens the capacity of SAAP as a specialist homelessness response.

Recommendation

3. That any response to homelessness recognises the interconnectedness of homelessness with other programs and services such as housing, health, employment and education, and includes a national framework to bring services together under a National Housing and Homelessness Agreement.

C) Meeting housing need

According to AIHW Bulletin 56, December 2007, SAAP agencies appear to be operating at capacity, with the demand for SAAP accommodation unable to be completely met. The most common reason that individuals or groups were turned away was because of a lack of accommodation (in 80% of valid unmet requests)⁹ The Green Paper acknowledges the need for access to stable, affordable housing¹⁰ but quickly moves beyond housing to support.

While support is necessary, the provision of adequate and affordable housing throughout the country will be crucial in addressing homelessness.

Rooming houses currently play an integral but problematic role in housing people who are homeless. The 2001 Census found that 59% of the inner city homeless were in rooming houses on census night and that 69% of short term homeless had been in a rooming house compared with 29% who had been in SAAP/THM accommodation¹¹. Until there are adequate alternatives, rooming houses will continue to provide accommodation of last resort. Providing grants per bed and other financial incentives to ensure rooming houses meet minimum social and health criteria will work towards making them more appropriate housing options.

⁸ Chamberlain 2007, p.31

⁹ Ibid. p. 6

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 59

¹¹ Chamberlain et al, 2007 p. 27

Recommendations

- 4 That the Federal Government work with state and local governments to significantly increase the supply of affordable housing stock for households on low to moderate incomes as an urgent requirement in addressing homelessness.
5. That strategies for the retention, replacement and upgrading of rooming house stock where operators meet socially responsible criteria be included in any housing policy framework to deliver affordable housing.

D) Adequately resourcing the homelessness system

Council is committed to addressing disadvantage and inequality in our community and recognises that people who are homeless deserve a service system that has the capacity and resources to meet their needs. Being treated with dignity and respect by governments is then manifested in adequate funding for services. Research shows that no matter how much discrimination is endured, and no matter how much people adapt cognitively and behaviourally to homelessness, there is always a desire to 'get out'. Specialised homelessness agencies know that even the most chronically homeless people can be helped if they are given the right assistance. This requires energy, understanding and resources¹².

To help people 'get out' of homelessness, agencies and governments need to understand the impact of long-term homelessness because it provides an insight into the capacity of people to manage on their own. Effective strategies to assist people who have been homeless long-term need to take into account the physical and psychological impact of long-term homelessness as well as the problems that led to homelessness.

This requires sufficient specialised and flexible assistance, such as the Supportive Housing model. This model, aimed at housing the most vulnerable and chronically homeless, is the basis for a demonstration project in Melbourne's CBD by City of Melbourne, HomeGround Services and Yarra Community Housing. By co-locating services with on-site staff and housing, the Supportive Housing model provides safe, affordable permanent housing that has been found to be cost-effective, and has been operating effectively for 20 years in the USA. When both support and housing are not available, people can 'fall back' into homelessness.

Recommendations

6. That the homelessness service system be sufficiently resourced to provide flexible, adequate, culturally appropriate dedicated responses that are based on best practice and are resourced to develop cross-sectoral partnerships.
7. That the Federal Government ensures that it takes account of best practice and the extensive experience of the sector in developing appropriate and innovative actions to address homelessness.

¹²Chamberlain 2007, p.31

E) A rights based approach

The Victorian Government has taken significant steps towards a rights based approach to the most disadvantaged Victorians in enacting the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities in 2008. However homelessness continues to be a profound form of social exclusion. Phil Lynch of the Human Rights Law Resource Centre found during consultation with people experiencing homelessness that above other rights, they nominated the right to participation and to be treated with respect as most important. Lynch points out that a human rights response to homelessness would firstly involve the participation of homeless people themselves in developing solutions to homelessness¹³.

In recognition of the need for people to own the solutions to their own problems, Council is proud to have supported the Homeless People's Association from 2000 to 2005. A local grass roots group of homeless people, HPA advocated for a voice for homeless people in the decisions that affect their lives.

Lynch also points to the correlation between respect for human rights and a government's success in dealing with homelessness and poverty.

Recommendations

8. That any approach to addressing homelessness incorporates a human rights framework, in particular the right of people experiencing homelessness to participate directly and meaningfully in service delivery.

F) The role of local government

Local governments have an important role to play in delivering many of the outcomes required to address homelessness. These roles were largely omitted from the Green Paper, which then fails to recognise the importance of the many faceted role local governments play in their local communities.

Local governments broker local partnerships, identify needs and develop local capacities, advocate, educate and inform communities, provide forums for participation and engagement, fund local initiatives and facilitate leveraging of other sources of funding as well as providing direct services for young people, older people and families. These include services directly impacting on health and well being such as, Childcare, Family Support Services and Youth Outreach.

An example of a successful collaboration with mainstream services and of the practices of local government is Council's Aged and Disability Services 'responsive partnering' model which consists of providing Home and Community Care (HACC) funding for services directly provided by homelessness service organisations to their service users. The aim of this policy and practice is to ensure that HACC services get to people who are unable to fit into the more structured models of service delivery. Through this model HACC funding is provided to:

- a) RDNS Homeless Persons Program to ensure that personal care is accessible to homeless people living on the streets and/or in chaotic living circumstances;
- b) The Way (supported accommodation for elderly alcoholic homeless men) for flexible home care and personal care to fit into the availability of the residents;

¹³ Lynch, 2008

- c) The Cottage (residential transitional health service for homeless people);and
- d) Assessment services are provided on site at the Coolibah, a Brotherhood of St Laurence day centre for elderly homeless people.

Recommendations

- 9. That the role of local government in addressing homelessness is acknowledged in the planning and delivery of services and programs.
- 10. That a national framework clearly delineates the respective roles and responsibilities of Federal, state and local governments in addressing homelessness.
- 11. That local governments be provided with adequate and secure funding to take on any additional role within a whole of government approach to addressing homelessness.

Conclusion

The City of Yarra welcomes the Federal Government's focus on homelessness and housing affordability. The Council acknowledges this is a complex and sensitive policy area which has great significance to the future of communities across Australia. Homelessness can and does affect Australians from all walks of life and the experience in Yarra highlights this.

The importance of the issue warrants extensive consultation and engagement processes. It is of considerable concern that the short timelines meant there has been insufficient time to consult in any depth with homelessness agencies and homeless people, given the level of expertise in the municipality and the complexity of homelessness as a social issue. Nonetheless, Council has consulted locally within the given timelines and encourages the Government to seriously consider the feedback through the Green Paper processes in determining a way forward.

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