

2012 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

Organisation: Homelessness NSW

Name: Mr Gary Moore

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Homelessness NSW

A red graphic element consisting of a long, thin, curved shape that tapers at both ends, resembling a stylized arrow or a swoosh, positioned below the text 'Homelessness NSW'.

Submission to Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters – Inquiry into the 2012 Local Government elections

Applicant Details

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Individual/Group/Organisation: Homelessness NSW
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Which stakeholder(s) do you represent: Homeless people and homeless service providers
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Homelessness NSW is a peak body representing individuals and services with an interest in homelessness in NSW. Our mission is to work towards the prevention and elimination of homelessness.

We work collaboratively with Governments, other peak bodies, community organisations and the private sector to advocate for homeless people and services that support them. Homelessness NSW plays a coordination, advocacy, policy development, leadership and information dissemination role for the homelessness sector in New South Wales.

At the time of the 2011 Census it was estimated that there were 28, 190 people homeless in NSWⁱ.

It is the mark of a healthy community how it protects its most vulnerable and disenfranchised. Being homeless is a complex issue, created by the failure of a variety of service systems. Homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless are affected by common themes that include social exclusion, an ineffective service system, lack of access to housing that is affordable to people on low incomes and a lack of support and supported accommodation services.

Being homeless is being without - without shelter, without resources, without support, without recognition, without the power to influence society. Voting gives people the ability to influence the society in which they live. For people who are homeless it is a not only their democratic right, it can also give them self-worth.

Homelessness NSW congratulate the efforts and commitment of the NSW Electoral Commission in enabling more people experiencing homelessness to participate in the electoral process; however there is more to do to ensure the democratic rights of people experiencing homelessness are recognised.

In previous submissions we have highlighted the fact that a search on the NSW Electoral Commission website for either 'homelessness' or 'homeless' would elicit no response. Unfortunately this is still the case. This is juxtaposed with the Australian Electoral Commission website, where a search using the 'homeless' takes the user to the required information.

On the NSW Electoral Commission site there is some information available under *Enrol to vote - Special Category Enrolment*. This takes the user to *Elector with no fixed address*. Many people experiencing homelessness, especially long-term homelessness, would not necessarily see themselves as 'no fixed address', but as homeless. We also believe that locating this information is unnecessarily complicated and that this could be remedied with little expense or effort.

Homelessness NSW has been informed by our members that many women escaping domestic violence are unwilling to attend polling booths and would prefer to postal vote. In regional and remote areas this is particularly an issue, as in some communities there are only 1 or 2 polling places. As such, we have been pleased to see 'fear for personal or family safety' included as a legitimate reason to use a postal vote.

During the lead up to the 2012 Local Government Election Homelessness NSW had trouble ascertaining whether the fourteen local councils conducting their own elections included a similar allowance on their postal vote application form. While the NSW EC had the postal vote application

available on their website a similar form could not be located on any of the fourteen LGA sites. This is not to say that they were not available, but that locating them was problematic.

Homelessness NSW has been unable to ascertain if all fourteen councils used similar phraseology on their postal vote applications.

In our verbal evidence to a previous inquiry we raised the possibility of the data from this form being used a part of the evidence base on the level of domestic violence. With some councils conducting their own elections we are unsure if this data will be collated uniformly. We believe that this evidence could be of value across a number of government program areas; the Homelessness Action Plan and the Domestic and Family Violence Framework among them.

Homelessness NSW supports the continued use of social media to advertise by the NSW Electoral Commission in the lead up to elections. Anecdotal evidence shows that young people experiencing homelessness extensively use social media and continued use of social media by electoral authorities should assist engagement by these people.

Similarly Homelessness NSW would support the continued use of iVote as an engagement strategy to allow, particularly, young people experiencing homelessness to participate in the electoral process. Again we are unable to ascertain the level of commitment to these strategies from the fourteen councils that conducted their own elections.

Homelessness NSW believes that if local councils are to be allowed to conduct their own elections they should comply with the current regulations and actions of the NSW Electoral Commission in regard to ensuring that people experiencing homelessness are able to fully participate in our democratic processes.

ⁱ [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/EB59F237159F7102CA257AB100170B61/\\$File/20490_2011.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/EB59F237159F7102CA257AB100170B61/$File/20490_2011.pdf)