

**Submission  
No 4**

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

**Organisation:** City of Newcastle

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Strategy & Engagement. SFeltham.SF  
Reference: OT2019/00480; StP2019/0448  
Phone: [REDACTED]



24 February 2020

Ms Wendy Lindsay, MP  
Chair, Inquiry into the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places  
20 Revesby Place  
**REVESBY NSW 2212**

Dear Minister

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY – COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES  
INQUIRY INTO THE PROTOCOL FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE IN PUBLIC PLACES**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission into the review of the *Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places* (May 2013).

City of Newcastle (CN) understands that homelessness is a complex socio-economic issue spanning communities and local government jurisdictions. CN provides support to the NSW Government and its agencies, who have primary responsibility for homelessness across the state, and community organisations that provide on-ground support and assistance.

CN supports the *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023* and endorses the *Housing First* and *Assertive Outreach* models as current best practice approaches to addressing homelessness.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Protocol should evolve to support and embed current best practice approaches in areas such as:

1. Contemporary social justice principles;
2. Best practice models including trauma-informed care and person-centred approach as outlined in the *NSW Homelessness Strategy* and *Assertive Outreach Guidelines*;
3. Ensuring services balance the need to protect the homeless and service providers, and provide a safe and peaceful environment for communities to live in; and
4. Collaboration and collective impact approaches to address the complex needs of rough sleepers.

The terms of reference have been addressed at **Attachment A**. Should you require any further information, please contact Sandra Feltham, Senior Community Planner on [REDACTED].

Yours faithfully

[REDACTED]

Brett Smith  
**Director Strategy and Engagement**



## ATTACHMENT A

### City of Newcastle (CN) Response to Inquiry into the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places

**a) *Whether the Protocol continues to provide an effective framework for government organisations with an operational presence in public places and for services that support people who are experiencing homelessness.***

The Protocol has formed an effective framework for how government organisations approach homeless people in public spaces.

The Department of Community and Justice (DCJ) funds the provision of specialist homeless services (SHS) in NSW and recently released the *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023* which has three areas of focus:

- Prevention and early intervention;
- Better access to support and services; and
- An integrated and person-centred system.

The *NSW Homelessness Strategy* supports current best practice approaches to homelessness. These approaches have evolved to a Housing First Model and it has been increasingly recognised that an assertive outreach model is required to engage with homeless people.

The Housing First Model prescribes safe and permanent housing as the first priority for people experiencing homelessness,<sup>1</sup> driven by a guiding principle that safe and secure housing should be quickly provided prior to, and not conditional upon, addressing other health and well-being issues. AHURI research<sup>2</sup> clearly identifies the cost saving for health services when an early intervention and assertive outreach approach is undertaken.

*Assertive Outreach Good Practice Guidelines* have recently been developed through an Industry Partnership, funded by the then NSW Family and Community Services (now DCJ) and are available at the link <https://www.homelessnessnsw.org.au/resources/new-guidelines-supporting-delivery-services-homeless-people>.

The key purpose for the practice guidelines is to equip SHS providers with the necessary tools and resources to deliver effective assertive outreach responses to people who are sleeping rough. The objectives of such a response seeks to address gaps in service provision and to assist people to potentially exit primary homelessness. It is based on a trauma informed care and practice and is person centred.

It is recognised that people experiencing primary homelessness are less likely than other homeless people to access on-site services. The lack of service utilisation may be due to individual reasons or institutional barriers.

In recognising the complex challenges of supporting this cohort within the broader homeless population, it is necessary to deliver place-based services that are targeted to effective client engagement and collaboration. Therefore, the concept of 'outreach' is used in the context of providing place-based outreach as opposed to alternative forms of outreach.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/policy/ahuri-briefs/what-is-the-housing-first-model>

<sup>2</sup> *What are the health, social and economic benefits of providing public housing and support to formerly homeless people?* (2016) Lisa Wood et al, at <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/265>

## ATTACHMENT A

### City of Newcastle Response to Inquiry into the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places

CN supports the principles, intent and implementation of the *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023*. CN recommends that the Protocol further support the best practice approaches currently being delivered by the NSW Government and DCJ.

**b) *The extent to which the Protocol is being implemented in practice by government organisations providing direct service delivery, and non-government organisations contracted on behalf of government.***

The Protocol has proven to be a useful framework, particularly when addressing place-based situations where punitive or 'move on' approaches are proposed by the community or businesses.

The Protocol enables a discretionary approach when approaching place-based challenges or when enforcing laws and regulations. Often, when place-based situations are further investigated, what appears to be homeless people turn out to be people who are known to have housing and are choosing to gather in public areas to socialise or hang out. It is easy to stigmatise people who appear 'rough' as undesirable and 'blame' or 'shame' them as homeless.

Overall, the Protocol is being implemented in principle. The practice has continued to evolve and a collaborative impact style of approach has emerged in Newcastle.

**c) *The appropriateness of the Protocol to support joint responses between government organisations, non-government organisations and local governments working in partnership to respond to homelessness.***

The *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023* sets out the NSW Government's plan for a comprehensive approach to prevent and improve the way we collectively respond to homelessness. It is a framework for action that will enable government agencies, the non-government sector, and the community to collaborate and act to reduce the impact of homelessness on individuals and improve outcomes for people and families.

For the first time, clear accountability is established across government so that all agencies and mainstream services (such as Family and Community Services, Health, Justice, and Education) share responsibility for preventing homelessness and increasing access to services for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

A partner NSW strategy is the *Future Directions for Social Housing in NSW* which aims to increase the supply of social housing in NSW through innovative programs.

In Newcastle, DCJ have recently formed a Newcastle Assertive Outreach Team which actively engages with homeless people and prioritises their access to housing, either temporary accommodation or longer-term options within social and affordable housing. Preference is for permanent and stable accommodation with community service supports as required.

Collective Impact is a framework for facilitating and achieving social change. It is a structured and disciplined approach to bringing cross-sector organisations together to focus on a common agenda that results in long-lasting change.

Collective Impact challenges the effectiveness of a fragmented unitary response by highlighting that impact is enhanced when organisations work collaboratively within a common purpose.

## ATTACHMENT A

### City of Newcastle Response to Inquiry into the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places

The Protocol would be strengthened by referring to the value of collective impact approaches and partnerships and would position the Protocol as an underpinning position statement for the *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023*.

**d) *Whether the Protocol adequately protects the rights and interests of people who are experiencing homelessness who use public places, including indigenous people and minority groups.***

The underlying social justice principles of the Protocol remains sound and could be strengthened to support current approaches to addressing homelessness. This would continue to protect the rights and interests of all people experiencing homelessness.

The rate of Aboriginal homelessness remains disproportionately high. The involvement of Aboriginal organisations in the provision of homelessness services is strongly supported.

The Protocol currently does not provide any guidance on those people sleeping in cars. A recent street count in Newcastle identified that of rough sleepers, the majority were sleeping in their cars, particularly near beaches which had amenities such as public toilets and showers. University and TAFE students have also been known to be living in their cars. CN recommends that the protocol incorporate guidance for those sleeping in cars.

**e) *Whether the Protocol appropriately balances the rights and interests of people who are experiencing homelessness with those of residents, businesses and other people and organisations using public places.***

The Protocol could be strengthened with further reference to social justice principles (participation, equity, access and rights). It is too easy for some residents, businesses and other organisations to stigmatise people who appear 'rough' as an undesirable presence and 'blame' or 'shame' them as homeless with no rights to be present in a public domain area.

**f) *Any other related matters.***

There are a number of organisations, such as some charities and church groups (often staffed by untrained volunteers) who are well intentioned in their desire to provide assistance to homeless people, but they practice in an unsafe manner and enable homelessness, rather than addressing need by a Housing First approach.

The unsafe practice examples include going to rough sleeper hotspots after dark, not providing adequate (if any) training or support to their volunteers, not undertaking sufficient background checks on their volunteers (eg WWC), providing homeless people with goods (such as blankets) which are then discarded; and either not referring people to the appropriate services or trying to undertake case management themselves.

A significant number of these groups are effective self-promoters and give an impression that they are the only group doing anything to help the homeless in their area.

One organisation, which receives a high level of donations, has recently approached CN seeking to waive licence costs to operate on community land, free electricity and water and a dump point for their wastewater. This organisation does not refer any homeless person to any SHS provider despite ongoing requests to do so.

## **ATTACHMENT A**

### **City of Newcastle Response to Inquiry into the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places**

The question that therefore arises is could the Protocol cover any community group that is reaching out to homeless people or is this beyond the scope of the Protocol. It is noted that the City of Melbourne recently developed guidelines to address challenges with grassroots organisations<sup>3</sup> and it is recommended that this be investigated to address this gap.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Protocol should evolve to support and embed current best practice approaches in areas such as:

1. Contemporary social justice principles;
2. Best practice models including trauma informed care and person-centred approach as outlined in the *NSW Homelessness Strategy* and *Assertive Outreach Guidelines*;
3. Ensuring services balance the need to protect the homeless and service providers, and provides a safe and peaceful environment for communities to live in; and
4. Collaboration and collective impact approaches to addressing the complex needs of rough sleepers.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/community/health-support-services/social-support/Pages/grassroots-organisations-homelessness.aspx>