



Australasian **Housing** Institute

Submission Homelessness Green Paper June 2008

Introduction

The Australasian Housing Institute (AHI) is the professional association for those involved in and with a strong interest in social housing. Our members have greeted the publication of the homelessness Green Paper with enthusiasm and a commitment to doing what we can, as housing professionals, to help reduce homelessness. Our submission is informed by the depth and breadth of our members experience in social housing – as practitioners, researchers, policy makers, service users and advocates.

We have taken to heart the notion that this is a ‘once in a generation’ opportunity and look forward to a continuing and robust conversation about a new approach to homelessness. The Institute held two workshops with members, one in Melbourne and the other in Sydney, and we interviewed some forty members about their thoughts. The comments of members from these workshops and interviews form the basis of this submission.

This submission deals in the issues highlighted by members and is therefore not comprehensive. We did not consult our members about the three options in the Green Paper and therefore make no overt comment about them. Instead we focus on some key messages and a small number of approaches which we believe are important in any discussion about how we might reduce homelessness.

There is widespread agreement that an increase in the supply of social and affordable housing is an essential foundation for a successful response to homelessness. The AHI believes that fundamental to a reduction in homelessness will be:

- A true voice for homeless people, the recognition of each individual as a person first and homeless second and a better understanding of the relationship between housing needs and the whole range of our other human needs and rights
- A massive culture change in service delivery: integrating lasting responses to the causes and impacts of homelessness into mainstream services, strengthening the policy frameworks that guide complex human services practice decisions and placing greater worth on frontline jobs, so that the very best people are implementing policy
- Major change around housing-related support, including the availability of appropriate wrap-around support for each individual and for a small number of people with specific needs the provision of long term supported housing
- Improved access to the most appropriate housing option and to the wider service system through information, facilitation and access policies within agencies; gateways and pathways that recognise homeless and potentially homeless people have a need and a right to mainstream services not just homelessness services

We expect to see some important new strategies in the White Paper and for the debate to continue. Even issues where there seems to be a broad consensus will benefit from further research, thinking and debate before we commit to action.

Our approach is to keep this submission simple and short. At any stage we are very happy to provide more detail on any matter we raise, particularly the housing-related support program.

Key Issues

A national plan

The Institute fully supports principles outlined in the Green Paper about a national commitment and strong leadership, joined up policy, evidence based policy and setting targets to reduce homelessness and build accountability.

Our members suggest that within the National Affordable Housing Agreement we need a national plan that can be actioned locally. This plan would include all participating agencies, not just housing organisations and lay out the responsibilities and protocols for achieving joined up service delivery to reduce homelessness.

We draw on recent UK experience where the integration of social service systems has been integral to the National Plan for Social Exclusion (UK Cabinet Office, 2006). A wide range and number of service systems are generally engaged in homelessness ventures, in particular housing, welfare and health. Better integration across the entire service systems will assist in addressing social exclusion, and in particular in establishing effective prevention and intervention strategies to address homelessness. It is critical that a national homelessness plan engages child protection, welfare, housing, employment, health (mental health, alcohol and other drugs) and justice (corrections) and integrates responses into mainstream service.

It is generally understood by agencies that we can often do more within existing resources by working smarter, but a national plan to reduce homelessness cannot be sustained or achieve its goals without a well targeted injection of additional funds and a government commitment to appropriate resourcing over the long-term. The support and leadership of COAG in national action on homelessness will be instrumental in effective implementation and resourcing.

Culture change

If we are to succeed in significantly reducing homelessness then we must expect to change many cultures – within mainstream services organisations, within the community, within the homelessness sector. This culture change will not be easy. There is however the right social and policy environment to give it the best chance, with the Federal Government setting a lead in modeling decent behaviour, with the raft of social reforms and the apology.

Homelessness responses are all too often siloed into a homelessness sector or seen as the responsibility of housing agencies. For mainstream services to make a significant contribution to ending homelessness there needs to be a major shift in how homelessness and homeless people are viewed. Positive culture change would involve seeing each individual as a person first and homeless second and a better understanding of the relationship between housing needs and the whole range of our other human needs and rights. This would enable the necessary shift in an approach to homelessness, one that would foster person centred policy and practice, flexibility, collaborative working and shared accountability and budgets.

Changes to policy and practice to reflect a shift in attitudes and understanding about homelessness will need to be supported by change in available training and professional

development opportunities. Alongside the service system change, a broad community education strategy about homelessness will be important. Community education about who is homeless, why and what we as a civilized society can do about it would contribute enormously to a better understanding of what homeless people need. There will always be a need for crisis responses and special services for homeless people, but in general homeless people have the same needs as housed people: appropriate housing; professionally run and staffed services; respectful, non-judgmental and non-stereotyping assistance; to be listened to and have their needs understood and responded to; to be offered informed choices; and to have their experience fed back into continual improvement of service systems.

Social inclusion

Institute members involved in developing this submission strongly support the Green Paper's emphasis on social inclusion. Social inclusion needs a long term commitment and financial investment by Governments and the community at large. The National Affordable Housing Agreement provides one opportunity for this commitment and investment to be demonstrated in the crucial area of housing.

Mainstream housing organisations have many years experience of working in neighbourhoods to improve the physical amenity of places and the dwellings themselves. They have worked with others to create employment, training and education opportunities for residents and to improve services such as childcare, child health and welfare, justice, mental health as well as general practice and other healthcare initiatives. Most importantly they have worked with residents to build individual and community capacity and resilience. Homeless people are excluded from these efforts. Those who are at risk of homelessness, for example due to violence in the home, are usually unable to be involved except in the most peripheral ways.

Those developing and implementing the government's social inclusion agenda can support homelessness strategies by clearly articulating how homeless people will have greater opportunity for education, training, work, participation and making a contribution to society

Homelessness is a shared responsibility and action must be taken by national, state, territory and local governments, by the not for profit sector, by business and by communities

Indigenous homelessness

The fact that Indigenous people are homeless at three times the rate for other Australians is yet another disgraceful statistic in the litany of Indigenous disadvantage. It is another sure sign that tackling the housing problems of ALL Indigenous communities - people in remote areas, regional centres and city dwellers - is a matter of urgency for us all. Whilst our members welcome the establishment of a Policy Commission to focus on remote Indigenous housing issues, strenuous efforts will be needed to assist Indigenous people everywhere.

Too great a proportion of Indigenous people need to use SAAP services and further hidden homelessness exists. Our members have experienced even larger numbers of people seeking

temporary shelter and support from family and community members. Overcrowding is a major consequence, with serious implications for individuals, families and communities.

In New Zealand some, mainly Pacific Islander, communities experience both chronic overcrowding and high rates of communicable diseases. Research from New Zealand shows a direct link between overcrowding and the incidence of diseases such as tuberculosis, meningococcal disease and skin complaints. This research has led to the development of the Healthy Housing Program, a joint initiative of Housing New Zealand and District Health Boards. This is a real partnership involving joint funding, planning and service delivery on the ground, with health and housing professionals working together with families and communities. We would urge the Australian government to investigate the usefulness of such a program in the Australian context to help tackle overcrowding and some of its consequences.

Overcrowding also has consequences for the tenant who takes in family and community members: too many people in one house can increase family and neighbourhood disturbance or conflict, have implications for the tenant's social housing rent payments, increase tenancy costs related to water payments or repairs, and may result in eviction for tenancy breaches.

Overcrowding is not restricted to Indigenous households. However kinship obligations, coupled with well documented disadvantage in access to mainstream services, do mean that the health and social consequences of overcrowding do disproportionately impact on Indigenous people.

Putting the person at the heart of policy, plans and practice

The Green Paper notes that people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness should be treated with dignity and respect and that the rights and responsibilities of individuals and families are paramount. Whilst the members consulted strongly agreed with these statements they felt we needed to add:

- The human rights of homeless people must be protected, particularly in the areas of income support, freedom from discrimination and to housing;
- Homeless people and those who have been homeless should have a strong and clear voice in the policy, program and service response;
- Measuring the success or otherwise of national plans, local strategies and service delivery should maintain a strong focus on service user outcomes and satisfaction;
- In some countries, homeless people have an enforceable right to be housed. Whilst we are not recommending that this be included in the White Paper, we are suggesting that it is a matter which deserves serious research and consideration.

Housing-related support

Many people who have been homeless will need support to settle into and then maintain their housing. This support should be provided in the way and for the duration people want it, but also

ensure that the nature of or ending of support is never a factor in precipitating homelessness. Our members strongly support the concept of wrap-around service in relation to housing-related support. There has long been a recognition that a clear separation of support provision from the functions of a social housing landlord is important to protect the rights of tenants and their security of tenure, and gain the best possible assistance for tenants. However, what has been termed supportive housing management practice, responsive to tenant needs that can be met by the housing provider without compromising their role as landlord, is essential to assisting tenants sustain their tenancies.

Well designed and resourced needs assessment, information provision and referral is needed for people experiencing housing difficulties that have led, or may lead, to them becoming homeless. This will lay the foundations for providing appropriate housing-related support to each person before and once they are housed. Many of our members have extensive expertise in establishing housing-related support programs and individual responses, within their organisations and in partnership with a wide range of other agencies, that ensure successful and sustainable tenancies.

The social housing sector welcomes further input into making these preventative and early intervention measures a central feature of future planning to reduce homelessness. Social housing professionals eagerly anticipate the integration of existing housing-related support responses into the national plan for homelessness and to the provision of appropriate long term resourcing to expand and support such initiatives.

Professional development

The Green Paper rightly identifies workforce issues as an important element in reducing homelessness. The relevant workforce extends across the entire social services system, across government and non-government organisations, and within business and the wider community. We recommend some key tasks be undertaken quickly.

Firstly, develop a national homelessness workforce plan, led by a taskforce made up of leaders in the homelessness, social inclusion, trade union and professional development fields. This plan would ideally be aligned with a national social housing workforce plan.

Secondly, make a start on providing better education and training options for everyone working in the services people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness need. A short term task would be to map the available education and training options against the job requirements of people currently identified as working with people who are homeless, and to develop some training options in addition to the training currently provided by the SAAP training units in state government agencies.

Thirdly, fund a professional development program for everyone working with people who are homeless about important new social inclusion, homelessness and social housing approaches in Australia and overseas.

Crisis accommodation

It will be a very long time before we no longer need crisis accommodation for homeless people. We need to ensure that this strand of work is not downgraded to make room for prevention and early intervention strategies. Australia has some excellent homelessness services. We should build on our strengths in this area to ensure a rock solid crisis accommodation system is in place for those people not reached by prevention or early intervention strategies. For example, women and children must have a safe place to escape to when faced with domestic violence, and similarly for the elderly or vulnerable faced with family violence, for young people forced to leave home or for people facing mental health crises that have resulted in the loss of their housing.

Crisis accommodation may no longer be the centerpiece of the approach to homelessness, but it will remain a vital piece of the puzzle. We should continue to strive to do it better: to make the accommodation a nicer place for people to stay and the first step on a clearly defined and quickly implemented pathway to permanent housing.

Our members note that young people are often in transit for many years and their mobility and need for temporary housing options to accommodate periods of study, job flexibility and varied life experience should not be confused with homelessness. In addition to crisis accommodation responses, flexible medium term housing options such as foyers, student hostels and lodgings have a continued role in the housing system.

Goals and Targets

Institute members are supportive of the Green Paper's contention that goals and targets for reducing homelessness should be ambitious and achievable. Members have suggested some targets

- increase the supply of social and affordable housing by 10% each year
- reduce homelessness by 70% by 2020 (an annual reduction of 10% each year on the previous year over 12 years) – an overall measure of the success of the homelessness plan
- fewer people moving from stable forms of accommodation to crisis accommodation – a measure of the success of prevention and early intervention strategies
- fewer people sleeping rough
- fewer people staying in temporary accommodation. For some groups a reduction in the average duration of periods of homelessness and a reduction in repeated periods of homelessness may be more appropriate measures than absolute numbers on any night.
- a reduction in the average length of stay in crisis accommodation, in particular for children and for people with complex needs
- no more than 2% tenancy ends for people with support packages are as result of eviction or abandonment
- 100% children aged 2-16 in refuge accommodation attending preschool or school, and 80% young people aged 16-25 in education, training or employment by the end of their stay

Members suggested that some further specific targets should be in place for population groups disproportionately represented in the homeless population and for whom prevention and early intervention strategies could be highly successful. These groups would include refugees, prisoners and state wards.

Members were uncertain about the appropriateness of some targets suggested in the Green Paper:

- measuring a increase in the numbers of women and children remaining in own home after domestic violence incidents could, based on the premise that what gets measured gets done, see perverse policy and practice consequences for women and children for whom this option is unsafe
- measuring a decrease in the number of homeless people who were homeless as children has implications for data collection and focuses on an assumptions about a cycle of homelessness that may not offer helpful insights into the success of the homelessness plan

Suggested Approaches

The Green Paper highlights many approaches which are working well and which should be incorporated into new programs designed to tackle homelessness. Some successful initiatives mirror work happening overseas, where they have demonstrated that combinations of approaches are working to reduce homelessness.

Australia's challenge is to deliver consistency of outcomes for homeless people across the country, whilst encouraging local flexibility and innovation.

In this section we focus on three areas

1. Prevention – stop people becoming homeless
2. Early Intervention – move people out of homelessness as quickly as possible
3. Crisis response – maximise the quality of life for homeless people

1. Stop people becoming homeless

The Green Paper rightly highlights the need to prevent homelessness. The Institute's members suggest a number of key strategies, which focus on the whole community and individuals at risk of becoming homeless.

1.1 Increase the supply of affordable housing

The Institute acknowledges the important steps already taken to increase the supply of affordable housing, but would emphasize the need for a renewed focus on increasing the supply of social housing. The National Affordable Housing Agreement should set out how an increase in the supply of affordable and social housing will be used to achieve a significant reduction in homelessness.

1.2 A radical change to the way housing-related support services are

Housing workers are often frustrated by the inadequacies of the support systems they must work with. Over the years valiant attempts have been made to codify, structure, fund and implement partnerships with a wide range of agencies to deliver the support people need to live independently, to enjoy a better quality of life and to maintain their tenancies. There are many examples of success, which we can build on. Unfortunately much of it is short-lived and dependant on the individuals involved. Generally little housing-related support is available to tenants in the private sector or to home owners.

We need a national program, part of the National Affordable Housing Agreement, to fund housing-related support for people living in all tenures, which is locally planned and delivered. There is debate amongst housing workers about who should provide this housing-related support – housing organisations, specialist support providers, government services or NGOs. Most housing workers simply want the job done properly and for the program to deliver:

- better social and economic outcomes for tenants and service users;
- high quality services, which complement existing services; and
- working partnerships between human service agencies, housing organisations, service users and support agencies.

We urge the Australian government, in collaboration with the states and territories and the not-for-profit sector, to take this opportunity to undertake urgent work to develop a national housing-related support program. In doing so, we might usefully draw on the experience of the Supporting People Program in the UK.

1.3 Improve access to existing housing options, both in the private and social housing sectors

Our members suggest that we can build on some useful initiatives around the country to introduce

- a comprehensive housing information and advice service,
- a housing options assessment, which seeks to find solutions rather than exclude people from service provision,
- brokerage for a range of housing products and services,
- strengthen tenancy legislation to prevent discrimination, and
- tenancy and rent guarantee schemes in the private rental sector

Whilst many of these initiatives are already in place in most jurisdictions, it is the scale and availability which needs to be tackled. Too often these services are seen as an adjunct to the 'main game' of housing provision. Housing access strategies need a funding stream and a recognition that facilitating housing access is a core business of the housing system.

Some of our members have suggested taking this idea to the next stage, which is to establish a common access system, with multiple entry points (gateways). This system could also feature specialist housing assessment teams with particular expertise in issues such as mental health, aged care and family violence. The main benefit of this sort of system is for the service user, who would need to connect with the housing and housing-related service system only once to find options, be assessed for housing products and services, develop a housing plan and be referred to other non-housing services. Ultimately housing providers will also benefit from more streamlined access processes and from specialist input to assessment and referral.

1.4 Reduce tenancy failure and eviction resulting from financial hardship in the public and private sectors

Our members report that a significant number of homeless people, or those at risk of homelessness, are in difficult financial circumstances. There are a number of useful projects around the country to assist people improve their financial circumstances, but not all have an appreciation of the housing realities for their clients. In New Zealand two departments, Housing New Zealand and Work and Income, have placed a high priority on working together to assist mutual clients become debt free. This work has been particularly important in the drive to assist people into home ownership. There is a clear role for a collaborative working relationship between Centrelink and state and territory housing agencies and community housing organisations.

Many projects which might assist in this area have been mentioned in the Green Paper. Again it is a matter of extending pilots and projects to cover all people at risk of homelessness. One opportunity to explore is for Centrelink to play the lead role through the HOME Program, bearing in mind the potential conflict of interest in Centrelink's role in suspending benefit payments.

Financial assistance that may be needed by people experiencing financial housing stress includes:

- budgeting and debt management
- help to claim full benefit entitlements
- direct payment of rent
- furnishing their home
- support
- finding work
- resettlement support covering budgeting and practical life skills such as electricity connection
- special loans to help people get settled, for example to buy a fridge or washing machine

1.5 Help people resolve family conflicts to enable them to continue to live with and/or be supported by their family

The Reconnect Program is an excellent example of how successful intervention can prevent homelessness. There is scope to develop this idea further for young people and perhaps for other groups, such as people with mental illness or challenging behaviours.

1.6 Help people leaving institutions move into settled housing

There is clear evidence that people leaving institutional care are particularly vulnerable to homelessness. Often this group of people lack a supportive family or friendship network they can turn to for help. It is in this area that we need to see mainstream services – prisons, mental health unit, state ward managers – take a lead role in making sure that when their clients leave their care they are placed in appropriate housing, with the right type and level of support. It may be necessary for some people to move into some form of supported housing, particularly if they have on-going support needs.

This approach would involve a housing plan for every person leaving institutional care, developed with the person, the institution and the housing assessor. The length and scope of the plan would vary depending on the age and needs of the individual. It is probable that each person would also have a housing-related support plan, to prevent the chosen housing option breaking down, to establish links with mainstream agencies and provide the option for continuity of support whatever part of the housing system the person moves to. The notion of separating assessment, support and tenancy management is very important in this process.

This approach may also be appropriate for newly arrived refugees, exiting resettlement services and hostel accommodation.

2. Move people out of homelessness as quickly as possible

Early intervention means acting quickly when people are threatened with homelessness to prevent homelessness. Importantly it is also about a quick response for anyone who does become homeless, providing prompt and permanent exits from crisis and temporary accommodation or from no accommodation at all.

Changes to social housing policy at the state and territory level to allow the immediate housing of people who are homeless or who are threatened with homelessness must be explored. This should be informed by achievable rental affordability limits and expectations about who can access the private rental sector. It is not reasonable to suggest that the majority of low income households, and in particular those who have already experienced often protracted periods of homelessness, have the option of securing suitable and affordable private rental housing. In seeking immediate social housing as a means to reduce homelessness, the rate of increase in housing supply will be a critical issue. We estimate that nationally at least 2500 new lettings would be needed each year – this year's budget has funded only 600 units. The impact of targeting lettings to homeless people on the availability of lettings for people waiting for social housing but not in urgent need (possibly having an impact on the prevention of homelessness) would require careful scrutiny.

We might have to stipulate a number of lettings each year that will be targeted to assisting people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. The first step might be to establish how many people need housing from crisis services. It would be interesting to look at the feasibility of running the entire program for housing people in immediate housing need through community housing, maintaining public housing as a wait turn system.

Expanding social housing supply is not the only supply option to address immediate housing needs. A private rental subsidy program (like the Special Assistance Subsidy Program in NSW) could help people manage financially in the private rental sector for say 12 months. It may be a particularly useful option for people in transition, for example women escaping domestic violence who cannot stay in their home or neighbourhood. It gives them a breathing space to make longer term plans, time to sort out new schools, jobs and support services and to identify where they need to live in the longer term. This approach could be attached to a refuge floating support program.

Further possibilities exist for new programs to offer temporary financial assistance to help people retain their existing housing during a temporary setback. For example, in NSW the Rentstart Program has the flexibility to be used to assist with the payment of rental arrears, in situations where the tenancy is otherwise sustainable.

A new long-term supported housing program that is explicitly for people who are not yet ready to live independently, but who want and can manage some degree of independence is another immediate housing option needed to remove people from crisis accommodation and homelessness. Some long term supported housing models offer semi-residential support, for example clustered housing units with perhaps a qualified social worker living rent free within the complex contracted to offer specific and tightly negotiated support to residents. Other models involve group homes with visiting support or a residential lead tenant.

3. Maximise quality of life for homeless people

Our members endorse the statements in the Green Paper that address quality of life issues for homeless people. Approaches to what is termed in New Zealand tertiary prevention are aimed at minimising the adverse impacts of homelessness and maximising the quality of life for homeless people, in particular rough sleepers and those who have been homeless over an extended period of time. Important in this is treating homeless people at all times with dignity and respect in all their interactions with any part of the service system and ensuring the provision of necessities of life such as temporary shelter, food and medical care.

There is already a well established network of services directed at meeting the needs of people sleeping rough or using the crisis accommodation services: drop in centres, soup runs, outreach services, mobile medical centres. The reach, mix and distribution of both crisis accommodation and additional support services targeting the homeless may not always match demand, and the standard or availability of facilities may be restricted by inadequate funding levels or excessive demand.

We support a review of homelessness services to reevaluate the specialist role required in a future where homelessness has been reduced. It is important to continue to improve the quality of accommodation services and of non-residential services to meet needs for food, clothing, medical treatment, information and support. Importantly these services will be closely linked with the prevention and intervention services and offer the same access to information, advice and support available to people in temporary and more stable forms of housing.

Rough sleepers will need multi disciplinary teams to demystify the maze of available options, connect them to services, help with emergencies, provide practical assistance in areas such as harm minimisation. Many good models exist in metropolitan areas but there are fewer services in rural and regional areas, affecting Indigenous people in particular.

A difficult to resolve issue will be what services to make available for the small number of hard to assist people, those excluded from the mainstream housing or other parts of the service system because of challenging behaviours or who refuse to engage with services: spatially segregated housing causes stigma; failing to assist a person into stable housing goes against the entire thrust of the new approach to homelessness.

Conclusion

Our members caution against acting too quickly without well thought out plans for how to take the approach to homelessness in a truly new direction, but also against failing to take action quickly enough. Plans need to be developed, new resources made available, new alliances and working partnerships forged and attitudes changed without too much more preliminary research. However ongoing research should inform the implementation and review of the plan in terms of direction, scope, targets and priority areas. The Institute highlights three key research priorities:

- Understanding what happens to people over time
- Skills audit and workforce requirements
- Evaluation of the trials, pilots and models

The Institute and our members hope to play an active role in the further development of plans to address the causes and consequences of homelessness in Australia, and to significantly reduce homelessness.

For more information please contact

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