

**OPTIONS TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO EXISTING AND ALTERNATE
ACCOMMODATION TO ADDRESS THE SOCIAL HOUSING SHORTAGE**

Organisation: Port Macquarie-Hastings Council

Date Received: 11 August 2021

11 August 2021

Submission to potential inquiry into options to improve access to existing and alternate accommodation to address the social housing shortage

Port Macquarie-Hastings Council feels the terms of reference are really too focussed on the providers.

Port Macquarie-Hastings Council's position is that they should respond to the social needs of those in need and believe that the only answer is really for the Government to:

- subsidise construction to make social or crisis accommodation an attractive economic investment
- provide greater monetary incentives to tourist accommodation providers to make emergency accommodation available when required.
- provide monetary incentives to establish small private crisis housing - providers/developments as a type of land use under a strict management framework
- set/legislate percentages on MHE's and caravan parks to provide emergency accommodation when required and identify them
- set a register of the identified crisis/emergency accommodation so that all agencies are aware of them

The Port Macquarie-Hastings region is one of the fastest growing regions on the Mid-North Coast. Like in many other towns in regional NSW, the arrival of COVID-19 and the ability to 'work from anywhere' approach has seen a migration of people from the cities to the Port Macquarie-Hastings region, which has caused a lack of housing supply, increased prices, and has squeezed locals out of the rental market.

Port Macquarie-Hastings has become an investors market, with rents skyrocketing due to the fierce competition for available properties. Data from the Department of Communities and Justice shows the median rent for the Port Macquarie-Hastings area increased approximately 15 per cent in the 12 months to March 2021, from \$395 to \$450.

This recent population growth and substantial increase in rent has been driving a rise in homelessness on the Mid North Coast as there is not enough affordable housing to meet the current demand. The Real Estate Institute of NSW shows that the residential vacancy rate for the Mid North Coast is currently 1 per cent, compared to a rate of 3.2 per cent vacancy rate in May, 2020.

The majority of people who have been left homeless and who are not sleeping rough, are sleeping in their cars or couch surfing and staying with family or friends.

The Port Macquarie-Hastings region needs more affordable housing, which in essence, is social and emergency housing. Until we get substantially more social housing built in all regions up and down the whole of the Mid North Coast, homelessness is going to be an increasing problem. In Port Macquarie-Hastings, the current wait list for social housing (as at December 2020) is five to 10 years for one or two-bedroom accommodation. For three

bedrooms, the wait jumps to 10-plus years according to the latest figures by NSW Department of Communities and Justice. There are 711 applicants on the wait list in Port Macquarie-Hastings with 93 registered as a priority.

The March 2021 floods also highlighted the lack of functional, long-term emergency housing available in the Port Macquarie-Hastings. During the crisis, there were hundreds of residents left without a home, which included young families, the elderly and those with disabilities, with limited emergency accommodation available to accommodate their needs. The lack of housing options left many staying with family and friends where possible, living in caravans or flood-affected buildings or even in tents. The effects of the floods are long term, with many residents being “homeless” for many months; those who were able to secure emergency housing were left to “hotel hop” every 3 to 5 days, which is unacceptable when they have just been through a traumatic experience, especially those who are trying to care for a family. The region still has community members that have not been able to return to their homes. We also saw that caravan parks have become an affordable option for retirees or low income families where no social housing or affordable housing was available which meant that during the floods, our most vulnerable were the most impacted.

Many residents who need emergency accommodation after a crisis need stability and normality, which include simple things such as their own cooking facilities and bathroom. Hotels and shared accommodation are not ideal for those who need long-term accommodation.

Ideally, the Government needs to provide greater monetary incentives to tourist accommodation providers such as caravan parks and private holiday rentals to make emergency accommodation available when required. This could be along the lines of an ‘emergency lease’ that when it is enacted in a time of crisis, a fixed weekly rent for a set period of time, will be paid to the provider to ensure the premises are available to only those in need of emergency housing. An insurance policy would also need to be in place to ensure the owner that the Government would cover any damages caused by those in emergency housing.

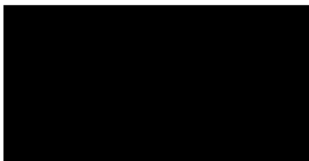
There would need to be criteria around the properties offered that they have cooking facilities, bathrooms, are clean and well maintained, private and would be available for long-term accommodation. This type of incentive would have a positive economic impact for the accommodation provider, as the Port Macquarie-Hastings strongly relies heavily on the tourist trade, which ceases to exist in times of crisis such as the March 2021 floods.

The March 2021 floods on the Mid-North Coast identified that there needs to be another model for key-workers short term accommodation. There were multiple Emergency Centres established by the NSW Government between Taree and Nambucca Heads, which were staffed from people all over the State. This meant that many hotel rooms were booked for staff, one to a room, which meant they were not available for those who were in desperate need of a roof over their heads. In instances like this, it would be more beneficial for the Government to engage in a short-term lease with a holiday house where the staff can still have their own bedrooms if required, but are sharing a house with their colleagues. By leasing a 4-bedroom house, in this instance could lead to four couples/families having accommodation, opposed to being turned away as there is no availability.

The lack support given to staff in the Emergency Centres during the floods by Community Housing to support residents was poor. The Port-Macquarie-Hastings region had approximately 2000 properties affected by the floods with hundreds of residents left temporarily homeless. The task of trying to allocate temporary housing for residents fell to Resilience NSW staff who had to phone a Community Housing hotline and they matched the resident up to the closest available vacancy. As this process was left to untrained staff to try to manage, the accommodation being allocated was not always practical or fit for purpose.

The Government needs to make the registered community housing providers accountable to those residents who need to utilise their services. More care needs be given by staff in times of crisis to those who are dealing with trauma to ensure that their needs are being met the best they can be. This means they need to have accommodation options for all situations and clarify what the individual's/family's needs are before they place them. A sick elderly man who cannot drive and needs to get to doctors' appointments should not be placed in accommodation over an hour's drive away from his home with no public transport, medical facilities or shops within walking distance, and I am sorry to say this did happen during the March 2021 Floods.

Yours sincerely



Jeffery Sharp
Director Strategy & Growth