

Survey Analysis – Link2Home and Capacity during the COVID-19 Pandemic

13 May 2020

Introduction

In NSW, in reaction to the COVID-19 health pandemic, an emergency response to homelessness has seen an escalation of thousands of people placed in hotels and motels across the state in Temporary Accommodation (TA). While some have been sleeping rough for some time and needed an immediate health and housing response, others have been moved from crisis accommodation services to better adhere to social distancing guidelines, and there are yet more who are recently homeless due to deteriorating community conditions.

Temporary Accommodation by its very nature is only temporary. To support the NSW government to plan for and find longer-term and positive housing outcomes for the influx of people into Temporary Accommodation, the three peaks conducted a survey of New South Wales homelessness services to understand:

- current conditions for services across the state during the pandemic including levels of demand
- whether current processes in place are effective, and
- the capacity of the sector to support increasing flows of people into and out of TA.

This report is a brief analysis of data from the online survey.

About the survey

The survey was short and intended to give high level indication of casework, referrals and clients supported in TA. Due to the quick turnaround required, the survey was not tested in the field.

The survey was open for 3 business days, was voluntary and responses were recruited from across the state, through directly emailing services on the three peaks mailing lists. Not all Questions were mandatory and so the number of responses (referred to hereafter as n=) varies across questions.

A total of 89 organisations responded out of 240 organisations currently delivering homelessness services in the sector. Responses were received from every DCJ District. Four responses were either state-wide or national services.

It should be noted that responses to, and analysis of, the survey are very specific to this period of time during which the health pandemic has seen service delivery in the homelessness sector impacted in unprecedented ways.

Homelessness NSW also notes that the 'no wrong door' policy colours how services interpret and answer questions regarding capacity and referrals.

Key Findings

- While 69% confirm receiving referrals from Link2Home (herein L2H), 31% of respondents are not receiving referrals.
- Of those who are not getting L2H referrals, most (75%) report this is normal. While it is likely that most of these respondents are the services that are not funded to provide this level or type of support, qualitative data also points out that this could also be a gap in the Link2Home referral process.
- The referral process from Link2Home to services is problematic and seems patchy – many services reporting they don't get referrals until the last minute or clients are self-referring, while some services in the same DCJ District are receiving referrals and others are not.
- Majority of respondents (78%) report capacity to support Link2Home referrals despite 55% reporting being 'at capacity' for client support and casework. This discrepancy in capacity is likely driven by the current policy settings stipulating 'no wrong door'.. Despite services not have any accommodation available or capacity to support clients, they 'accept' referrals and then refer clients onwards.
- Of respondents, 28% report increased referrals from Link2Home, with 14% reporting a decrease and 59% reporting no change. This is despite a large increase in calls to Link2Home. Further data on the outcome of calls to Link2Home is needed to understand these results, and whether referrals from Link2Home are reaching services.
- Qualitative data indicates that referral pathways are changing. Some services are reporting a decrease in referrals from Link2Home, but an increase in referrals from CHPs or Housing Offices instead.
- Approximately 600 people are being supported in TA across the 87 respondents¹. If you were to view this as a sample of the sector, then you could surmise that services are supporting roughly 75% of those accommodated in TA.
- Demand has changed and shifted across the sector and complexity has increased.
- Of respondents, 38% are reporting an increase in demand for their services. A further 38% are reporting that demand for their services is at the same levels – 'business as usual', with only 24% seeing a decrease in demand.
- Overall, demand across the sector has decreased slightly since the same time last year – by 133 less 'requests for assistance'. But this isn't the whole picture. Complexity is increasing, referrals are down overall due to closure of referral pathways (early

¹ The survey question was limiting in that it asked services to count 'from today' instead of giving a firm date. As the survey was open across three business days, this impacts the clarity of the results. As it was a relatively small window of time, we can still draw an approximate.

intervention, drop-ins/walk-ins closed), and demand is shifting across the sector which some experiencing a large increase, and others a large decrease - due to the pandemic and likely for a number of reasons. These are discussed in more detail below.

- There are disparities between service experience in the same district. For example, in Hunter New England some services are reporting an increase in referrals from Link2home, and others in the same area a decrease. Some are managing higher demand for services, and others reporting a decrease in demand.
- Overall, 55% of the sector can support additional clients, ranging from 5 extra to 20 extra. As earlier, the 'no wrong door' policy would account for discrepancies here, and how services interpret the question and their responses.
- Of services reporting ability to support more clients:
 - 45% can support an additional 0 – 5 people²
 - 22% can support an additional 5 – 10 people
 - 15% can support an additional 10 – 15 people
 - 17% can support an additional 15 – 20 people
 - 1 service can support 20+, their comment being 'no wrong door policy'

Discussion regarding demand and capacity

Demand is shifting across the sector, but complexity is on the rise. Some parts of the sector have seen requests for assistance increase by approximately 300, while others are reporting a decrease by roughly the same amount. This could be because of the shift in policy direction (i.e. introduction of Assertive Outreach teams, reduction of referrals from Link2Home but increase in referrals from Assertive Outreach teams or from Housing Offices instead) , could be based on geographic/spatial factors (i.e. socio-economic status, concentration of employment type resulting in a concentration of job losses, or cost of living varying across geographic locations, even compounding crisis of drought, bushfire and health pandemic), changes in client demographics shifting referrals from 1 service to another (i.e. more young people experiencing homelessness may mean more referrals for youth specific SHS, more DV related homelessness may mean increase in demand from DV support services or women-specific refuges), etc. These factors weren't tested for in our brief survey.

Of respondents, 38% are reporting an increase in demand for their services. A further 38% are reporting that demand for their services at the same levels, with only 24% seeing a decrease in demand.

² The survey question asked respondents to select how many additional people they could support, with an option including from 0 - 5 which impacts on clarity of analysis. The data could be read as 45% of services being able to support 0 additional clients. Additionally, an overlap in the upper number and lower number of options also impacts clarity of results.

There has been, across the sector as a whole, a decrease in demand by about 130 requests for assistance in comparison to a similar time period last year³. But this is despite the closure and/or reduction of many referral pathways which were 'non-essential' such as drop-ins, early interventions services, community centres etc.

Qualitative data showed that capacity has decreased as a result of human resourcing issues in the current environment. Some services report difficulty recruiting, and others report difficulty to train new staff members.

Complexity of the work of homelessness services is on the rise. Services are spending more time dealing with complexity of clients, resulting in a reduced capacity overall. Likely prompted by the survey focus on Link2Home proposals, but also acknowledging that some of these issues existed prior to the pandemic, many services commented on Link2Home and how its recent operation has increased the complexity of their work.

Issues with referral process in Link2Home was the most commonly raised issue. These ranged from:

- Services not getting referrals, but clients self-referring
- Referrals only being received at the end of the TA period (whether it was 30 days or 5), forcing services to scramble to ensure the client wasn't made homeless again
- Difficulty using Link2Home to get TA – services spending more and more time on accessing this service
- Poor assessments by Link2Home – clients who are eligible for TA not receiving TA, resulting in services then re-advocating to Link2Home or finding alternative means to support clients.
- Inappropriate referrals
- Referrals coming from CHPs or housing offices, not Link2home

It was also noted that there was for some an increase in out of area TA clients (clients in motels being moved into pre-paid TA). As a result the complexity of working with clients was caused by: clients don't want to be in the area, have no support in the area, no links, don't feel comfortable, are working with supports in place elsewhere, pre-paid TA doesn't meet their needs e.g. people who have had traumatic experiences in shared accommodation in the past are placed in an environment that can re-traumatise them.

Complexity has also changed, diminishing capacity, due to:

- The experience of constant crisis – drought, bushfires, COVID.
- Service adaption: longer and more stressful changes to practices and working in relation to COVID and rapidly shifting information

³ There is also some ambiguity in how the question was asked but also in how services track and record this. It appears some services have counted client numbers, whereas others were looking at unassisted requests, or onward referrals.

- Change and/or reduction in accessibility of other services (AOD, mental health, DFV) due to closure, increased demand/or reduced capacity, changed delivery methods. SHSs are taking on this workload, or working with clients who don't receive this support that they would have received previously
- Slower and/or harder, to get access to support for clients and address needs (link2Home, Centrelink, Housing and Real Estate)
- Clients struggling in online environment – applications for housing, for Centrelink, etc
- Advocacy and service navigation more difficult due to changing policy context (i.e. clients not getting access to services they are eligible for, as staff don't have access to or aren't applying the most recent policy)
- Overloaded with rough sleeper referrals
- Lock down and isolation is affecting client groups in different ways – i.e. DFV more complex, loneliness increasing, shifts in mental health etc.
- Limited to no movement in short-term, transitional or affordable accommodation making housing outcomes very difficult to achieve
- Referral process from Link2Home flawed putting both client and service under pressure to do much in short timeframes, where referrals are only received at the very end of a client's stay in TA

Qualitative data also noted a few reasons as to how COVID has impacted on the community, and increased demand on services:

- People moving out from overcrowded accommodation (i.e. single mothers)
- loss of employment and gaining financial support from Centrelink etc
- Public Health Orders resulting in couch surfers being moved on, whereas they were previously welcomed

“While we have greater capacity in the TA space, this capacity has not been increased in other services, such as boarding houses, mental health teams, drug and alcohol rehabilitation to match the demand that SHS are experiencing so now there is a bottleneck in the TA space, causing problems with placing many people with complex issues in the same accommodation, requiring Police and Ambulance responses!”

- Survey Respondent

Analysis - Referrals from Link2Home

Overall, 69% of respondents report receiving Link2Home referrals. Of respondents, 78% report capacity to support Link2Home referrals, with 22% indicating no capacity. Those who reporting no capacity cited the following reasons:

- Out of area or inappropriate age group referrals
- Limited accommodation, that is appropriate (i.e. only have accommodation suitable for women, only for young people, not suitable for young people etc)

- no TA providers in LGA
- At capacity
- Can only offer limited support until have vacancy/capacity, and then offer case management

One service reported supporting such high numbers of people in TA that they had to close their books as it became unmanageable.

When asked to count the number of clients that services are currently supporting in TA, data shows:

- Total equates to 602 people,
- Of which 67 have been relocated from a service into TA, and
- Of which 338 have been placed directly from Link2Home into TA

If respondents equate to 37% of those currently delivering homelessness services, then they are supporting roughly 27% of the estimated 2200 in TA. If you view this as a sample of the sector, then you could surmise that services are supporting roughly 75% of those accommodated in TA.

Noteworthy that only 27% of SHSs are reporting an increase in referrals from Link2Home, despite a steep and significant increase of calls since COVID-19 for Link2Home. Data on outcomes for those people who contacted Link2Home would be of interest. Some qualitative data from services suggested they had contact from clients who should have been eligible but weren't assessed as so.

Geographically, those reporting increased referrals were in:

- Sydney, South Eastern Sydney and Northern Sydney District (27% of respondents)
- Hunter, New England and Central Coast District (20%)
- Western Sydney and Nepean Blue Mountains District (20%)
- Illawarra, Shoalhaven and Southern NSW District (13%)

And those reporting a decrease:

- South Western Sydney District (33%)
- Hunter, New England and Central Coast District (22%)
- Murrumbidgee, Far West and Western NSW District (22%)
- Illawarra, Shoalhaven and Southern NSW District (11%)

Who is not receiving Link2Home referrals?

For most services who are not getting L2H referrals, this is normal. Of those who responded 'no' when asked 'Are you receiving referrals from Link2Home to support people in Temporary Accommodation?', 75% noted this level of referral was 'Business as usual'. It's likely that these are services who aren't funded for this level of service, but it's clear in the qualitative data that many who should receive referrals are not, and that clients are self-referring. This is a gap in the Link2Home process.

Of those who are not receiving referrals, 82% (where n = 23) do have the capacity to support Link2Home referrals. Of those who do not have capacity to support Link2Home, they commented they only accept referrals from custody, or are not an accommodation provider.

Of all those who are not receiving referrals, 75% mention this level of 'referral' from Link2Home is normal – business as usual, while 18% are reporting this is a decrease in referrals for their service.

There would appear to be some gaps in the referral process between Link2Home and services. For example, one service reported receiving no referrals from Link2Home, but that they have been supporting a number of young people in TA who self-referred – contacting them directly after their 5 days of TA. The issue of self-referral was reflected a number of times in the qualitative data, including from those who did receive Link2Home referrals.

82% of those **not receiving referrals** are operating in Sydney and its surrounding areas, across the following districts:

- South Western Sydney District
- Sydney, South Eastern Sydney and Northern Sydney District
- Western Sydney and Nepean Blue Mountains District

There are shifts in demand across a number of areas, but the survey hasn't tested for why. For example, it is interesting to note that while South Western Sydney District as well as the Sydney, South Eastern Sydney and Northern Sydney District are listed above as those who are not receiving referrals, they are also two of the districts where services are reporting an increase in referrals. This further demonstrates that there is discrepancy within geographic locations. Factors as to why this is the case were not tested for in the survey but require further investigation. Some questions arising, among others, include:

- Are some services who should be getting referrals not receiving them from Link2Home?
- Has COVID resulted in a change of clientele accessing Link2Home (i.e. resulting an increase in a youth specific service receiving more referrals as a result of an increase in youth homelessness)?

Analysis - Service Capacity

Overall, 55% of respondents report they are at capacity in terms of client support and case work, with 45% reporting they are not at capacity.

Geographically, the services reporting they are at capacity are in:

- Hunter, New England and Central Coast District (39%)
- Sydney, South Eastern Sydney and Northern Sydney District (19%)
- Western Sydney and Nepean Blue Mountains District (16%)
- Murrumbidgee, Far West and Western NSW District (10%)
- Mid North Coast and Northern NSW District (10%)
- With one of two state-wide respondents reporting they are at capacity

These services also report that:

- 75% are receiving referrals with 25% not receiving referrals, a slightly higher proportion than the whole sample (at 69% and 31%)
- Despite being 'at capacity' they still report capacity to support referrals from Link2Home.
- Data shows they are supporting 73% of clients in TA, of total survey respondents
- Of these services, 35% report increased Link2Home referrals, compared with 28% of the whole sample
- Of these services, 49% report an increase in demand overall, compare with 39% of the whole sample

Overall, 55% of the sector can support additional clients, ranging from 5 extra to 20 extra. As earlier, the 'no wrong door' policy would account for discrepancies here, and how services interpret the question and their responses.

- Of services report being able to support more clients:
 - 45% can support an additional 0 – 5 people⁴
 - 22% can support an additional 5 – 10 people
 - 15% can support an additional 10 – 15 people
 - 17% can support an additional 15 – 20 people
 - 1 service can support 20+, their comment being 'no wrong door policy'

⁴ The survey question asked respondents to select how many additional people they could support, with an option including from 0 - 5 which impacts on clarity of analysis. The data could be read as 45% of services being able to support 0 additional clients. Additionally, an overlap in the upper number and lower number of options also impacts clarity of results.

Table 1: Survey data filtered based on responses to various questions

	Q1 - receiving referrals?	Q2 – Capacity to support referrals ?	Q3 - # of clients in TA		Q4 – change in L2H referrals	Q5 – service at capacity ?	Q6 - change in #s seeking support	Where are they?
Whole sample	Y – 69% N – 31%	Y – 78% N – 22%	Total	602	28% increased 14% decreased 59% BAU	Y - 55% N – 45%	39% increased 24% decreased 37% BAU Less 137 when compared with same time last year	
			Relocated	62				
			L2H	388				
No re L2H referrals	N – 100% (n=27)	Y – 85 % N – 15%	Total	135	7% increase 19% decrease 74% BAU	Y – 44% N – 56%	31% increase 31% decrease 38% BAU	Sydney, SE Sydney and N Sydney District (38%) SW Sydney District (25%) Western Sydney and NBM District (19%)
			Relocated	36				
			L2H	64				
No capacity re L2H referrals	Y – 71% N – 43%	N – 100% (n= 7)	Total	22	60% increase 0% decrease 42% BAU	Y – 86% N – 14%	50% increase 0% decrease 50% BAU	Hunter, New England, and Central Coast SW Sydney Sydney, SE Syd and N Syd.
			Relocated	5				
			L2H	13				
Increase in L2H referrals	Y – 92% N – 8%	Y – 75% N – 25%	Total	259	100% increased (n = 24)	Y - 71% N – 29%	74% increase 13% decrease 13% BAU	Sydney, South Eastern Sydney and Northern Sydney District (26%) Hunter, New England and Central Coast District (20%) Western Sydney and Nepean Blue Mountains District (20%)
			Relocated	16				
			L2H	156				
	Y – 58% N – 42%	Y – 100%	Total	36	100% decrease (n=12)	Y – 17% N - 83%	11% increased 78% decreased	
			Relocated	2				

Decrease in L2H referrals			L2H	29			11% BAU	South Western Sydney District (33%) Hunter, New England and Central Coast District (22%) Murrumbidgee, Far West and Western NSW District (22%)
Service at capacity for client support	Y – 75% N – 25%	Y – 69% N – 21%	Total	443	35% increased 4% decreased 60% BAU	Y – 100% (n = 48)	49% increased 6% decreased 45% BAU	Hunter, New England and Central Coast District (39%) Sydney, South Eastern Sydney and Northern Sydney District (19%) Western Sydney and Nepean Blue Mountains District (16%)
			Relocated	57				
			L2H	250				
Not at capacity for client support	Y – 62% N – 38%	Y – 90% N – 10%	Total	159	18% increased 26% decreased 56% BAU	N – 100% (n= 39)	26% increased 48% decreased 26% BAU	Sydney, South Eastern Sydney and Northern Sydney District (30%) South Western Sydney District (26%) Murrumbidgee, Far West and Western NSW District (17%)
			Relocated	10				
			L2H	88				
Increase in demand	Y – 76% N – 24%	Y – 76% N – 24%	Total	228	52% increased 5% decreased 43% BAU	Y – 71% N – 29%	100% increased (n =21) Plus 370 compared to same time last year	Sydney, South Eastern Sydney and Northern Sydney District 33% Hunter, New England and Central Coast District 19% Western Sydney and Nepean Blue Mountains District 19%
			Relocated	7				
			L2H	126				
Decrease in demand	Y – 62% N – 38%	Y – 92% N – 8%	Total	40	15% increased 53% decreased 31% BAU	Y – 15% N – 85%	100% decreased (n=13) Less 350 compared to	Hunter, New England and Central Coast District (31%) Murrumbidgee, Far West and Western NSW District (23%)
			Relocated	5				
			L2H	23				

							same time last year	South Western Sydney District (23%)
Service targeted to young people (n = 18)	Y – 61% N – 39%	Y – 67% N – 33%	Total	131	11% increased 33% decreased 56% BAU	Y – 50% N – 50%	39% increased 28% decreased 33% BAU	
			Relocated	1				
			L2H	69				
Service targeted to rough sleepers (n=13)	Y – 69% N – 31%	Y – 62% N – 38%	Total	90	31% increase 16% decrease 54% BAU	Y – 46% N - 54%	54% increase 23% decrease 23% BAU	
			Relocated	0				
			L2H	68				
Service targeted to women and children experiencing DFV (n =19)	Y -79% N – 21%	Y – 79% N – 21%	Total	101	42% increased 21% decrease 37% BAU	Y – 53% N – 47%	53% increased 26% decreased 21% BAU	
			Relocated	6				
			L2H	60				