

Homelessness NSW submission to NSW Ombudsman's Office Review

October 2020

Introduction

Homelessness NSW thanks the NSW Ombudsman for the opportunity to provide comments regarding the young person unable to receive a service who was the focus of the review paper.

Homelessness NSW is a peak not for profit organisation that works with its members to prevent and reduce homelessness across NSW. Our members include small, locally based community organisations, multiservice agencies with a regional reach and large State-wide service providers.

Our vision is a state where no one is experiencing homelessness and no one is at risk of homelessness and where there is affordable and safe housing for all with access to a range of community and support services.

Our purpose is to advocate and provide leadership on homelessness issues across NSW and to support effective service delivery to those who are experiencing homelessness, have experienced homelessness or are at risk of homelessness.

Accordingly, you can imagine our concern when reading of the young person unable to access an appropriate service in 2018. We hope that this matter has been remedied.

Unfortunately it is all too common for people in need of a homelessness service to not obtain it. We have a crisis which is only getting worse.

Between 2011 and 2016 NSW experienced the highest rate of homelessness across states and territories with the number increasing by 37% in this period. This was significantly higher than the national increase of 14%. This was during a time of a booming economy, with Greater Sydney and many regional areas undertaking unprecedented development. New dwelling investment accounted for 5.3% of SFD in 2015-16. Growth in new dwelling investment increased at a rate of 13.0% in 2015-16. This followed a 12.2% lift in 2014-15 and was the highest annual rate of growth in dwelling investment in NSW in 13 years.

Despite this booming economy homelessness increased. The statistics below paint a picture of the growing homelessness crisis in NSW.

- The NSW Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) program saw 72,500 clients in 2018-2019. This was a 42 percent increase since the homelessness reforms in 2014-2015.

- Aboriginal people comprised nearly one third of service users in NSW in 2018-2019. This increase in proportion of Aboriginal clients accessing homelessness services had been maintained since 2017- 18.
- In NSW, 38 percent of clients are seeking support because of domestic and family violence – an increase from 31 percent four years ago. Nationally, family and domestic violence was the most common reason identified for seeking assistance – accounting for 28 percent or approximately 80,500 people.
- NSW was one of three states reporting an increase in numbers of clients experiencing family and domestic violence: recording an increase of 1,200 clients since 2017–2018.
- Young people represented 26 percent of clients in 2018-19 in NSW, an increase of 4 percent from 2017-2018. There has been an increase of 1,000 children aged 10 – 14 accessing homelessness services in NSW – a 22 percent increase in 12 months.

Unfortunately, in NSW there is little possibility of people on the lowest incomes of obtaining housing. According to Anglicare’s National Rental Affordability Snapshot, just four percent of all properties were affordable and appropriate for households on government income support payments. For households on the minimum wage it was 26 percent.

For single people it is even worse. There was just one property out of more than 69,000 that was affordable and suitable on the Snapshot weekend for people receiving Youth Allowance and only two for a single person on Newstart.

Again, the lack of social housing is also of concern. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an existing wait list of 60,000 applicants for social housing in NSW, leading to wait times in excess of ten years.

There are 240 Specialist Homelessness Services across NSW. Since the Going Home Staying Home reforms there have been significant gaps for the SHS sector including service provision to young people, women and children escaping domestic and family violence, and Aboriginal communities, no program outcomes measurement, and complicated contractual arrangements that impact on service delivery. Homelessness NSW has raised this with Ministers and the Department on numerous times over the years.

Not surprisingly given the information above SHSs have experienced an unprecedented increase in demand due to the increase in homelessness in NSW and inadequate funding to meet these needs.

NSW has the highest unmet need in Australia of 45 percent and unmet need is greater than service delivery. NSW has an average growth rate of clients of five percent compared to three percent nationally and 25 percent of the national total of clients.

NSW has now reached the point where more people who need crisis accommodation do not receive it (21,552) than those who do (18,000). And even if supported by a homelessness service, two in three clients will still be without long term accommodation or housing.

Adding to this is the [research](#) indicating an additional 16,000 people will be experiencing homelessness in NSW when the JobSeeker payment is reduced.

Response

Given the information above it is not surprising, but disappointing, that many people expecting and needing a homeless service response fail to receive the service required.

The current service system has no capacity to triage or prioritise clients. The system is often a lottery for clients, based on where they live and where they try to receive a service.

As seen from the data above there is an urgent need for investment in social housing. It is entirely unacceptable for people to wait 10 plus years for housing. The level of complexity in the life of a client increases the longer they are waiting for housing.

The best way to end homelessness is an ongoing commitment to supportive housing and housing first responses. All people experiencing homelessness should be able to receive the type of housing they require and the support they need. Until governments are willing to fund a service system capable of delivering this unfortunately individuals will miss out on a service.

Homelessness NSW welcomes the recent announcement of the NSW Government of the \$36 million Together Home response aimed at providing housing and support for up to 400 people who were sleeping rough, but unfortunately this will only scratch the surface. On Census night there were over 2,600 rough sleepers in NSW. We need Together Home multiplied by 10 to end rough sleeping.

The other key to ending homelessness is prevention. This is often referred to as turning off the tap. The NSW Government does have a policy of no exits into homelessness, but evidence would suggest it is not adhered to. According to research published in the Medical Journal of Australia 28% of rough sleepers in Sydney had been released from prison. Another 21% were from hospital, but most concerning is that 21% had been evicted from a Housing NSW property. If we are talking of people being banned and the consequence of this adding to their homelessness then this matter needs urgent action.

Homelessness NSW is pleased that services across the state are committed to service improvement, including implementing appropriate complaints management processes and engagement with service users.

Since 2018, homelessness services have participated in a sector wide client satisfaction survey that is held on an annual basis. In 2019, 56 services took part in the survey and over 1,000 clients participated with over 80% of clients agreeing that they had been informed as to how to make a complaint. Further information is available [here](#). The surveys provide sector wide findings but also individual reports that assist SHSs to better understand their own organisational service delivery and make changes to improve it. The 2020 survey had to be postponed due to COVID-19 but is currently live.

From 30 June 2024, all DCJ-funded NSW homelessness providers will hold a minimum of certificate level accreditation against the Australian Service Excellence Standards (ASES). The decision to adopt the ASES was made by DCJ in April 2018 following consultation with the sector. The ASES is a set of standards and national quality improvement program that aims to assist non-government organisations (NGOs) to improve their business systems, management practices and service delivery. The ASES self-assessment is similar to the current self-assessment against the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) Standards. The ASES

includes standards on complaints management and engagement with service users on service design and improvement.

Services have advocated for and undertaken collaborative approaches. This has most recently been demonstrated in the collaboration undertaken to ensure that people experiencing homelessness are kept healthy and well during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period homelessness services have worked collaboratively with NSW Health services, the Department of Communities and Justice and a range of NGO stakeholders to ensure that their accommodation is COVID-19 safe, that people sleeping rough are provided with temporary accommodation to keep healthy and well and that the workforce across the sector is able to respond and support clients across organisations.

Services participate in more than 7 Communities of Practice on issues ranging from domestic and family violence to the NDIS which have resulted in the production of a series of induction videos on topics and in the case of trying to improve sector knowledge of the NDIS, [practice guidelines](#) for SHSs regarding their interface with the NDIS.

Services have also led advocacy regarding broader service system issues. These include advocating regarding client 'bans' from social housing, 'bans' from Temporary Accommodation and 'bans'/management of complex clients in congregate care settings. The current housing and homelessness service system in NSW is not based on international good practice and does not provide an appropriate supportive housing approach that focuses on providing long term affordable housing alongside tailored support to assist clients to maintain that housing.

The crisis accommodation model, and particularly the congregate care model, comes with its own issues that can contribute to the wellbeing, access and outcomes for clients. Homelessness NSW would be pleased to talk to the NSW Ombudsman further regarding these issues.

Homelessness NSW understand that at times clients will not receive the service required. If this arises, these matters are should be raised with and by the Department of Communities and Justice as part of their contract management process. Increasingly Homelessness NSW believes that DCJ do not have the capacity to contract manage effectively.

As can be seen the service system has numerous deficiencies and failings. The best that homeless services do is a first come first served basis. Is this optimal? Of course not. Until we remedy the multitude of issues driving homelessness across NSW they will persist.