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

Organisation: Hawkesbury City Council

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Inquiry into options to improve access to existing and alternate accommodation to address the social housing shortage

Parliament of NSW Legislative Assembly, Committee on Community Services

This submission has been prepared by Hawkesbury City Council in consultation with Specialist Homelessness Services that operate in the Hawkesbury Local Government Area.

1. Options to better support "meanwhile use" (temporary supportive accommodation), and the current major planning barriers to "meanwhile use";

There is no permanently designated Temporary Accommodation in the Hawkesbury; instead, motels are used intermittently and people are housed at these locations on a short term basis without on-site supports.

Supported Temporary Accommodation with workers in place is essential for individuals and families in the initial crisis stage of homelessness to ensure they have access to necessary support and advocacy services.

As many individuals and families accessing Temporary Accommodation have health, wellbeing and financial issues, unsupported Temporary Accommodation does not provide the support needed to transition people to more permanent housing solutions.

Temporary Accommodation facilities in the Hawkesbury can compound issues for individuals and families as these sites

- have no cooking facilities
- have very few designated rooms suitable for families
- are a significant distance from public transport and NSW Housing office
- have no support worker on site
- charges occupants for a deposit on room key (this is not offset by specialist homelessness services)

For individuals and families experiencing homelessness in the Hawkesbury, local supported Temporary Accommodation is important, as it has:

- the potential to reduce the amount of time spent in "homelessness"
- the potential to reduce the impact of trauma experienced by adults and children
- the potential to increase the speed at which people can connect with supports
- the potential to alleviate the level of disruption to families in work, health and schooling

To better support "meanwhile use" accommodation, specialist agencies should be resourced to support persons staying in Temporary Accommodation in accordance with 'Housing First' principles. The guiding principle of Housing First is that safe and secure housing should be quickly provided prior to, and not conditional upon, addressing other health and well-being issues.

There are examples of Housing First principles being applied "meanwhile use" accommodation. The key is wraparound support services being in place immediately and throughout temporary or meanwhile accommodation placements, supporting people to move to more permanent housing.

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2. Options to improve access to existing accommodation to provide community housing;

The pathway into Temporary Accommodation for a person experiencing homelessness is problematic, particularly for people who have exceeded the prescribed Temporary Accommodation limit.

Many people in Temporary Accommodation have physical access considerations that cannot be provided for within the existing sites and often individuals cannot manage without NDIS supports in place. This places strain on resources for Specialist Homelessness Services staff and organisations, who need to find alternative options. There are even less options for accessible Temporary Accommodation in the Hawkesbury.

To access Temporary Accommodation, people are subject to an assessment process that is not trauma-informed. Young people are particularly disadvantaged by this process which often requires multiple assessments questioning why they cannot continue to live at home etc, which increases trauma.

Many people speak of issues pertaining to indignity, lack of privacy, cultural inappropriateness etc. when accessing Temporary Accommodation. Some of those with lived experience of homelessness prefer to remain sleeping rough rather than access Temporary Accommodation for one or more of these reasons.

There is a lack of Temporary Accommodation options available in the Hawkesbury, creating barriers for local people who are experiencing homelessness. Many people prefer to sleep rough rather than go to Penrith or Blacktown areas for accommodation; this decision impedes their ability to obtain Temporary Accommodation further down the track as they are deemed by Department of Communities and Justice Housing to be refusing assistance and not resolving their own homelessness issues.

The lack of local Temporary Accommodation options is a likely contributor to the high numbers of people 'couch surfing' in the Hawkesbury. Young people need to remain connected to school and people of all ages want to maintain social connections; this can't be achieved if people are moved out of area.

As with most social housing/community housing placements, vulnerable individuals and families are provided with accommodation then left to their own devices. More comprehensive supports and services put in place would increase the success of individuals and families to manage a tenancy and take steps to improve their general life and wellbeing.

Options to improve access to existing accommodation include;

- provision of support to tenants by community workers not linked to the Community Housing Provider. A delineation between the housing provider and a support agency is likely to increase engagement with support services as it would reduce any perception of tenancy insecurity that is reportedly experienced when tenants need to access support services from the same agency that manages the property they live in.

- increasing the numbers of head leased properties in the private rental market by increasing funding for this program to Community Housing Providers.

- funding specialist workers to provide support to people staying in Temporary Accommodation, increasing in place support services.

3. **Option for crisis, key-worker and other short term accommodation models;**

Hawkesbury Local Government Area has a low housing projection target as compared to Greater Sydney due to its flood risk. The option most likely to deliver an increase in short-term accommodation stock is a funding approach that delivers incentives to the private market, with an adequately resourced specialist support program to assist people in crisis and short term accommodation.

4. **Barriers to additional supply across NSW, including for smaller non-CHP housing providers;**

The barriers to the provision of additional social housing and crisis accommodation are multi-faceted. In addition to funding shortfalls, community attitudes to public housing often hamper any proposed development.

The image of social housing is largely influenced by areas of public and community housing development which has resulted in clusters of poverty and disadvantage which is evident in the quality of housing and the social issues residents deal with.

An example of large-scale provision of social housing within multiple communities is that of Eden Housing in California. Housing is of good quality, is well maintained and is not identifiable readily as community housing. Creative and targeted support services are designed to support families and individuals who are provided with pathways out of poverty and disadvantage; a whole of government commitment to invest in policy and infrastructure could provide social housing under this model.

In the absence of a commitment to sustainable, long term housing solutions, increasing supply is reliant on local government stand-alone initiatives that will never achieve the quantum of additional community housing placements that has been identified as needed.

An option to improve access to existing social housing in the Hawkesbury would be for Community Housing Providers to amend policies that hamper maximum occupancy of existing housing stock, such as the current practice of singles not being able to share multiple bedroom dwellings.

5. **Support for and accountability of registered community housing providers.**

Whilst existing funding agreements of Community Housing Providers and Specialist Homelessness Services promote joint responses, Council supports a revised policy across service systems that interact with housing providers to increase the level of collaboration and accountability between the service system, such as the Human Services Outcomes Framework.

There are often multiple and complex issues experienced by many people in temporary accommodation and social housing. In addition to funding to develop a capable workforce within community housing providers, the application of the Human Services Outcomes Framework will advance collaboration and coordination across the diverse service systems that interact with people residing in community housing, ultimately improving support for and accountability of Community Housing Providers.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry for the consideration of the Committee.

Yours faithfully

Hawkesbury City Council