

**NSW Parliament Legislative Assembly – Committee on Community Services
Inquiry into the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places
Additional Questions for Penrith City Council**

1. Can Council comment on the particular types of sleeping rough and people experiencing homelessness at the moment with COVID?

Penrith City Council understands that the number of individuals experiencing primary homelessness in Penrith Local Government Area (LGA) has declined during the COVID pandemic. Council Officers have noted this through our role in responding to community requests for outreach service assistance to individuals sleeping rough, also through ongoing liaison and communication with local service providers and Council's overall perspective of the issues occurring within the LGA through the diverse range of services provided to the community.

It can be said that this decrease in primary homelessness can be attributed to a range of dynamic factors currently in motion, this includes increased levels of service provision, flexible accommodation options, the availability of COVID specific income support and strengthened collaboration amongst a range of service providers.

Generally speaking, we observe that adult males comprise the largest cohort within the category of primary homelessness which is in line with the ABS Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness, 2016 data. More recent service data provided by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice and the funded Specialist Homelessness Services collated during this recent period will provide further insight into this question.

The service response to people experiencing homelessness within the Penrith LGA during this COVID pandemic has been effective. The NSW Government has provided a range of services and flexible options to support people in crisis during this challenging time, this includes the easing of eligibility criteria to access temporary accommodation (TA), offering a range of accommodation options such as hotels, motels, apartments for quarantine purposes that meet a range of needs and also allowing individuals and families to stay within TA for a longer period of time with more lenient case management plans in place.

The high level of collaboration that we are currently witnessing amongst service providers from community organisations and government agencies is positive. The NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) and local Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) are providing a comprehensive range of services, programs and initiatives to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness which reduces homelessness and increases wellbeing across the community.

The COVID specific income supports have assisted people to sustain tenancies and continue meeting mortgage obligations. This financial support has minimised the financial stress experienced by families and individuals and it could be said the planned reduction of these benefits on 31 December 2020 may result in increased rates of homelessness early 2021.

2. For example, we know that domestic violence is a big driver of homelessness. How do we incorporate particular experiences or particular groups of people experiencing homelessness, especially in regional and rural areas, into the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places?

As outlined in Penrith City Council's Submission to the NSW Parliament Legislative Assembly Inquiry into the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places, it is understood that this Protocol is based on a low intervention approach which may be seen in direct contrast to good practice response to victims of DFV. For future reference, it may be useful to outline incidences and occurrences in the Protocol such as DFV that require urgent intervention and overshadow the need to protect the privacy of the individual. The reviewed Protocol might include service contacts and clear diagrams demonstrating the connection between these services and explanation how they link in with the Protocol.

The Australian Institute of Criminology in their recent Statistical Bulletin 28 on the prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic state that it appears likely that the conditions and consequences associated with the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to an increase in domestic violence. These drivers of increased violence are complex, but likely involve some combination of the increased time spent at home, social isolation due to social distancing requirements and financial stressors associated with the economic impact of COVID-19.

The opportunities for women to contact and engage with domestic violence services or the police have been even more constrained during periods when social movement was restricted. To effectively respond and provide solutions to homelessness caused by FDV, it would be positive for the NSW Government to reinforce their existing commitment to fund the effective suite of DFV services currently available to community, i.e. SHS DFV services, the Staying Home - Leaving Violence Program, Start Safely and Women's DV Court Advocacy Service.

3. Would you like to comment on the lack of services sometimes, particularly in regional and rural areas?

The importance of assertive outreach support has been emphasised in Council's response to this Inquiry. As mentioned in the first part of this response, Penrith LGA (which is categorised as metropolitan) has an effective and responsive homelessness service system where collaboration and partnerships are critical. To ensure assertive outreach is effective, it requires adequate resourcing to traverse geographic expanses and operate over flexible hours. This issue would have significant impact on rural and regional areas that are large and can often be some distance away from key services.