

**Submission  
No 2**

## **INQUIRY INTO THE PROTOCOL FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE IN PUBLIC PLACES**

**Organisation:** Shellharbour City Council

**Date Received:** 12 February 2020

12 February 2020

The Chair  
Committee on Community Services  
Parliament House  
Macquarie St  
Sydney NSW 2000

### **Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places**

Dear Chair

Shellharbour City Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the inquiry into the *Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places*.

#### **Background**

At the 2016 Census, Shellharbour had a population of 68,460 (up from 63,605 in 2011)<sup>1</sup>. This population is expected to increase to 94,877 in 2041<sup>1</sup>. At the 2016 Census, Shellharbour had a total of 180 homeless people, which had increased from 134 in 2011<sup>2</sup>. Safe, secure housing is essential for good health, employment, education and community wellbeing. Shellharbour City Council adopted the *Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places* in 2013 to help ensure homeless people are treated respectfully, appropriately and are not discriminated against.

After consultation with internal Shellharbour City Council staff and external service providers, we recommend that the Committee on Community Services consider the following when conducting this inquiry. This response is focused on providing information under the specified areas with particular relevance to the Shellharbour Local Government Area (LGA).

#### **What is working well with the Protocol?**

A number of elements of the Protocol have been recognised as having a positive impact within the Shellharbour community. These include:

- Recognition of the rights of homeless people:
  - The Protocol recognises the rights of homeless people in public places and acknowledges the myriad of issues that contribute to homelessness. It also aims to protect children and young people by outlining appropriate legislative requirements to reduce the risk of harm to these specific vulnerable population groups.
  - There are clear guidelines on when to approach homeless people, which ensures they are treated respectfully and appropriately.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Census of Population and Housing*. Informed Decisions (.id), 2011

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. *2016 Census*

- Document format:
  - The document is clear, concise and easy to understand.

### **What needs to be improved in the Protocol?**

The following improvements to the Protocol should be considered by the Committee:

- Accuracy of information:
  - While the Protocol states that a formal review will be conducted every two years, this has not occurred. As a result, a number of the contact details and phone numbers are inaccurate.
- Availability and access to information and support:
  - The Protocol needs to recognise that many homeless people do not have access to a phone and, therefore, are unable to easily contact support services. Unreliable or a lack of public transport is also a barrier for Shellharbour residents, including our homeless population. In addition, many homeless people do not feel comfortable leaving their belongings to physically access services.
  - The Protocol fails to recognise that there is a lack of particular support services and others are at capacity and cannot meet the growing demand.
- Practical responses:
  - Through consultation with service providers, it was evident that providing information to homeless people can lead to tension and conflict. Further guidance on how to effectively respond to a situation if it escalates to a point of potential conflict is essential.

### **What is missing from the Protocol?**

Additional information should be considered for inclusion in the revised Protocol, including:

- Access:
  - The Protocol needs to recognise the lack of public transport options in rural and regional areas such as Shellharbour and work with agencies to provide avenues for homeless people to access the services they need.
- Community awareness:
  - Information on how to identify a homeless person would be valuable as well as how to balance the needs and interests of homeless people and community members in relation to issues such as poor hygiene or perception of safety. Enhancing community awareness around the rights of homeless people should be addressed in the Protocol.
  - Education and training around the Protocol would be beneficial to organisations and agencies, such as Transit Police. Strong anecdotal evidence suggests that people experiencing homelessness are targeted on the rail network (both on the trains and at train stations) and are often evicted.
- Practical support:
  - Recognition of the range of unique situations organisations may need to respond to is required, for example, homeless people sleeping across doorways of public buildings or poor hygiene issues.
  - The provision of localised information and a formal process would provide practical support to services and local government.

### **Other issues raised through the consultations**

A number of other issues were raised through the internal and external stakeholder consultations. While these issues do not relate specifically to the Protocol, they may have an impact on its effectiveness through addressing the complex issues surrounding homelessness and effective service provision. These include:

- Service provision:
  - Services state that older males are one of the biggest homeless demographics in the Shellharbour LGA. Currently, there are very limited referral options for this population group.
  - There is a gap in service provision for those individuals who have been released from prison but have nowhere to stay. This increases the risk of becoming homeless and then reoffending and returning to prison.
  - In many cases, homeless people have little confidence in the services, as previous referrals have not assisted them and are, therefore, reluctant to receive assistance.
  
- Complex nature of homelessness:
  - The Protocol does not address the reasons people have become homeless in order to tackle this issue. By creating an effective system that recognises the complex nature of homelessness and responds holistically will help break the cycle of disadvantage and support people to live safer and more stable lives.
  
- Access:
  - Addressing homelessness requires a long-term and systematic effort across agencies, sectors, and the community. It is essential that the NSW Government work closely with services to enhance outcomes for the homeless community. Ensuring that services are centrally located together would improve access for homeless people and create integrated support.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to comment on the inquiry into the *Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places*. If you require any further information, please contact Kathryn Baget-Juleff, Group Manager Community Connections on [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

Melissa Boxall  
**Director, Community and Customers**