

OPTIONS FOR ESSENTIAL WORKER HOUSING IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Singleton Council
Date Received: 19 September 2024

Council Reference: 24/63331

19 September 2024

Committee Secretary
Legislative Assembly Select Committee on Essential Worker Housing
6 Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

To the Legislative Assembly Select Committee on Essential Worker Housing,

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY SELECT COMMITTEE ON ESSENTIAL WORKER HOUSING

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission into the inquiry into the Essential Worker Housing referred to the Standing Committee on 16 May 2024.

As the Select Committee would appreciate, the definition of essential worker is necessary to ensure legislative and planning instruments enable the provision of suitable housing as well as ensuring that the housing provided is able to be accessed by essential workers into the future.

It is also important that the definition of essential worker is expanded to include those roles that are critical to the provision of basic goods and services and are typically unable to be performed remotely. Under this definition, Council employs essential workers across a variety of sectors who provide basic services to the community to ensure their safety and wellbeing as well as enable others to participate in the workforce. Examples of essential workers employed by Council include:

- Water and sewer operators
- Landfill operators
- Road maintenance and construction operators
- Parks and facilities operators
- Rangers
- Early education workers.

Council wants people to live, work, play and invest within the Singleton LGA and not be forced to travel long distances to get to work due to housing unavailability and unaffordability.

Unfortunately, in recent years, the Singleton LGA has seen a significant decrease in housing affordability with 43% of dwellings sold in 2015 considered affordable but only 4% considered affordable in 2023. Similarly, in 2015, 60% of all rentals were considered affordable but in 2023 this had significantly reduced to 35% of all rentals. The Singleton LGA sees significant competition for housing due to nearby employment being largely in mining, defence and energy production industries, leading to a residential vacancy rate currently sitting at 0.5%.

Housing unaffordability and unavailability is reflected in Council's workforce composition where 54% of Council's workforce currently lives within the Singleton LGA, but only 17% of workers potentially classed as essential currently live within the Singleton LGA. This significantly impacts Council's ability to attract and retain workers to provide essential services to the Singleton community.

The declaration of the Hunter-Central Coast Renewable Energy Zone and the large number of associated projects, in addition to State Significant Projects including the Singleton Bypass, Hunter Gas Pipeline and Hunter Transmission Project, as well as ongoing mining industries, will all have a significant impact on short, medium and long-term housing demand and supply in the already stretched market in the Singleton LGA. It will also mean competition for housing and particularly affordable housing for essential workers will only become greater. Without significant planning to support these projects, and ensuring the continuing ability to provide for essential workers, these projects will not be successful and the Singleton community will not be able to grow and prosper.

To support Singleton in providing increased affordable housing options, Council is looking to prepare Affordable Housing Guidelines. These would be used to guide the provision of essential worker housing, ensure certainty for affordable housing providers and give Council levers for greater affordable housing availability. They would also facilitate fast tracking of approvals for this housing type and enable tracking of projects delivered. However, Council needs the support of the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure to provide funding to assist in fast-tracking this work.

Affordable or essential worker housing needs to be tracked to ensure the desired performance is achieved. Under the current planning instruments and NSW Planning Portal, it is challenging to record affordable housing accurately. However, with appropriate definitions included in the standard instruments as well as updates to the

NSW Planning Portal, it would be possible to track from application to occupation certificate; noting that housing that is regionally or state significant or provided by a public authority would need to be tracked alternatively with Council often not the consent authority. However, this would not ensure the perpetual use of the housing provided for essential workers. This requires an enforceable instrument that is not beholden upon Councils to investigate and enforce. It is essential that the NSW Government, when planning to increase supply of essential worker housing, considers appropriately planning for and resourcing ongoing monitoring to ensure housing delivered remains available to essential workers.

Council has long advocated against 'mining camps' in the Singleton LGA as a solution for temporary worker housing and would rather see permanent housing solutions to ensure investment and connection to the Singleton community. There is a potential for housing required to support the construction workforce for the current and future State Significant Developments within the Singleton LGA to be repurposed upon project completion for affordable and essential worker housing. This would enable a coordinated approach, led by the NSW Government, to ensure adequate housing is available to guarantee the success of the projects as well as the long-term provision of clearly-needed affordable and essential worker housing in the Singleton LGA.

Given the Singleton LGA includes the Department of Defence's Singleton Military Area, Council also acknowledges the role the Department of Defence currently plays in providing housing through Defence Housing. Similarly, there is the potential that in regional areas, the NSW Government could provide affordable housing under a similar model for essential workers employed by the NSW Government (e.g. police, fire, ambulance, health).

We trust that the NSW Government will continue to engage with Council to collaboratively deliver affordable housing for essential workers to ensure the continued provisions of these services to the Singleton community.

If you have any further enquiries, please do not hesitate to contact Katie Hardy, Acting Director Infrastructure and Planning Services on telephone 02 6578 7290 or email khardy@singleton.nsw.gov.au

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Justin Fitzpatrick-Barr', written in a cursive style.

Justin Fitzpatrick-Barr
General Manager