

Answers to additional questions – Byron Shire Council

Q1. The rough sleeping cohort represents a high proportion (approx. 45%) of people experiencing homelessness in Byron Shire. This is significantly higher than the overall homelessness population in Australia where the proportion of rough sleepers is (approx. 7%). The COVID-19 pandemic has seen an opportunity for people to access temporary accommodation within the limitation of services (as detailed in Q3. below). We have seen some longer term rough sleepers take up to the opportunity to access accommodation with some maintaining the accommodation and others returning to rough sleeping.

COVID-19 has also seen an increase in rough sleepers from other parts of NSW and Australia. Byron Shire already experiences a transient nature within the rough sleeping cohort and this will no doubt be more evident once the full economic impact of the pandemic is realised. There are a number of long term rough sleepers that are sleeping in various hotspots around the Shire including dunes, beaches, parklands, and on the streets. There are also a number of travellers that have been displaced as a result of COVID-19 who are sleeping rough. This is due to employment opportunities drying up and also budget accommodation options closing down during the COVID-19 period. There has also been an increase in Australian citizens who have lost employment and subsequently their accommodation. Byron Shire continues to have some of the least affordable housing in the country. Byron Shire also experiences a high number of people who are sleeping in their vans/cars in a variety of locations. Also, through speaking to the local community centre in Byron Bay where a number of rough sleepers access food they have seen an increase in younger people accessing their services.

Q2. In urban areas such as Sydney there are a significantly higher number of services and currently more opportunities for advocacy. I feel that there may be an important role for some of the peak bodies who represent different groups across the state and not just in the major cities; for example Homelessness NSW, DV NSW, Shelter NSW, and NCOSS etc... ensuring that the voices of those in regional areas are also heard.

Q3. There is a big problem in the Byron Shire area with a lack of services to address the issues facing rough sleepers. This is particularly evident when it comes to temporary accommodation, crisis accommodation and social housing. There is currently no temporary accommodation options in the Byron Shire and people experiencing homelessness who want this assistance are being asked to travel to either Ballina (35mins drive away), Lismore (50mins), and Tweed Heads (50 mins). The amount of social housing in the Shire is very small and disproportionate to the need. This results in people experiencing homelessness having to make the decision to relocate to an area that is often away from their support networks. This is all in the context of Byron Shire having significantly high numbers in the Street Count over the past few years including being second only to the City of Sydney in the most recent count in February this year. In addition, there is a great need for a proper 'Assertive Outreach' model similar to what is being rolled out in nearby Tweed to assist in addressing the issues of people sleeping rough in the Byron Shire. Byron Shire Council has recently endorsed the reopening of support 'Homelessness Hub' and is currently seeking Expression of Interest for an anchor tenant.