

**REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES**

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

**Virtual hearing via videoconference on Monday 17 August 2020**

**The Committee met at 9:00**

**PRESENT**

Ms Wendy Lindsay (Chair)

Mr Justin Clancy

Ms Trish Doyle

Ms Melanie Gibbons

Mr David Harris

Ms Jenny Leong

Mr Dugald Saunders (Deputy Chair)



**The CHAIR:** I start by acknowledging the Gadigal people, who are the traditional custodians of this land. I pay my respects to the Elders past and present of the Eora nation and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people who are present or who are viewing proceedings on the internet. This is our second public hearing for the inquiry into the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places. We will be hearing today from a number of organisations that are on the front line of dealing with homelessness issues, from local governments from both Sydney metropolitan and regional areas, and lastly from the Department of Communities and Justice. The Committee has resolved to authorise the media to broadcast sound and video excerpts of its public proceedings today. Copies of the guidelines covering coverage of proceedings are available. The hearing is also webcast and can be viewed on the Parliament's website.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak the New South Wales Government has spent more than \$70 million on expanded programs to help support some of the most vulnerable people in our community. Some 850 individuals and families have received assistance to rent homes on the private market and more than 1,900 individuals and families who were homeless or at risk of homelessness have moved to social housing since April, including more than 230 rough sleepers who had spent time in temporary accommodation such as hotels. Rough sleepers and street sleeping is what this inquiry is focusing on. We will hear about a number of issues today including whether the Protocol continues to provide an effective framework for interacting with people experiencing homelessness in public places, and whether the Protocol strikes the appropriate balance between the rights of people experiencing homelessness and the rights of residents, businesses and other people using public places. I now declare the hearing open.

**BRETT MACKLIN**, Director, Homelessness and Housing, St Vincent de Paul Society NSW, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**KAREN SOPER**, Manager, Homelessness and Housing, St Vincent de Paul Society NSW, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**Mr MACKLIN:** I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which I am working on today. For me that is the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. My name is Brett Macklin and I am the Director of Homelessness and Housing at St Vincent de Paul Society NSW. Today I will share a brief introduction to the work that the Society undertakes and then I will hand over to my colleague Karen Soper, who will talk about our work with people experiencing homelessness in public places in Newcastle. Based on that work, we will share our reflections on the Protocol.

The St Vincent de Paul Society has worked in New South Wales for more than 130 years, providing assistance to people experiencing poverty and disadvantage with a particular focus on supporting people at risk of homelessness. This includes delivering more than 12 service packages of specialist homelessness services across New South Wales that provide emergency and transitional accommodation for many thousands of people each year, together with support services, including drug and alcohol programs, domestic violence [DV] services, independent living skills training, access to meals and laundry services.

Through our community housing provider, Amelie Housing, we provide social and affordable housing with tailored support to meet the needs of the growing number of people locked out of the private rental market. Together with the New South Wales Government and other NGO providers the society is also a signatory to the End Street Sleeping Collaboration, which seeks to halve the number of people experiencing street homelessness by 2025 and work towards zero homelessness across New South Wales. We will also be the partner of a number of community housing providers to deliver wraparound support for people who were sleeping rough as part of the recently announced Together Home initiative.

Whilst the Society supports many people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness across New South Wales, to date, the vast majority of this work happens at one of our many community centres, hubs or emergency or transitional accommodation properties. This means our engagement with people who are experiencing homelessness tends not to be in public places. That said, our Newcastle assertive outreach program is an important exception. Through this program, we regularly engage people experiencing homelessness in public places to access housing and support. From this experience we have some learnings that we hope will inform your review of the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places. On that note I will now hand you over to Karen Soper, the manager of this service. She can reflect on how the service operates and what that means for the Protocol.

**Ms SOPER:** I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which I am working today—the Awabakal and Worimi peoples—and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. My name is Karen Soper and I am the Manager for Homelessness and Housing Services for the St Vincent de Paul Society NSW in the Newcastle region. I have responsibility for the Matthew Talbot Homeless Service in Wickham, which is a St Vincent de Paul program and is also funded by the Government as a specialised homeless service. I also have responsibility for the Newcastle assertive outreach program. That program started in August last year and is a pilot program in response to the Premier's priority to halve homelessness by 2025. It is jointly funded and delivered by the Society and the Department of Communities and Justice across the Newcastle local government area.

Both of our programs target rough sleepers and we work on an evidence-based, housing-first model. This model focuses on obtaining safe and permanent housing as a first priority for people experiencing homelessness. Once housing is secured, the caseworkers work with the individual to address complex needs by establishing wraparound support services including mental health, drug and alcohol, NDIS, trustee and guardian and other supports required. Assertive outreach is the term used when workers actively approach people on the street and offer accommodation and support services. This approach enables workers to respond directly and immediately to a person's needs by bringing services to the people, rather than waiting for individuals to come to services on their own, which is really difficult for people with complex needs. Through assertive outreach, workers engage people experiencing homelessness in the locations that they frequent, which includes streets, parks, train stations, bus stops, bridges and overpasses, vacant lots, buildings, vehicles, riverbanks and camps.

In the Newcastle local government area [LGA] we work collaboratively with the Department of Communities and Justice, the Newcastle and Lake Macquarie Councils, police, libraries, other not-for-profits, businesses as well as local community members to identify people experiencing homelessness who are sleeping

rough so that we can get them the supports they need. Specifically, where services or members of the public identify a person sleeping rough, they can lodge this on our Matthew Talbot website to report a rough sleeper. This gives us a direct email, giving us information of the location and details about the person sleeping rough. We then organise for our caseworkers to visit the person as soon as possible with a view to getting them off the streets that night. Normally we work with Housing and we contact Link2home with the person with an aim of accessing temporary accommodation, or TA. In the normal course of events everyone who is sleeping rough is able to access 28 days a year living in a local motel.

Once that initial accommodation has been arranged, our caseworkers undertake a more detailed assessment of the person's needs and immediately start working on accessing more long-term housing, which is no easy task given the lack of affordable social housing in our area. As specialised homeless service workers, we then apply the client-centred service delivery model, keeping the person at the centre of all decisions and using the trauma informed care approach. We also utilise the assertive outreach guidelines that were prepared by Homelessness NSW in collaboration with the sector. These are much more detailed documents that inform what we do and how we go about the work, and these documents incorporate principles of the Protocol. That said, we do have some comments to make about the Protocol. We agree that government agencies that employ staff or contractors who may come in contact with people who are homeless in public places should endorse the Protocol to ensure people experiencing homelessness are treated with dignity and respect, and that they receive the specialist supports that are required.

We further believe where there are rough sleepers within an LGA, the local councils should endorse and implement the Protocol. We have worked with a large number of staff in a number of councils and in doing so we know that council workers have a diversity of views, experiences and responses to homelessness. Some of them are consistent with our own informed view while others are less tolerant. We provide training to local councils and park rangers, which we find really beneficial for all parties involved. Asking councils to endorse the Protocol would go a long way to ensuring that they adopt a more progressive and consistent approach. That said, the endorsement of the Protocol online would not suffice. We think it is necessary to provide regular training to relevant staff to ensure they are familiar with the Protocol and how it should be implemented. We would like to see the New South Wales Government proactively organise and deliver training to those agencies and councils who make that endorsement. We also support training to be provided by specialist homelessness services to not only share information and positive outcomes that have come about by working collaboratively, but to build local relationships and foster that collaborative approach.

Given our staff have the training, skills and the experience necessary to understand and respond to people with complex needs, we find this collaborative approach not only leads to positive outcomes for the person sleeping rough, but the relevant staff who identify the person feels confident they have done all they could to assist the person and they have also contributed to that positive outcome. In terms of the content we applaud the Protocol for acknowledging that people experiencing homelessness have the same entitlements as any member of the public and for recognising that people experiencing homelessness must be treated respectfully and not discriminated against. We urge the Committee to ensure any updated Protocol similarly respects and protects the rights of people who are homeless.

Consistent with this respectful approach, we submit that the term "homeless people"—which is littered throughout the Protocol—should be replaced by the term "people experiencing homelessness", which reflects that homelessness is a temporary state that someone experiences, rather than being something that defines who you are. The contact numbers referred to in the Protocol on page 13 also need to be updated. The Homeless Persons Information Centre number is no longer operational. Also, updating the Housing NSW after-hours temporary accommodation link to include Link2home so people become more familiar with the service and that temporary accommodation can be accessed immediately.

The guidelines for implementing the Protocol state that:

... many areas have local services for homeless people; officials should give contact details of such services as requested by homeless people.

We would like to see this amended to reference local specialist homelessness services in particular. These services are experienced, professional, funded services with appropriate recruitment, training and support for staff, proper governance arrangements, and accountability to New South Wales Government, who provide much of the funding. We note this because there are other groups and organisations who do not apply the same professional standards, are much less accountable and, in spite of their best intentions, enable rather than overcome homelessness.

We would also like the Protocol to encourage agencies and local council staff who have contact with a person experiencing homelessness in a public place to contact the local specialised homeless service rather than

simply handing over or leaving a phone number for someone to call. It is our experience that the latter approach is not effective, especially where the person expensing homelessness does not have a phone, does not speak English or is illiterate. Adopting the former approach is much more likely to result in a specialist caseworker engaging with the person experiencing homelessness face to face, with a view of providing them with housing and support. We often work collaboratively with council rangers and other agencies to meet the person on site where the person has been sleeping rough so we can offer specialised support. This has led to many positive outcomes for people. Thank you for your attention this morning. I would normally hand back to Mr Macklin but I am not sure if he is available. Mr Macklin, I am not sure if you can hear us.

**Mr MACKLIN:** I can hear you.

**Ms SOPER:** Fantastic.

**Mr MACKLIN:** Thanks, Ms Soper. As Ms Soper described, we seek to support people to move from homelessness into stable and supported homes as quickly as possible. Before we wrap up, I would like to briefly mention that in practice in Newcastle and across much of New South Wales we find that one of the biggest barriers to doing so is a lack of social housing or appropriate exit points. Social housing should be a safety net that supports people experiencing homelessness and housing stress, but there is not nearly enough. More than 51,000 applicants or 110,000 people are on the waiting list for social housing right now. Some people have been waiting for more than 10 years. The Society acknowledges the existing investments made by the New South Wales Government, including the Social and Affordable Housing Fund Program, Communities Plus and the recent Together Home initiative, which is particularly targeting rough sleepers.

We are excited to be partnering with the Government to deliver 500 new social and affordable housing homes through the Social and Affordable Housing Fund. But with 51,000 families waiting for social housing, we respectfully submit that significantly more investment is required to reduce homelessness across New South Wales. St Vincent de Paul is asking the New South Wales Government to deliver 5,000 new social housing homes every year for the next 10 years. To do so would go a long way to reducing homelessness, particularly for those that are rough sleeping. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee this morning. I am happy to take any questions.

**Mr JUSTIN CLANCY:** Thank you, Ms Soper and Mr Macklin. Ms Soper, you spoke about the report a rough sleeper program. I was just interested in learning a little bit more about that—whether it is just Newcastle-based or State-based in that regard. And the second question, please—I really appreciate the learnings that you have spoken about. In terms of measures of success I suppose I am interested in the qualitative data—as in, the experiences of those people who are experiencing homelessness. How are they finding assertive outreach? What is their experience of that assertive outreach?

**Ms SOPER:** Certainly. So, our report a rough sleeper website is just a local initiative. It is not State-based but I think it could be really incorporated across the State. It is a really effective tool where people can get onto our website, click on the link and then they give us the details of the person—a description of the person, where they are sleeping rough and maybe if they have a dog, as well, just to be aware of safety concerns. The council rangers also use that quite a lot, and then we can go out and meet them together on the site. In the past we have even had to jump on a boat. There have been people sleeping rough in the bush that is only accessible by boat, so a caseworker will go with them. I think the benefit of that is it also helps us collect data so we are able to report back to the person as well—not giving away details, but saying, "Yes, we have seen the person. They have received assistance." So, not only does it give us data on how many people have been reported sleeping rough in those areas, we are able to report back to that person.

I think in your second part, with the outcomes, generally I guess prior to the reforms a lot of people sleeping rough would say, "I'm fine, thanks. Just leave me." And then people would leave and walk away. But we know, working on an evidence-based practice, that that person has received a lot of trauma. We only get to know small part of that, as well, working with them. But working with specialist homelessness services and workers we know there is a bigger story, so they have techniques to be able to engage with that person. We know once we get them housed—that is when they can breathe a sigh of relief and then we can put the other wraparound supports. So, we do get a lot of very positive outcomes. In the first initial engagement they are quite standoffish because they have also had some very bad experiences in the past. We find, being consistent and persistent, we do get some very good outcomes. And also, working with council rangers, we meet with them for training and then we report back to them on certain people that they have identified to us—and letting them know that that person is now housed. They may be working now. They have got the supports around them. We find that that is a really, really good feedback to find, as well.

**Mr JUSTIN CLANCY:** Thanks, Ms Soper.

**Ms TRISH DOYLE:** Thank you, Mr Macklin, and thank you, Ms Soper. I really appreciate you and your truth-telling based on experience. It is really quite refreshing, I have to say, Mr Macklin, just to say it is straight up more than 50,000 families waiting for a home. Affordable housing—and that would go some way to reducing homelessness. I think that is a statement we all need to speak over and again. So, thank you for just putting that out there and speaking the obvious. It is really important for us to do that. I just wanted to make a couple of comments and then ask a question. You honed in on training. I think that, with the Protocol, improving, adapting, amending and working alongside the Protocol for people who are at the coalface is absolutely critical. I think that training of locals is absolutely critical. As you said, too, Ms Soper—updating the referral pathways list.

On that, I hear from a lot of people—especially in my area of the mountains, where they may not be visible. People who are experiencing homelessness or at risk may not be visible. They are couch surfing. They are living in their cars. They are taking the family for a camping trip out into the bush. What they tell me and what a number of our services tell me is that the ironically named Link2home actually does not work most of the time. And so, the reliance is on local services and having that very local connection to specialist homelessness services. Is this obstacle something that you have also experienced? How can we improve those supposed one-stop shop referral points?

I think what works for us, or how we get better outcomes because it does depend sometimes on the person you speak to when you call Link2home. It is really up to the experienced caseworker to advocate for that person quite often. We bring Housing into our service to speak to us about the barriers that they face. Also, with building better connections and local relationships with people, we are finding that we are getting better outcomes that way. You spoke about the people couch surfing. For us, people can report themselves on their rough sleeping or they can make a direct referral to us. We link them in with a caseworker and then we will advocate. We would prefer not to go to temporary accommodation if we can house them straightaway. More affordable housing would make that easier and then that would make everything a lot easier.

For people who are sleeping rough in cars, we actually go out and do patrols around the streets of Newcastle, being a regional area. We do leave information there and we knock on windows. Just last year I know we housed an 83-year-old man who was sleeping rough in his car after a family breakdown. We do assertively go out looking for people and then we assertively advocate when we contact Link2home. That is the answer to that. But I think building better relationships is key. We do have very strong relationships with the local councils and that training is imperative. We go out, we provide a face, we give them details, we tell them stories about good outcomes and then we advocate, we advocate and then we advocate some more for those people.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** Do you think the current protocols properly cover readiness to be housed? Some witnesses at our last hearing raised questions about whether people had the right frame of mind to be placed in housing and that sometimes that breaks down. Do you think that protocols have enough information for users to be able to deal with those situations?

**Ms SOPER:** Sorry, just to clarify, are you saying that the person who is sleeping rough is ready to be housed?

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** Yes.

**Ms SOPER:** I think it is everybody's right to a home. It may appear that they might not be ready for housing. If I could use an example, just this week there was a man who had been rough sleeping for a long period of time in the Newcastle area. Looking at him, he was quite dishevelled, he was not wearing appropriate clothing, he had mental health issues and he had acquired a brain injury. Housing would not house him. Housing said that he was previously an unsatisfactory tenant and had left properties not in a good way. We actually have some properties that St Vincent de Paul own at Matthew Talbot. We said, "Listen, this man needs a home." The only way that we can get better outcomes for people with complex needs who are sleeping rough is firstly to put a roof over their head. We know that works. It is an evidence-based practice. That gentleman came into our accommodation probably six weeks ago and he is now looking like a different person.

With the support of specialist caseworkers he has been given a Department of Communities and Justice [DCJ] full-time permanent house, he has the NDIS wrapped around him as well now and on Friday he was able to get the NSW Trustee & Guardian involved. He has mental health now, because when you do not have a home mental health services cannot come and give you medication. They will not support you. You need a home to actually get those wraparound supports. Once he had a home they could then come and visit him. He also now has proper mental health treatment. He is so grateful. His life, as he said, is just about to start again. This is somebody that they would not house. It is just the effect that putting a roof over someone's head can have. I think we need to really focus on that Housing First model, which is the Government's approach at the moment, given the response to COVID. All of those people who were rough sleepers who were put into emergency

accommodation, we are now working towards housing them. Honestly, we can change people's lives if we take that approach.

**Mr MACKLIN:** Just to add to that, a person may never be housing ready, but I think the first stage is getting them accommodation and then you wrap the behind-level supports around that individual. When you are initially talking to someone who may be rough sleeping, having their own accommodation may be so far from what they are thinking is going to be a reality, it may not even come into their thinking. But once you house someone and they feel safe and secure with housing, that is when you can provide all of the other supports that may inhibit either sustaining a tenancy or keeping the tenancy. Then the person becomes more relaxed or they feel more safe and secure in their own environment, that is when more and more issues come out. But if you have the appropriate level of support and the support services to wrap around that individual, you have a greater chance of maintaining the tenancy.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** Do either of you think that the protocols are currently appropriate in covering the situation you are talking about?

**Mr MACKLIN:** I tend to think our protocols are a bit outdated. What we are seeing is such a massive change in practice with both the DCJ and the housing services, the specialist homelessness services, that due to the COVID response we are now housing people in hotels and starting to wrap that support around straightaway. I think if the protocols were updated to reflect that, as that is the preferred practice to get individuals off the streets as soon as possible, it would be great for rough sleepers.

**Ms SOPER:** I agree there also. It needs to be updated to that approach of getting people off the street. As to, "let's give them a blanket, let's give them a swag", I would really love to see that mentality gone. I do not know anybody who would like to sleep on the street in a swag. Giving out food and giving out things to people often hampers our efforts to get people off the street and, in fact, enables homelessness. Getting people off the street and into their own place empowers people, so they can do their laundry in private and we can teach them how to cook instead of giving them food. I would also like to see the protocols updated in that regard. Then people would know that, yes, we need to get these people off the street and, yes, we need to engage with the local support in specialist homelessness services that have that experience working with rough sleepers.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Thank you so much to both of you for setting the bigger scene. I have a couple of questions around the intersection between different policies of the Government currently that I think can create some challenges for the Protocol. Ms Soper, the first was in relation to the amount of temporary accommodation available. When we joined the assertive outreach team in Sydney, it was clear that some of the people that were sleeping on the streets actually had access to social housing already, but did not have the necessary supports for their other mental health needs. I wonder how you see issues around the Government's plans to look at trying to prevent exits from housing into homelessness intersecting with the Protocol, whether there is a way for us to improve that and whether there is a way for the Government to improve that? The second goes to the issue of temporary accommodation. I understand that there has been really amazing flexibility, coordination and resourcing around the COVID pandemic to address people who are sleeping rough, which would suggest that with the right resourcing and flexibility from the DCJ we can solve this a lot quicker than the Premier's Priorities may set out.

There are limits around the issue of temporary accommodation that I fear we may already be seeing cracks in during the current pandemic response, but also in more general times, with the fact that we see a limit on temporary accommodation of 30-odd days. Sometimes people have been on the priority housing waiting list for many years. I wonder if you could talk about whether there are changes to the temporary accommodation? It is necessary to say I do not think we are going to solve the need for social housing right now in this Committee. Ms Soper, I wonder if there could be changes around the temporary accommodation that you would see on the ground that would actually give your agencies the time to be able to support people into longer term accommodation, or anything around the exit to homelessness that we see, which is a sad reality with the lack of flexibility around the DCJ's housing of people in public housing?

**Ms SOPER:** I guess in an ideal world we would have more affordable housing that we could put people straight into, because temporary accommodation is often in motels around—I will just speak regionally for what we do—but then we have a lot of people just living in very small places and that can be problematic if they are not getting the wraparound supports that they need. I think more TA would be helpful while we are waiting for those houses to be built. You mentioned social housing and that then they are exiting it. Once again, that is more funding around caseworkers to continue to engage with people, because often we have got—I know for our service it is up at least 50 per cent with COVID on the referrals that are coming through, so for our caseworkers to stay with people long term to ensure that they sustain that housing is really important. We do not just house people and then let them be. We know that that first six months is going to be the hardest part for them as well to maintain



that housing. For us it is around some funding to keep caseworkers engaged with those people and more temporary accommodation.

I know that there was flexibility with COVID, that they extended it to 28 days. They normally only give them a couple of days, generally, and so you need to come to the Housing office, you need to engage with your local specialist homelessness services [SHS]—if they are men with children, that is our service. They get two days. Two days is not a long time to find somewhere else for somebody to be, so I think some more flexibility around that time frame would be fantastic in the short term, and some more options in TA would also be really helpful. Even some designated TA for people who are specifically sleeping rough would be really helpful. That is very limited, especially when you have—not at the moment, obviously—events on or school holidays all of the accommodation is gone, so there is actually no TA available. When we have the Supercars in town in Newcastle there is no TA available for people because it is all booked out by people, so very limited slim pickings down here in Newcastle.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** It is great to get that perspective of the considerations. I want to ask about consistency in training and implementation of the Protocol in government departments. We have read in some of the submissions about concerns in how the NSW Police Force may not be necessarily adhering in the same ways to the right-spaced approach when it comes to the Protocol, but also questions around a lack of consistency in training of different government departments and also reporting and accountability on making sure there is adherence to the Protocol. I wonder if you have any thoughts specifically around that and what could be improved? Then linked to that is that we have had some submissions talking about the benefits of public space officers, as opposed to the idea of law enforcement being involved early on. I wonder if you have experience of local government public space officers, but also whether you think that is something that the New South Wales Government could look at as a way to have people who are advocates of the Protocol, if you like, on the streets and aware of those issues.

**Ms SOPER:** I can just speak to what works for us down in Newcastle, and that is we have a committee that is made up of police—and we have got some really wonderful police down here who do not want to go in there charging all guns blazing; they want to get good outcomes for people. We have had a couple of collaborative approaches for places that become hotspots. We have worked with the local council. We all meet together: the specialised homeless services who support women, who support men, and we have got the councils. We all work together so that we can go on site, meet with the people and have discussions with them first. It is not that the police are coming in first; they will only come in at the end if we are not getting any outcomes.

For me it is always about relationships. It is always about collaboration and training, because you cannot expect a council ranger to understand how to be a caseworker, how to best support someone who may have a traumatic brain injury who has had a traumatic past. We are not going to get that. But I think getting people who work in that field to go out and talk with people instead of just trying to deliver a protocol but not having any experience working with people always speaks volumes for us. Incorporating people who work in the sector to deliver the training I think is really, really helpful and it breaks down the barriers. It builds relationships. We can all go out there—I know I have been a part of it myself, even, going out to different hotspots and trying to engage with people; bringing Housing down with us as well so they are part of the collaboration. They can organise TA on the spot for that person. Then we have got the caseworker who is talking to the person and trying to encourage them to get to that housing.

You do not really need police, at the end of the day. I think if you are bringing in those supports initially, we are doing the training, we are all meeting [inaudible]. We set that out specifically for when we have got hotspots and then we will just meet sort of bimonthly just to keep in contact and provide training bimonthly, if need be, because we know there is a large staff turnover for local councils and police as well. We incorporate that all at once with the training. Does that make sense?

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Yes, that is great to hear and it aligns with a number of other submissions that we have heard around the need for local coordination across agencies to do that, so it is great to have that example put out there as well. Thank you so much, Ms Soper.

**Mr MACKLIN:** Can I jump in as well? The other thing that does make it easier and has come about due to COVID is now the quality of temporary accommodation that is on offer. Previously the TA available to a rough sleeper would generally be a more at-risk type of venue where a history of drug use or other unsavoury people may be hanging out. The actual choice of TA or having quality temporary accommodation does provide a greater level of stability to engage rough sleepers in as well. We have seen that through COVID, that suddenly hotels that would not be taking any rough sleepers are now taking rough sleepers as an income source, mainly, but you do see the level of engagement is very different when someone does feel safe and secure in a quality temporary accommodation rather than what was available pre-COVID.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Chair, if I may just say on that: We have said to a number of other organisations that have made submissions that because of the fact things have changed significantly since these submissions and the inquiry started through COVID that if there are any lessons that you think could be incorporated and you wanted to submit those in writing—what you think has worked well that could be adapted and put into the Protocol beyond what we have covered—I think that would be very welcomed by the Committee as well, if there are examples of how things worked better and how we could learn from that, to incorporate it.

**Mr MACKLIN:** Okay, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Macklin and Ms Soper. If we do have any other questions for you and we email them through are you happy to respond? Thank you. We are asking for a week or two turnaround on that, if possible—two weeks is fine. Thank you for joining us today.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**CINDI ANNE PETERSEN**, Executive Officer, Launchpad Youth Community Inc., before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Thanks for joining us today. We are here to discuss the protocols into street-sleeping homelessness that we have sent through, and your submission. Would you like to make an opening statement?

**Ms PETERSEN:** I will just go into a little bit of background about Launchpad. Launchpad is a homelessness service for young people aged 16 to 25 operating in and around the City of Sydney LGA. We provide services to young people who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness. Launchpad is funded by the Department of Communities and Justice and the City of Sydney to provide services which include case management, assertive outreach tenancy support and a brokerage program with flexible funds to support the case management needs of clients. Launchpad provides services to over 800 young people every year. Launchpad employs an assertive outreach officer who works alongside other Homelessness Assertive Response Team (HART) and Homelessness Outreach Support Team (HOST) member organisations to provide support to those sleeping rough in the City of Sydney. The underlying principles of the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places are applied during the delivery of these services. As Launchpad operates in the inner city context we can only really speak on this. The need for coordination and collaboration is critical to ensuring those rough sleeping are provided the most appropriate services in a timely manner. I will leave it there and will be led by questions.

**The CHAIR:** I will start with the members who are online. Justin Clancy from Albury?

**Mr JUSTIN CLANCY:** Thank you Ms Petersen for your time. It is really important that you spoke about coordination and collaboration. What would you see as being important steps in terms of further collaboration with government? Can you outline those steps?

**Ms PETERSEN:** I think the city is an area which exemplifies the work that agencies do together working collaboratively to respond to homelessness, whether it be rough sleepers or other areas of homelessness. What is really important is getting the right people to the table. In the city we have coordination groups that include local government, the Department and a number of SHS as well as homelessness services, and then other services who may have a target group of homeless people such as health, mental health, and other services like that.

With Launchpad we collaborate with people through brokerage funds. We have a brokerage program which is funds available to assist homelessness and homelessness services workers to help young people meet their case management plans. With the coordination of that brokerage and sharing it with other organisations in and around the city, we build really strong links with these other services and it makes it easier to work, in our case, on a young person's case management plan. So if a young person is experiencing homelessness, has mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues and needs educational or vocational support, we can draw on our partner organisations to assist with that case management plan to make sure that the right agency is dealing with the right part of that young person's needs.

I understand that these areas are very rich; there are a lot of services probably more per capita than anywhere else in the State. Without those coordinated efforts and having the non-government and the government sector working together I do not think we would be able to achieve the outcomes that we do. I think that coordination has been really evident during COVID. I think the city has been able to respond much more effectively and efficiently because of those players working together. I hope that helps in some way. Sorry, there are also services and Indigenous services for that part of the [inaudible].

**Ms TRISH DOYLE:** It is really difficult. Thanks for the work you do and please pass on from us thanks to the team as well. As someone who represents a community that considers itself regional and that is removed from the City of Sydney—though that is where many of the services are, as you said—I know that there are a number of young people who are at risk of homelessness, or, for one thing or another in their lives, have periods of time without a roof over their head. They travel by train, couch surf or head to the city.

You would be dealing with a transient population at times as well, and I was wondering how you link in and what sorts of mechanisms are in place to support you to link in with young people that come within your [inaudible] those in regional and rural areas who are struggling with homelessness and a whole range of issues in their lives? There is a vulnerability that is quite particular to young people and their trust with organisations and agencies. You are right, they have to be linked up with the right agencies and the right departments at the right time according to their issues. Do you receive funding or support to deal with kids who turn up in the LGA of Sydney but are from other areas?

**Ms PETERSEN:** Inner-city drift is something that definitely occurs in the inner city. As I said, we are funded predominantly by the Department of Communities and Justice. We did get some additional funding from City of Sydney for an assertive outreach position a couple of years ago—I think, maybe, three years ago—which has been fantastic because although we were operating the assertive outreach, what we were finding was having a person dedicated to that sphere of homelessness meant that they were leaving the office and able to do assertive case management with people in tenancies—we have got loads of clients. I spoke to the Department and the city and they were great at getting us some additional money so we could have that dedicated position. That has made it really—not easy, but it is a direct point for the Department, it is a direct point for the City of Sydney's public space liaison officers and the general public to let us know that there is a young person, where they are and a brief description, and then our assertive outreach will go out and actually look for that young person and attempt to engage with them.

Obviously young people are very transient, even in street-based homelessness they move quite regularly, so having all of that contact with people who work on the streets makes it easier for us to track those young people. As I mentioned earlier, we do have a brokerage program. So with someone who has gravitated from another area we can engage them and we produce brokerage to return them home if that is appropriate. If we had a young person who had come down from rural New South Wales and it was not necessarily what they expected when they got here—often young people are quite ready to go back home because it has not been what they expected. Others, it is kind of staying with them and waiting until they are a bit more willing to engage and look at those options.

If we were returning a young person home we would make contact with a service at that end, or family or someone to ensure that the young person had someone safe at the other end to meet them. If they were not willing to return to the area they had gravitated from we would have to start working with them in the city area, but, obviously, we are funded for those who have links to the city, so we would do what we could to, as I said, offer services but try and refer them back to the area they came from where we are more likely to have established links and family. Did that answer your question?

**Ms TRISH DOYLE:** That is great. In your view and the experience and work that Launchpad does, do you think that the Protocol should be expanded to deal specifically with information relating to vulnerable young people? If you do, what sort of information should be in that Protocol?

**Ms PETERSEN:** I think maybe the section on under-16s needs to be fleshed out a little bit because, in my opinion, anyone who is under 16 who is sleeping rough is at a significantly greater risk than older street-based people. I think it is really important that when we look at the rollout of the Protocol we get more council involvement and more coordination set up in other areas like the [inaudible] definitely include youth services who have the expertise to deal with matters for reporting and the like. I guess it is making sure that the people and anyone else who are involved in the provision of services to young people on the streets are adequately trained in child protection, child rights and youth homelessness in the context of youth homelessness in whatever area it is that is being addressed.

**The CHAIR:** Do you have a rough idea what percentage of youth that you are dealing with come from the regions rather than the city?

**Ms PETERSEN:** Not off the top of my head, but it is something I probably should have prepared for today. I will say that most of the referrals we do get are from young people in and around the city and then obviously it comes down to where the young person identifies as coming from. They may originally be from Tamworth, or something, but then they were in Parramatta for a couple of weeks. So when you ask them where they are from they may tell you they are from Parramatta rather than saying they are from East Hills—that is just working with young people. I would not say it was a huge percentage. I would say that the majority of young people we work with would be from Sydney's streets. If a young person has been on the streets for a couple of years, or something like that, they will tend to say that they are from the area. Even if it is shorter periods of time, they will tend to say that they are from the inner city area rather than reflecting where their original family is.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** I think your young parents program is a really good initiative. I have two questions. Does the Protocol properly cover parents with young children, particularly young parents. Secondly, does the current Protocol currently have enough information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth? If not, what suggestions could you make?

**Ms PETERSEN:** To answer the first question, I think it addresses under-16s sleeping rough, but I guess it doesn't really necessarily speak to an under-16 who is pregnant and sleeping rough? We have had instances where we are informed by other parts of the community or a young person themselves that they are in fact pregnant while they are sleeping rough. I guess it is really critical to get that information and be able to work with that young person as early as possible in those instances, obviously because it is time sensitive. If the young person

was looking at other options beyond going to full term then we need to identify that pregnancy as early as possible. Indigenous organisations are critical in the delivery of any assertive outreach to that particular population. There are cultural considerations that need to be understood and worked with. I do not think there is any area that could boast having enough Indigenous workers or enough Indigenous organisations participating in coordinated responses to homelessness. That is not through a lack of willingness for those organisations; it is just the Going Home, Staying Home reforms and organisations and expertise that we have lost during that period. I think we need to investigate in that space and the Protocol should reflect that.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Thank you, Ms Petersen. We know that people sleeping rough are a very small percentage of those experiencing homelessness, and I understand it is an even smaller percentage for young people. I wonder if you have thoughts about the Protocol to expand into areas that may include people sleeping in cars or couch surfing who might be known to agencies or organisations that are signatories to the Protocol, and how we might expand that to capture and ensure the support of young people and the rights of young people experiencing homelessness beyond those in public places. My second question is about the suitability of temporary accommodation for young people, particularly those who are under 16 but also those who might be slightly older than that. We have heard about the questionable nature of some of the temporary accommodation. I wonder if you could comment on that, because obviously that creates a barrier if the temporary accommodation is not appropriate for assisting and supporting people sleeping rough on our streets.

**Ms PETERSEN:** Expanding the protocols includes rough sleeping to include couch surfing and those that [inaudible] such as cars is really important. I am not really sure how we go about engaging that rough-living population. But obviously you would need involvement in the SHS sector and I do not know if that is what prompts you to assess what those numbers are through SHS data collected through CIMS—the Client Information Management System—to see what those numbers are. I do not know how we would have a coordinated response to that because, as I said, if we have a young person who is couch surfing, we provide services to them—obviously, one of the first being to give them a mobile phone so we can actually have contact with them, because that is really important when they are transient. Sorry, I am not really answering that question well. I do think we should certainly move into that space but I am just not sure how we go about it.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** It is absolutely fine for you to take some of these questions on notice. If you have further thoughts on that or on the Chair's question on the regional split or other things, it is absolutely fine for you to provide additional responses to the Committee. It is particularly challenging when we are dealing with this kind of technology, so do not feel like you have to give us all of the answers right now. You can have the space to do that after.

**Ms PETERSEN:** Great.

**The CHAIR:** If you think of anything, just email it.

**Ms PETERSEN:** I can speak to the team on that and [inaudible].

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** The other question was about the suitability of temporary accommodation, particularly for under-16s or young people.

**Ms PETERSEN:** Yes. I think it has always been a struggle to find quality temporary accommodation in the city. In a previous role I had I was brokering arrangements with hotels. It is incredibly difficult to manage, particularly with young people who may not abide with what is required in the TA, whether it be noise—all of that sort of stuff. So it is very difficult to maintain those relationships with hotels. There have been some less than desirable hotels available. Speaking from Launchpad's perspective, if we were offered a TA placement that we felt was unsuited, the young person felt unsafe in there and we felt it was not particularly safe, we would probably utilise brokerage funds at that point to find something a bit more suitable and located close to our service where we could avoid people [inaudible]. During the whole COVID situation, some more better-quality hotels have become available for TA through that process. I am hoping that the Department is able to maintain some of those relationships moving forward.

I think also maybe the Department needs to look at more models like the Addison, which is run by our foundation. It is a hotel with some—well, it is not a hotel; it is an old hotel that has been refurbished for the uses of providing TA and transitional tenancies. We need more models like that where there are actually some staff on site as well, because young people obviously have—well, they are young people. Having support on site is a great way to make sure that we can minimise disturbance between young people and also help manage their day-to-day—build on their living skills and all of that sort of stuff. So if there were more services available like that, they would be the preferred options for placements for TA for young people, rather than hotels with open populations—open age groups.

**The CHAIR:** Obviously, with COVID things have changed substantially since we originally started this inquiry. If there is anything that you would like to add to your submission, if you could send that through within the next two weeks that would be greatly appreciated. If we have any further questions for you, we will email those to you as well. We would appreciate if you could respond to any questions that we may send to you.

**Ms PETERSEN:** Okay. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Petersen, thank you for joining us today. We appreciate your submission and you giving us your time today.

**(The witness withdrew.)**

**(Short adjournment)**

**STEVEN WENZEL**, Service Director, Community Programs, Momentum Collective, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

**NICOLE SECOMB**, Community Services Manager, Momentum Collective, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

**KATIE BURGESS**, Acting Senior Manager Governance, Northern Rivers Community Gateway, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**TONY DAVIES**, Chief Executive Officer, Social Futures, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**CATHY SERVENTY**, Senior Manager, Housing and Employment, Social Futures, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**VIRGINIA WALKER**, Chief Executive Officer, Momentum Collective, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Thank you all for joining us today. Would anybody like to start with an opening statement?

**Mr DAVIES:** I am happy to say a few words very quickly; I know you have got a lot of people. Firstly, thanks to everyone from the various locations to give us an opportunity to present all of our organisations that [inaudible] and really support the Government Protocol on rough sleeping and we will [inaudible] towards that. In terms of the Protocol, the distinctive Social Futures strongly support the Protocol—

**The CHAIR:** Can you please speak up? If the other members could mute their microphones, that may help Mr Davies to be heard more clearly.

**Mr DAVIES:** We strongly support the Protocol. Like the rest of the sector, we agree that there should be more representation. We think the application of the Protocol and its strict implementation by local government is important. We also agree that with some better guidance as to how it is implemented, it is proven to be quite effective. There does need to be a stronger focus on trauma responsive practiced, so ensuring people that are interacting with people sleeping rough do actually understand that the way that they talk, the way they approach people, the way [inaudible] at night can have a real impact, and it is really important that the way they operate escalates rather and de-escalates. So that requires some really good training. We do feel that the specialist homelessness services assertive outreach good practice guidelines should be applied. We think that there should be training and probably a basic summary given to the people across all those agencies. We agree with others that say that there should be a single agency responsible for oversight of the Protocol and data collection.

We also feel that the model being used for rough sleeping—outreach model programs—in a number of select locations around the country are creating a by-name list, where people who are sleeping rough are actually known by name. They have their details so that we can track them. So we understand what is happening, who they are and what the needs of the individuals are, will go a long way towards the drawing of those staff in government agencies that are out there and/or working with the people on the streets better know the needs of the individual they are working with and also [inaudible] the services that they are actually able to support.

Probably the final thing that I would say about it is that whilst we like the Protocol, that is just one part of the homeless puzzle and it is possibly not the most important. What we need is effective support networks and systems in place for people sleeping rough. We need resources for those government workers and also non-government workers who have counted people sleeping rough to actually support them. Properly resourced, expert staff who are trauma-responsive who can [inaudible]. The other critical thing is we need to invest in additional social and affordable housing so that we actually have a sustainable exit for rough sleeping. This is a longstanding issue. The Protocol was certainly something that came from the Sydney Olympics. When I worked in Sydney—in fact in the House where a number of you are sitting—there was a huge number of people sleeping rough around the library, around the back of Parliament House. What council were doing then in Sydney was basically finding a way to move people out of the way so that we could have a perfect Olympics.

We still have not cracked that issue [inaudible] support and that is going to require that affordable and social housing investment. With the COVID-19 crisis moving into a long recession, there has never been a better time to invest in affordable housing. It is about keeping our economy strong whilst we protect the most vulnerable. That is a win-win situation we have not had before around social housing. That social housing needs to be everywhere. We need it certainly in the far north coast where require specialist homelessness services where the census indicated that 20 per cent of all rough sleepers in the State lived between Grafton and the Queensland border. That is an area that has 4 per cent of the State's population.

The street count that the DCJ coordinated had 337 of rough sleepers in that same area. The Central Coast, where obviously we had the Member for Wyong, had very high numbers as well. We had something like 10 per cent of the State's rough sleepers according to the census in that area. Dubbo, as well, we need investment in social housing there, too. Blue Mountains, Albury—all of those areas there is a need. When governments can borrow at less than the rate of inflation, now, more than ever before, we can really create a lasting difference throughout the community so that the environment that we live in and our children will grow up in will have a stronger economy with those that are most vulnerable feeling well.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Davies. Ms Serventy, would you like to add anything to your statement?

**Ms SERVENTY:** I am happy to take some questions later on. I think Mr Davies has really covered everything. The basics are: It is a great Protocol but it needs a whole lot of things around it to make it work.

**Ms WALKER:** Momentum is completely on the same page as Mr Davies and his articulation of the challenges that both of our organisations work with every day. From my own perspective, in addition to the comments that Mr Davies has made, is: Protocols are great but what is stopping them being implemented? For me, it is a change process when you are looking for different behaviour from a group or groups, what is stopping that change? We know the protocols are great but why do they not happen on the ground? Mr Davies talked about some of the lack of flow. We cannot house reliably homeless people either because of a lack of supply, or because there is not enough awareness, or it is too difficult for that process to work. In the first instance, why do we get instances of those who are engaging with homeless people not respecting their rights or being able to work with them appropriately? We can put rules in place, but if we do not understand why those rules aren't being followed, then we will not crack that particular part of the problem. I think that the education process is not just a "tell" process, it is an "ask" process. For example, in terms of working with homeless people, what is stopping police from dealing with them differently? What is getting in the way of that and how can we support that?

**The CHAIR:** Ms Burgess, do you have anything you would like to add?

**Ms BURGESS:** Could I just clarify the format? These are opening statements. Is this where we can share our process and some of the concerns we have? Apologies for not really being aware of this.

**The CHAIR:** That is okay. If you want to give us a brief overview of what you do.

**Ms BURGESS:** Particularly, lack of affordable housing still continues to be the key issue in our area. There seems to be a disconnect between what is happening in the inner city and what is happening in regional and rural areas. That needs to be acknowledged. Our Helping Hands Aboriginal homelessness program—we have seen an increase in numbers of women fleeing from domestic violence. In fact, more than 50 per cent of our clients are female, many of whom have children, and are being placed into motel accommodation with no cooking facilities or anything to be able to provide or cook for those children. Their income is then obviously primarily going on takeaway foods and things like that. We have sort of worked around that in terms of providing rice cookers and slow cookers and so on to assist in that process, but it certainly is not a suitable arrangement, particularly for women with children who are fleeing domestic violence.

The other issue is that homelessness is comorbidity. Assertive outreach does not necessarily address these comorbidities. I am talking about mental health and so on. Currently, there is a lack of cohesion between services, particularly in our area. There really does need to be more of a wraparound approach if we want to address the underlying factors that continue or persist homelessness of a person. In terms of the lack of cohesion between services, we often receive referrals with no information around the background of that person and no proper risk assessment—no proper comprehensive assessment process.

We had a recent case where we had a client who was released from jail not into permanent or transitional housing but into a motel. He has significant mental health forensic history and had committed some very significant crimes that almost resulted in the death of two people. When we received a referral from Housing Link, we were provided with no additional information regarding risk factors or his mental health status. We have a female caseworker who provided outreach to him and it was not until another incident that we contacted police and found he was not being supervised.

What that showed us is that there is a real lack of connection and cohesion between key services. As I said, homelessness is comorbid. We need to be also addressing and working together with mental health services, probation and parole, as well as housing providers. Within that there is also significant disconnect between housing providers and the department of housing. These processes are really inadequate and place significant risk on our caseworkers trying to work within this space. There needs to be a protocol around that for key services to be working together from that holistic perspective to see that there are all different factors that are in play when a person becomes homeless or has persistent homelessness over a long period of time. We cannot just address the issue of housing or a roof over their head, we have to look at all of the factors that are sustaining that picture.



That is one of the key issues that we wanted to highlight. It should involve mental health providers, drug and alcohol providers, housing providers and the Department of Housing. That is what we would like to see as something that is developed here—some kind of centralised information and referral system, where there are comprehensive risk assessments and information gathering that occurs before these clients are referred to housing providers, so that we can work with all of those different services to support more of a sustainable, long-term change for these clients.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Mr WENZEL:** Mr Davies has summarised my thoughts on the protocol. I think the Protocol is a really important part of the picture for rough sleeping and our response to that. It is only a small part of the picture around homelessness. Obviously there is a lot of homelessness that is not rough sleeping. For our clients we deliver specialist homelessness services to women fleeing domestic violence and to Aboriginal people across northern New South Wales. A number of our clients are not necessarily rough sleeping but it is really important that they are able to access the services that they need to. The Protocol is vitally important in regional Australia but I do not think it has been implemented as strongly as it has across the City of Sydney. I do not know that there is the knowledge across our local service sector generally around how we should be approaching people and how we should be treating people with the respect they deserve and providing them with the rights that they are entitled to access services.

Our work is a really important part of this picture. One of the projects that we are delivering with Social Futures and the Department of Communities and Justice is an assertive outreach program in Tweed. That really goes beyond the bare bones of the Protocol to say, actually, the Department of Housing can do a lot more in terms of engaging people and they can really make meaningful change to people who are rough sleeping. That is a really important part of the picture. The Protocol, whilst being really valuable in saying we should treat everyone with these rights, it takes it beyond that to say positively actually we can impact positive change on these people by the Department of Housing having a set team where they go out and it is still people who are trained to go out and engage with rough sleepers. That is an important part of this conversation. The Protocol is an important stopgap. It is a base level, but you could do so much more with the resources of the Department of Housing when they are targeting the most in need. Certainly rough sleepers in our region are absolutely some of the most needy people. Ms Secomb is probably the best to talk to about her on-the-ground experience, how the Protocol plays out in practice here and her knowledge of the Protocol. I will leave it to her to talk about that.

**Ms SECOMB:** I just wanted to say that the non-government agencies have been working as per Protocol guidelines for quite some time under what we call our good practice guidelines. What I have found, as Steven referred to, the assertive outreach program is a multidisciplinary approach and that is where we see the Protocol starting to work well. We see it in pods. Another example is the safety action meetings for the domestic violence cohort. They work well because the government agencies are directly working alongside the non-government agencies and to a degree the non-government agencies are educating those government agencies around those protocols.

I feel the non-government agencies have become the teacher of that protocol but also the policing of that protocol in regards to where they are not maintaining the guidelines within that protocol. We are following up in regards to complaints and seeking answers as to why that protocol is not being maintained. I agree with what was said earlier. There needs to be better training and information around the Protocol with the government agencies and the ongoing training, and ensuring that those agencies and the workers within those agencies have understanding and training in trauma informed care, for example, which was stated earlier. I have a couple of points in regards to where we have seen homeless people within our Aboriginal homelessness services and specialist domestic violence services and responses from police.

As was said earlier, often those sleeping rough already have a range of complex issues and the response by police or other agencies can either help to move forward with that client or make the situation more complex. Unfortunately, what we do see occur is making their circumstances more difficult for them and increasing their complexity. For example, people sleeping rough are being moved on by police. Often people sleeping rough will seek a CBD area where it is well lit, so they stay there. That is for their safety; there is lighting, people are around. When police come along, they will often move them out of town and where they land they cannot access services and even basic things like a supermarket and things like that. The response I have had from police is, "Well, we have to respond to community complaints." It is a little bit of "get them out of view", sort of thing. If they are out of sight they are out of mind and, as we know, that does not work. It certainly impacts on the safety of those individuals.

Just in the last two weeks we had a gentleman who was slight of build, would be very vulnerable in the community and very easily taken advantage of. He was moved out of town into a quarry area so he could camp

there. He has no transport. I will say that what happened then was a good response from the council ranger who detected him there and did actually engage with our specialist homelessness service. We do see those little pods of our people working to try to move forward, but again that comes down more to the individual's values and ethics than actually working within a protocol.

There seems to be a real lack of knowledge in government agencies of the existing services that are available. That is why police are not engaging with the services to ensure people are being referred through and getting the support that they do need, and that is not tricky stuff. That is as simple as providing cards and most of our services have done the rounds of these agencies providing information and providing cards but that information just does not seem to filter through. Things like failure to move on fines as well for people sleeping in their cars. They are dependent on those vehicles for transport. We noted during COVID it was very difficult for those people to move around, especially if they had interstate numberplates. They were constantly being harassed by police and threatened with fines. If they were to incur more fines that actually risks their licence and their registration and potentially their capacity to have somewhere, as far as they are concerned, safe to stay and to be able to move and get the supports that they do need.

Going back to comments I have had come from police, they say their job is to be suspicious and unfortunately that sometimes overrides their incentive to understand what is going on for an individual. We acknowledge that most of these services are very time-poor and they need to move quickly but they do not appear to have that time for those individuals to sit and listen to what is going on and seek out what supports and a more positive response for that individual. I get a response stated very regularly from Aboriginal people who present to our office is that when they have decided to have a picnic in a public park, they will be asked to move on. Our parks are there for congregating—acknowledging not so much during COVID. We are fortunate on the north coast that we have beautiful outdoor weather and parks are designed to encourage people to come together and congregate and spend time, but when our homeless people or groups of Aboriginal people do that police will move them on very, very quickly, whether they are drinking or not. I have actually observed it myself: Aboriginal people not drinking have been asked to move on.

I would like to also speak in regards to the DCJ housing. As Mr Wenzel was saying, we have had a really positive response during this COVID period and we got to see exactly what can be done when we come together as a multidisciplinary team and start really seeking out resources and speeding up processes. It is those historical processes that historically have been very slow. We have had people apply for housing and apply to be prioritised. They have waited for several months and sometimes up to a year to get that documentation confirmed and approved to the stage of what we call a live application or a prioritised application. Again acknowledging these services are time-poor and they do get inundated with people, but the application processes are quite arduous with numerous forms.

One thing that is not being checked is that often a person will go into a housing or a social housing office presenting as homeless and sleeping rough and will just be given a pile of forms to go away and complete. There is no checking whether these people are capable of reading those forms. There is no check on literacy or if they have the capacity. As we know, when a person is in a place of crisis their capacity to process is considerably impaired. Also, for people who have been traumatised, evidence shows that people in a place of trauma will remember about 10 per cent of what has just been said to them. When we often have people presenting, we will have the housing officer say, "Oh, but I told them." You know, which they probably did, but unfortunately our people are not necessarily remembering or understanding what that process entails and what they were supposed to do.

Often feedback is about being rushed, being moved on, feeling like no-one really cares about them, not feeling comfortable in those spaces, especially our Aboriginal people. Going into a space, there is usually not an Aboriginal face greeting them at a counter. For some there is already a sense of discomfort when attending such places. Again in the housing area, poor referrals. It usually only seems to be at a crisis point that referrals come through. There is very little referral around early interventions, when somebody first is presenting. We tend to get referrals through the Link2home process but, again, that is part of their protocols. If people are looking to extend temporary accommodation through Link2home, Link2home is required to refer to a specialist homelessness service, which they do and do that well and frequently. But often these people have presented to housing offices on several occasions prior and those referrals have not occurred at that point in time.

I want to speak about those housing applications, being able to come up with the evidence. Often they are being asked for evidence that they have no capacity to provide. For example, evidence from where they last resided that they can no longer reside there. They may have left there due to conflict or violence or threats. It is not appropriate for them to go back there. They are not getting a letter from that individual or any such evidence if they have been robbed or items have been stolen or money taken. Unfortunately police do not always write reports on such matters, hence there is not an event number so they are not provided [inaudible] much information.

Some people are required to also complete a mental assessment form. To be prioritised, this is an expectation. For some people, especially those who have hepatitis, HIV, a history of addiction, they are not wanting that information—they have a right to their privacy and do not want to be forwarding that information on to a housing provider.

I also just want to acknowledge as well that when a GP completes that medical assessment on behalf of an individual, and I have had repeat raises of this as to who is reading it at the other end, and it is not a medical professional reading it at the other end in regards to housing, and I have had repeat questions as to why such a document is being completed when the person who is doing an assessment does not have that medical expertise. What I did want to raise, which has become a huge concern to us in Aboriginal services, is the requirement for the proof of aboriginality. We certainly acknowledge why that is there and acknowledge that they do need proof of aboriginality if they want to be listed for an Aboriginal Housing Office property. But as the housing applications are moving to online and over the phone, we are having applications that are not even being processed because the person does not have proof of aboriginality.

For some people, they are never going to be able to get that proof of aboriginality. Due to that we have Aboriginal people going back and ticking that they are not Aboriginal, which is a significant concern that Aboriginal cannot be recognised on a government form. It was not always that way. Previously people could tick that they were Aboriginal. They just knew that they would not be eligible for Aboriginal Housing properties without that proof. But in this past 12 months there has been a change where that has been stopping applications from being processed. I think that is about it. Probably just the only other thing in regards to rough sleepers, just back to police, is in regards to those sleeping rough continually report—and this is both police and council rangers—that they leave their belongings and it could be like a small tent, a sleeping pack—that sort of stuff—where they will strategically place it somewhere and if police or council find it, they dispose of it. It is quite frustrating for those individuals because they do not have the means to replace those items. Rough sleepers have very, very few items so what they have is quite precious to them.

**Ms TRISH DOYLE:** Hi, everyone. I thank you all for being with us in a difficult space or type of topic, but talking and sharing some thoughts here. Thank you to Mr Davies, Ms Walker, Ms Secomb, Ms Serventy and Ms Burgess. I really appreciate what you have to say. Mr Davies, I want to make a comment with you. Any conversation around protocol with people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness should state front and centre that a trauma-informed response or trauma-informed care sits at the top of that, wraps itself around that, especially, as Ms Burgess mentioned as well, there is a whole range of quite complex issues. Thank you for raising that and putting that on the table. That is really important. As has been said by a number of other witnesses that we have had the pleasure and have been humbled to hear from, investing in affordable housing will go some way towards addressing the issue of homelessness. We need to keep saying that and I will make that point every time after we have had a session with witnesses because it is stating the bleeding obvious, but it needs to be said.

Can I also say to Ms Burgess and Ms Secomb, particularly, that we do need to in our truth-telling around homelessness and looking at this Protocol, remember that there are increasing numbers of women and children particularly escaping domestic violence and the biggest driver of homelessness is domestic violence. It is really good to hear you say that, especially in my capacity as the shadow Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence, including sexual assault. Thanks for putting that on the table. I want to explore a little bit about all of those issues: providing a trauma-informed response, the need for training, about DV sitting quietly to one side unless you are actually at the coalface, the disconnect that Ms Burgess talked about between city and country and the need for advocacy. I was wondering whether anyone wanted to speak a little more about that.

Advocacy should be wrapped up in this Protocol. As Ms Secomb pointed out, it would seem to me that non-government organisations are educating government departments and there is not a consistent response. How do we include casework and advocacy and embed that in the Protocol of whatever experience is there because it is missing? My staff tell me every day that case management is missing from government services. I do not know who would like to start. Maybe Ms Burgess?

**Ms BURGESS:** Helping Hands Aboriginal homelessness service is not funded for a certain outreach but under the current process it has been providing those services. We are actually purely a case management service. We will actually case manage that client from the moment they come into the program and onwards. There is a fair bit of advocacy that actually goes on as part of the case management process.

**Ms TRISH DOYLE:** It happens at the non-government where it is missing, and this is the gap, the huge obstacle for you I imagine, it does not fit as much within government services. Is that right?

**Ms BURGESS:** Absolutely. Whilst we might provide that within our service, there are numerous barriers from the government level to actually provide that, yes.

**Ms WALKER:** Can I say that even within our own organisation where there is obviously an elevated level of awareness around homelessness, DV et cetera, we have recently run a cultural awareness training with an Elder who works for us who developed the program. It is a few hours and it is an emersion program. So it is story telling about his own experience and the areas in which we exist. The response from our employees has been amazing. Their normal response is: Why didn't I learn this in school? Why didn't I know about this? How do we make sure that we get this message out there? And that is from people working in the centre in and around these services.

What it has highlighted to me is that we need to do what we probably did not even think about which is even a few hours at the basic levels of awareness around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history because it is not taught anywhere else. So we do it as part of our orientation, if you like. We have various orientation and training and we now do that and we are just about to move on to a second tier where we are going to create yarning to our tools with local Elders so that we can do more to look after the wellbeing of those who work for us, because if we do that we know that that has a ripple effect into those that we work with.

**Ms SERVENTY:** I just want to go back and touch a little bit on what Ms Doyle was raising around DV. I know that in some areas—Brisbane Water is one of those areas—where the police work really closely with some of the DV services. So you are getting that cooperation, you are getting a trauma response or a trauma-informed response because they work with non-government services. So those kinds of things work really well [inaudible] more about that and that was about five years ago. That kind of collaboration could work really well.

**Ms TRISH DOYLE:** My point is and, I attend meetings from time to time and I would say we have got a best-practice model in the Blue Mountains but it depends on individual people and those relationships, interagency collaboration, but it is not a consistent response. I was interested in your views.

**Mr JUSTIN CLANCY:** I have two questions. To follow up on Ms Doyle's question, Ms Burgess made the point that there is a disconnect between city and country. I want you to explore that a little bit more. I know Mr Wenzel touched on that a little bit. My other question was around the unique situation in the Northern Rivers is that you are also on the border. I am interested in that interface between jurisdictions. I suppose there are unique challenges associated with that.

**Ms BURGESS:** The key issue is a lack of services, lack of access to services. In a city there tends to be a lot of services that can be accessed and perhaps a greater availability of being able to coordinate that wraparound type of response. However, in our region services are so scarce that it is very, very difficult. The other thing is that the resources are so under-resourced and the waitlists are so long. Even acute mental health. Trying to get someone into acute mental health to have some kind of length of time for some ongoing therapeutic support, it is almost impossible to actually get that. That is the issue.

The real issue is the lack of services, obviously the lack of affordable housing and the fact that our services up here with mental health, drug and alcohol and so on are so under pressure that it is very difficult to get support for our clients that enter our service. Within that, there is that disconnect between the services so there is no clear referral pathways. Even though we might be a smaller area, the referral pathways are really unclear. No-one knows what the other is doing in terms of case managing someone who really needs that intensive case management in order to get well and to function. I am a psychologist actually; that is my training. So working in that space I know what mental health looks like in our area. There are no beds. It is extremely difficult up here. That is the biggest barrier and divide between the city and our area.

**Mr DAVIES:** I agree the lack of services and the high level of mental distress within welfare, that is [inaudible] very clearly and it shows up in suicide rates. We also need to look at what is happening with young people who are sleeping rough because we know that most people have been sleeping rough long term and had their first episode of sleeping rough before the age of 18. So we need to look at that. Mental health support for young people is really quite low. We provide headspace services but once you get to needing long-term support, that is not available.

The border issue is a significant one at the moment for us as an organisation that I mentioned as well because of the border [inaudible] which is a poorly thought out policy. [Inaudible] having very significant consequences because some of our border [inaudible] Tweed Heads has the most rough sleeping population—we have a very high rough sleeping population on the north coast. If any of our staff move outside from the border [inaudible] they cannot effectively work in the [inaudible]. It is particularly hard at the moment, but it is always—we work across borders. To be honest, it is actually easier [inaudible] south-east Queensland than in the Northern Rivers. We try to get people to accept accommodation on the Gold Coast; it would work better for us. There are some positives as well.

Undermining all of this is the lack of social housing. Statewide, about 5.5 per cent of all housing and social housing [inaudible]. On the north coast it is about 3 per cent or less. In Byron is well over 1 per cent. That is why we need that investment. When you get big social housing construction programs they tend to peter out not far past Newcastle or Wollongong, if they get that far. So it is particularly hard to have somebody there.

**Ms SERVENTY:** I would really like to add one thing about the border, because people obviously do move back and forth. They get moved on by the police in Queensland, they come over the border and they get moved on by our police and they go back. So the by-name list would be really useful for us to be able to track and support people where they want to live rather than bringing them back and forth. That is a great question.

**Mr DAVIES:** It would also address what Ms Burgess raised around that lack of coordination in the first place because we do not track them. We do not know who is sleeping on the streets. I pose the question to the Government that it is a magnificent initiative to ask where they are sleeping. We don't even know how many people are sleeping rough. The street count that the DCJ gave stated that there were four people sleeping rough in Dubbo. I think that is more than a slight underestimate. It was pretty accurate perhaps for Byron. [Inaudible]. But we need that system, we need to track it. That is why the Protocol is needed for that. It needs an agency of government to take ownership of [inaudible]. That can be [inaudible].

**Ms BURGESS:** I want to add one thing. On top of what I was saying about mental health, it is okay to have mental health services but if they are not—we have got a trauma counselling program at Northern Rivers Community Gateway. It is one of the only programs that offers free counselling without the need for a referral from a GP. Community mental health is the other that is free. Unless you have a free service without the need for a mental healthcare plan—because a lot of the rough sleepers are not going to go to a GP to get the plan and often will have to pay a gap with a private psychologist. Unless that service is available, you will not be able to elicit that support for a person. The other issue is drugs and alcohol. We have got one drug and alcohol unit in Lismore that services the whole region. It is called Riverlands. It only provides a one-week detox and then they are out. The only other drug and alcohol rehab in our area is the Buttery, which provides long-term rehab, but the waitlists are about six to eight months to get in there. All of these little aspects are really big aspects in the full picture.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** My time is limited, so first I acknowledge that the details Ms Secomb has provided are really helpful. It is important to say that it is really powerful to have those direct experiences put in. Thank you so much. I want to ask each organisation to comment on the Government submission that we have before us, which made very clear that the DCJ is the lead agency. It states that each government agency is responsible for monitoring and implementing the Protocol within their own organisation. My concern at the moment is the disconnect. Almost every organisation that we have heard from has said that there is no real responsible agency and there is very little accountability ensuring that the Protocol is adhered to within government agencies.

One organisation even suggested that the Government should meet its own criteria when it comes to what services are required and proving that they are meeting those requirements. As far as we are aware there is no regular reporting and it is unclear if there is. How do you think it could be strengthened? We have a disconnect at the moment where everyone is saying that there needs to be a lead agency that is responsible and better training and accountability, but the Government submission states that we have all of those things already and this is how it works. What are your thoughts on how it could be strengthened? Where in the DCJ could it sit? Does it need to be more specific? Is it about public reporting? How would it actually work in practise to make sure that it is stepped up to meet the needs and desires of the Protocol?

**Mr DAVIES:** Very quickly, public reporting is absolutely fantastic. That is what gives us confidence in the capacity of government agencies to deliver when they report. Even in cases where that is not always so—if the figures are not good at the beginning, they usually get better. We need agencies to report publicly and for us not to castigate them for not doing so well in the early stages. The by-name list is probably the mechanism. That is where we track everyone so we know who is sleeping rough. Until we have a proper system for that, it will be very difficult. To go to the border issue, it needs to be known who is coming from Queensland and who is going to Queensland. The by-name list helps us manage that effectively as well. It is really what we want to see.

**Ms WALKER:** I come from a world of organisational change and looking at how you can make things happen. One of the examples that we have had in this space has been assertive outreach, where you are pulling together a set of agencies across NGOs and government. It does not happen without work. While I recognise what Mr Davies is saying—if you are not measuring it then you do not know whether you are getting any better—if you are not doing the work then what is going to change? What we did with assertive outreach is: How do we talk with each other? What do we need to talk about to make sure that we are getting the outcomes that we are all there to get? There needs to be an agreement of what we are all there to do. If we are all there to get the number of homeless down then how are we working together to do that and what is getting in the way? Those are the

unstructured conversations that need to be had. They are the personal insights where people, instead of finger-pointing, work out how they can work together. There needs to be facilitated conversations for those things to shift. I know that sounds a bit woo-woo to those who like reports, but if you are not in the same room working out how you solve the same problem, it won't change.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Some of the submissions have mentioned the idea of requiring cross-agency coordination at a different regional level be part of the Protocol so there is a discussion. It would be good to get your thoughts on that. I appreciate that reporting is not everything, but there appears to be no coordinated response or approach to how agencies are trained and what is required within individual agencies, which means there is a lack of consistency. It would be good to get your thoughts on those two things. That also applies to Ms Burgess or Mr Davies.

**Ms WALKER:** I will re-emphasise what I have said. Yes, the accountability for working across organisations needs to be overt. The whole of the last hour has been about how do we work better together. When we work better together, we get better outcomes for the people that we are trying to help. It is really about what do we need to have in place to achieve those outcomes. Single agencies can be given accountability but who else needs to be part of those conversations and how does that get captured and tracked?

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** I acknowledge what Ms Burgess, Ms Secomb and others have said. It is clear that the protocols need to better reflect the cultural significance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. That is coming out very clearly. Where do you think the protocols for regional areas should better reflect the seasonal availability of temporary accommodation? I am from Wyong on the Central Coast, as Mr Davies acknowledged. We have an issue in the summer months. A lot of people are put out of accommodation because the rents can go up three times the normal level. During the winter it is a bit easier to find accommodation, but once you hit that expensive summer period then you lose a lot of that accommodation. Do you think there should be something in the protocols that better regulates those accommodation providers to make sure that they are not exploiting people through those low periods?

**Mr DAVIES:** I think it is a hard one because we have got accommodation owned by private owners—I guess they have got to run a business, in a sense. Thinking about the planning and the supply of accommodation and planning for this, we obviously have the same issue in every coastal area, so we experienced that very much over the summer period. Ultimately, it is probably going to go back to the supply of social and affordable housing, because social and affordable housing cannot be compared to the holiday rental and Airbnb market. It is protected and quarantined and because it is not in the private housing market you are not reducing or increasing people's property value. It is a resource to help people get back on their feet, to participate in the community and to be productive, social and ethical public actors within their communities. That is critical.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much everyone. We will be in touch if we have any extra questions for you. If that is the case and you desire to respond, could you please return your answers within a couple of weeks. Things have changed since we started this inquiry, particularly with COVID. Our initial questions were in relation to the Protocol, but what has occurred since COVID has changed the way we are dealing with things. If there is something specific from your original submission that has changed due to COVID and you would like to add it, can you please get that to us within the next two weeks. Thank you again for your submissions and joining us today.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**JENNY RANFT**, Divisional Manager, Community Services, Wentworth Community Housing, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

**The CHAIR:** Would you like to make an opening statement?

**Ms RANFT:** I will. It is very brief. I thought it would be helpful if I gave you a quick introduction to Wentworth so you can locate the full text and pull out a couple of points for the inquiry. Wentworth Community Housing is located on the western outskirts of Sydney. We cover urban areas, suburbs, rural areas and national parks. So each of those settings has different opportunities and challenges for ending homelessness. Wentworth covers the spectrum from homelessness support services through to social and affordable housing and my role is to lead the homelessness response. We have three services. One service targets adults who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and it is a service that includes an assertive outreach component that works directly with people who are sleeping rough, to engage them in a journey to a home.

We also have a tenancy support service to prevent exits from the private rental market into homelessness and to rapidly re-house people who have recently become homeless from a private rental. So we engage with real estate agents significantly in that service. We also have a small DV service for women and children escaping domestic violence in the Hawkesbury, which is a mix of small towns and rural areas. I have also championed a particular approach to resolving tent encampments by housing people with support and then returning those sites to the community. Tent encampments are a quite specific form of homelessness that really need a multiagency and quite targeted approach.

That is who we are. I also want to call out an acknowledgement to our local member, Trish Doyle, who has played a very critical role as an ambassador for one of our homelessness projects in 2016 called Heading Home and continues to support particularly the domestic violence service in the Hawkesbury. In terms of clear messages, we have learnt a lot about what works to end homelessness since the protocol was first prepared. We know that Housing First—that is, a secure home and wraparound supports—has the best outcome for people who are street homeless. Although a protocol itself cannot end homelessness, it can guide the way in which agencies work together as well as how we work with people who are experiencing homelessness.

I noticed that there were lots of positive suggestions in the various submissions and I just wanted to call out two things. One was there was a theme about the language in which the Protocol was framed. We are wondering whether it can be reframed from the negative—people should not be approached unless—to the positive. This Protocol is to support community efforts to end homelessness and then the advice would follow Housing First principles. So what is in there at the moment in terms of that specific criteria about when, how and who should approach a person experiencing homelessness could be better being in the appropriate place, in the Housing First principles.

The second theme was that many of the submissions have noted that the Protocol has had the unintended consequence of inhibiting efforts in some places to house and support people who are experiencing homelessness. I think a protocol should support community efforts to end homelessness by encouraging collaborative efforts and inhibiting unilateral action. In talking about collaboration interagency we need to be quite specific about that collaboration being purposeful; so the focus being on client-centred projects to end homelessness, and the Adelaide End Street Sleeping Collaboration, which I am not sure has come before the Committee. They are good examples of that rather than us having service-centred inter-agencies that focus on the exchange of information. Thank you.

**Ms TRISH DOYLE:** I want to thank Ms Ranft. She does a great job. I want to ask a question about the efforts that our housing services provide around advocacy and follow-up whilst people who are homeless are in emergency accommodation. Whilst people are there is when they are at their most vulnerable, when they need that advocacy and follow-up support. I am not quite sure if our housing services are able to provide that and whether they believe that should sit within the Protocol.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Ranft, Ms Doyle wants to know about the Department of Housing. As far as advocacy goes, how do you feel about their follow-up support and are they able to provide that with the current protocols?

**Ms RANFT:** Can I just check I have understood that? The question is how helpful is the Protocol assisting the agencies to follow-up?

**The CHAIR:** Yes. I think Ms Doyle really wanted to know particularly in relation to the Department of Housing.

**Ms RANFT:** Okay. We work closely with the Department of Housing and the Protocol I do not think has played a significant role in either implementing or encouraging that interaction so we have an interaction at the policy level with the DCJ head office and we have an interaction at the operational level with the district staff. There are a number of areas in which we can collaborate closely. In the two projects set up in homelessness in the Hawkesbury and in Penrith we did that on a daily basis. Of course, every agency has its own internal procedures, but generally speaking my experience in those two projects was that we were able to cooperate helpfully. Part of that, I think, is because we are working also as a community housing provider, so we had a good working knowledge of how housing works and what some of the policies and procedures are that can either encourage or constrain us.

**The CHAIR:** I think where Ms Doyle was trying to head was that perhaps within the Protocol something that might need to be added is a better list of agencies for people to deal with as far as the Protocol goes. That seems to be a bit of a theme we have got coming through, that that needs to be updated and related a bit better into the system.

**Ms RANFT:** To pick that up as a theme, and we would want to support that, there is an increasing number of players in the homelessness space and they have different intentions; some of them are about the immediate relief of suffering—the laundries and the food services and so on; each absolutely have a place and it would be helpful if they were a part of the Protocol and had access to the kind of training in those evidence-based methods so that we can all be coming from as similar a place as possible, even though we have different roles. Again, some of the submissions talked about how not all of the NGOs are really involved.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** It is quite difficult and challenging.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** I apologise that the technology is so challenging. Given your area of focus and the region, I want your thoughts on the appropriateness of the Protocol for people where English is not their first language and the diversity of communities. What do you think could be done to strengthen the Protocol, services and support for people who may not have English as a first language or who may find themselves not with the level of literacy that allows them to engage with the system?

**Ms RANFT:** Just to relate that question to the second vendor that I wanted to call out, if the Protocol provided guidance to agencies about how we conduct ourselves in working with each other as well as how we conduct ourselves in working with people who are experiencing homelessness, that would assist with the question you just raised. If I think about the area that I work in, there are parts of the catchment areas where there are people from culturally and linguistically diverse [CALD] communities. We want to be partnering with other ethno-specific or multi-agent, multicultural services in approaching people in those areas. In our experience, people who are from CALD communities experience a range of different forms of homelessness. They may sometimes be street homeless; they may be car sleeping. It is often likely to be overcrowding situations within those communities, so we will meet people on the street and then we will not see them again for a while.

Those connections with agencies that are not specifically in the homelessness space but who have particular cultural competencies is crucial. That is why the level of the quality of the intervention can be improved if all of the agencies, police, the DCJ, homelessness services, charities et cetera were encouraged through the Protocol to act jointly with those services that have specific expertise for whatever the cohort is that we are dealing with, whether that is CALD background, or people with severe and persistent mental health issues, or alcohol and other drugs.

**The CHAIR:** This question is from Ms Trish Doyle: Could housing services provide advocacy and follow-up during the emergency housing process? If the follow-up that is required was embedded into the Protocol, would that be helpful and how would you like to best frame that into the Protocol? I have just added a bit.

**Ms RANFT:** I will just check I have the gist. The question recognises that precarious and difficult stage between putting in an application and having that assessed and approved, getting a rating, and what is the role of advocacy in that and how can follow-up be improved. Is that right?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, and how you can add it into the Protocol.

**Ms RANFT:** I might do that last bit first. If it was possible to reframe the Protocol from the negative into the positive and—like many of the submissions have said—call out the housing-first process and how the Protocol should support getting people into homes, then there would be a natural place in those principles for where you could talk about the Protocol for inter-agency collaboration and advocacy during the assessment of a person's priority for housing. People apply for housing; it is quite a significant application process. To be considered for priority or critical at risk or management transfer—any of the categories that actually give you a hope of getting housed in a reasonable period of time. A lot of evidence is required and that really works against



the situation of people who have long-term trauma backgrounds and chronic experiences of homelessness because, by definition, they will not have the required documentation nor is it an easy process of engaging with them to get it.

In a recent project that we did in the Hawkesbury, we met 31 people and I think from memory there were about 29 who worked with us. Four or five of those people—and that proportion can be extrapolated pretty well—had absolutely no documentation. One fellow had an RSL card, bless him. He had no income support and no means to obtain income support because he had no documentation. When you are street homeless for long periods of time, you are likely to experience threat and theft, and so it is quite often that people do not have it. There is quite a long period of time that we need to hold people and engage with them. We need to start the process of trying to get that identity documentation. The collaboration really helps because we relied on police to give us an identity statement because that person had had an experience of incarceration. We used that to then get the birth certificates and the other things that were required to go to Centrelink to get the income support so that they could apply for housing, because an application for housing cannot go live until you have got a lot of that in place.

Of course if you have a live housing application and you have lost your phone or had it stolen and you have missed the text from Housing that says, "Can you tell us if your circumstances have changed?" then you are off the list. Then when you apply, you go back to the bottom again. There is a fair bit of work that needs to be done. I am encouraged by the use of the Vulnerability Index—Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool [VI-SPDAT] during the Together Home program, which has just started. The VI-SPDAT is an evidence form triage tool and it gives a rating for acuity—that is, the likelihood that you are going to die if housing is not provided. It spits out a score. If there was a way that that score could be used as a proxy for being able to apply for housing and at least get on that list, then there will be a grace period for us to continue the engagement and continue working with people on their health issue so that they are well enough to seek the documentation they need to support a priority assessment.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for your submissions today. If we have any other questions we will email them to you. If you would like to respond to any further questions, we would appreciate it if you could get that back to us in two weeks. As COVID has changed things since the inquiry first started, if there is anything you would like to add to your submission that was not in it originally, if you would get that to us within the next couple of weeks we would appreciate that.

**Ms RANFT:** Thank you. I will leave you with a last comment on the difference in regional areas compared to urban areas and collaborative efforts to end tent encampments where they occur. I notice you have Megan Ang from Hawkesbury Council and Vesna Kapetanovic from Penrith Council this afternoon. They were on both of the two projects that I have referred to and might be helpful in their information.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**(The witness withdrew.)**

**MONICA BARONE**, Chief Executive Officer, City of Sydney Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**GOWAN VYSE**, Manager, Social Policy and Programs, City of Sydney Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**JON SWAIN**, Manager Homelessness, City of Sydney Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for joining us today. Today's hearing is being recorded both visually and via audio. Swearing you in is the formal part of the proceedings, but we are very relaxed here and happy to hear your stories and what you have to say. A few things have changed since the original inquiry began; obviously the space has changed from when we first started it, due to COVID. If at the end of today you would like to email any further submissions through to the inquiry, it would be appreciated if you could send that to us within a couple of weeks. If we have any further questions after the hearing today and you would be happy to respond to them, we would appreciate it if you could send them back to us within a couple of weeks as well. Who is going to put their hand up first to kick off with an opening statement?

**Ms BARONE:** I will just make some opening remarks from the City of Sydney. The first thing we want to say is that we think having had the Protocol for these years has been really very, very useful in terms of the way we all work to support rough sleepers and the way we all collaborate in dealing with the issues that arise from rough sleepers in the community. We think it is great that you are reviewing it. It is important that things like this are looked at and reviewed periodically, so we think that is terrific. The important thing about the Protocol is that it means we are all working to the same principles, and that really helps when you are dealing with the complexity of issues to do with vulnerable people in our community. The Protocol has really held us in good stead because it has given real clarity about how we go about things, but it has also given real clarity to the community about how we do things. We are all able to say, even though we are not signatories to the Protocol, we have a policy of adhering to your Protocol. We are able to say to the community when they have concerns that the City of Sydney adheres to the Protocol, uses it as a guide, and we think it is a very good set of guiding principles. We think it is terrific and it is really important to have it.

The only thing I want to add or say in addition is that for about 30 years the City of Sydney has run homeless services. We put about \$2 million a year into direct provision of services for the homeless community. Of course we do more than that; that is just the annual grants. We have recently given almost \$2 million to food services as a consequence of COVID. We often do over and above that, but the \$2 million is what is in our operational budget. So we deal with the complexities of rough sleepers in our communities every day and we have a number of staff who work on this, including the staff that are here with me today.

But we also have four public space liaison officers and they have a very particular and important role. They are the people who go about the community and help to reconcile the tension that sometimes arises between rough sleepers and the business community or the residential community. They are out on the ground every day and they get to know people and they help to reconcile some of those tensions. For example, we might get a call. Someone might say, "Look, there's a rough sleeper sleeping in the doorway of our business. Can you help us deal with this situation?" Our people will go and, consistent with the Protocol, will say, "You know, it's okay for you to be here but it would help if you moved maybe somewhere that you weren't blocking a doorway. Can we help you deal with your possessions?"

Probably the most important thing they do, of course, is encourage these people to connect with services. Really, we do not want to have rough sleepers. We want to have people in homes and supported to be there. But when that does not happen we do have people on the ground, as does the State Government with the outreach services and Family and Community Services. Lots of people are out there getting to know people, trying to reconcile the tension between the needs of the rough sleeper and the needs of the business community or residential community—particularly, for us, the business community in the CBD. The Protocol helps us to operate in a consistent way and that is a really good thing. I think that is all we want to say as an opening statement. You have our submission and we are very happy to take questions.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Vyse and Mr Swain, is there anything that either of you would like to add as an opening statement?

**Ms VYSE:** No, not at this point. We can probably answer questions.

**Ms TRISH DOYLE:** Hi, everyone. Thank you for your submission and for coming along today even though it is a little bit of a tough experience. There are some days when we are all getting used to Zoom meetings

and there are other days where there are just failings. We have struggled a bit today. Can you comment upon a couple of things for us in terms of what you think should be embedded in any kind of protocol, which some people see as guidance and some people see as central to assisting people, working with people and respecting people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. That is a consistent response across government agencies and non-government services.

We have heard from some people today who have spoken very honestly about the lack of funding and referral pathways in regional and rural areas of New South Wales, but also about how there is an inconsistent response around what we do with the difficulties we encounter with homelessness. I just thought it would be good to hear from you about what sort of collaboration you think is required—what works and what does not—so that we can move towards a consistent approach between government and non-government. We just heard from some people from the non-government sector who said they feel like they are often teaching government. But I am aware that local government sits at the coalface too, so I am just interested in your views about a consistent approach.

**Ms BARONE:** The first thing I want to say is that consistency is really, really important. We should all be really proud that we have a Protocol that says that all people have a right to be in the public domain. It is fantastic that the State Government has a Protocol that is so respectful and that we all work to adhere to that. That does help with the consistency. The challenge is not what is in the Protocol. This is what the question was alluding to. The challenge is not really what is in the Protocol because the Protocol is very clear. The challenge is when you go to implement that Protocol in the real world, when you are dealing with people with very complex needs.

Before I just give some examples about some of those challenges, I want to comment that I think the Protocol gives us consistent principles and ways of working, which is great. The collaboration between local government and State Government is better than ever and in recent years has really improved. We have really appreciated that. When everybody is focused on the issue and everyone is focused on trying to get rough sleepers into safe and sustained accommodation with services, then we are all being our best selves, really. The way we have been working in recent years—Family and Community Services particularly and, of course, all of the different community organisations—has been fantastic. Since COVID that has been even better. We really hope we can maintain that level of collaboration and we really appreciate it. Having agreed principles is fantastic.

I will give an example of the difficulty. We face this all of the time in the city. Sometimes rough sleepers put up tents and then we have this issue of, "Well, of course camping is not allowed in Martin Place", or in some of our parks. Council has a rule that says, "You can't camp in Martin Place." But if a rough sleeper puts up a tent—yes, in some regards they are camping, but it is not a normal situation. Sometimes people will come to us, like the police or others, and say, "Can you use your rules that say 'no camping' to get the tents out of Martin Place?" We say, "Well, of course we can say, 'You can't camp here,' but we can't just go and take someone's tent. There's a person sleeping under it and we can't just make a person who is sleeping there move."

The Protocol says that if they want to be there they can be there, right? So we have to try and negotiate that. I am sure you all remember situations where there have been growing areas—Belmore Park has been one, and Martin Place—where there is tension between saying that, as a rough sleeper, you have a right to be anywhere, but how the being in those places impacts on other people and nobody really being sure who can do anything about it without breaching the Protocol. So, they are the sorts of sensitive issues that we have to all deal with all the time. That is why having a Protocol that we all use to guide how we do things really helps.

Perhaps that is why sometimes people see inconsistency. They might say, "The Protocol says you cannot move rough sleepers on but I seem to see that you are doing something about that. Why is the council doing that? Why are the police doing it? That does not seem consistent with the Protocol." It is because dealing with this issue is very, very complex and you are trying to navigate the needs of many groups: the rough sleepers, the business community, the residential community. No protocol is ever going to solve that problem, it just guides it, but that maybe where you sometimes see inconsistency.

**Ms VYSE:** Yes, absolutely what Ms Barone said. Just taking on from that, I think what the City of Sydney is very fortunate with this is that we have very collaborative engagement across our local area with non-government specialist homelessness services, with the police, the State Government, the DCJ and the HOST team. We run a service or a collaboration called the HART, the Homelessness Assertive Response Team, and that team has everybody coming together weekly and they talk about issues on the street. They then go out and suitably support people sleeping rough and manage issues in the public domain.

As Ms Barone said, our public space officers are out in the public domain every day trying to support people to get off the street and to get a home, a sustainable home, and to refer them to specialist services. Mr Swain, is in the thick of it every day. There are a few things that could be enhanced with the Protocol. I think that is around education across the non-government sector and specialist homelessness services with businesses

and residents too. That will increase the compassion and understanding around the needs of people sleeping rough and also what various levels of government can do and not do about things. There was one other thing that you said but I might have to come back to that, I have lost it.

**Mr SWAIN:** I will just reiterate what Ms Vyse and Ms Barone mentioned. My unit does a lot of public education with businesses with the homelessness one-on-one training which I guess fills that void around the Protocol education and that is probably something that was in the guidelines. It was meant to be a consistent rollout of training and education of the Protocol and I do not know if that happens as regularly as it potentially should, especially from an NGO space. The other difference potentially also from more regional areas is we are quite fortunate with a lot of wraparound services and I know that is looking at changing. If we have a response we can engage someone, like Ms Barone mentioned around tents. We can also bring in health services, NGO services, and the Department of Communities and Justice with their homeless housing outreach team. I know the Department of Communities and Justice is looking at changing that and rolling it out across the State but I think there is a big difference that probably needs to be considered as well. We have the Protocol but we also have a lot of services that we can wrap around that.

**The CHAIR:** Is there a strong chamber of commerce for the City of Sydney? Do you deal with the chamber of commerce with your role in local government?

**Ms BARONE:** Oh yes. We have the Sydney Chamber of Commerce and we are members. I spend a lot of time at the Chamber of Commerce and a lot of time attending their events or speaking at their events. We actually participate within the New South Wales Chamber of Commerce because we support the business awards for the New South Wales Chamber of Commerce. We do lots with them but that is our main relationship. Then we have the Sydney of Chamber of Commerce and then we have all the local chambers of commerce and we give grants to almost all of them. So we have very close relationships with business through many networks but the chambers of commerce are definitely one of them. We also are members of things like the Tourism & Transport Forum and Committee for Sydney. We are members of many of those organisations and so we interact through those people linked with business as well as directly with business.

**The CHAIR:** The only reason I ask is because I have quite an active chamber of commerce in my local area. I am curious to know if it would be helpful for some guest speakers to come out and talk to those businesses about street sleeping homelessness and what channels they can go to deal with some of the frontline agencies. I am sure there are a lot of businesses that would not even know who to call first apart from council and if they could have some of the other details to hand. I was just curious if that has ever in your experience occurred at any of the events you have been to?

**Ms BARONE:** I get a lot of calls and I am sure the staff do from businesses. And yes, we will often try to go through the peak body so they can disseminate that information more broadly. We have been talking recently and pre-COVID we were planning some business forums just to talk about rough sleepers and just making sure people understand how the system works and where they can go. It is interesting. Most of the people that I talk with, they really want to help. They know we are a very lucky and wonderful city and it disturbs them that there are rough sleepers or people who are not being able to be transitioned into permanent accommodation, so generally they are not complaining. I mean, sometimes there are interface issues. Generally they are saying, "The people we serve are actually keen to help, what we do?" I think your point is great. Maybe there should be a little bit more education and reaching out as well from the State Government maybe. I am not sure what the State Government does. That is what we do.

**The CHAIR:** I was just curious if you had ever been to an event where there had been a guest speaker that says or does a protocol hand out at that event. Obviously now with COVID events are a bit of a hard thing to do but I thought it might be something that we could look to do.

**Mr JUSTIN CLANCY:** I thank Ms Barone, Ms Vyse and Mr Swain. We really appreciate your responses. Is there a benefit to seeking those people or organisations that we should have as signatories to the Protocol that are currently are not there? For example, Business NSW, Local Government NSW? This is just a little add-on about how do we reach out with that consistency?

**Ms BARONE:** I think that is a great idea because if you sign the Protocol you have to read it and by reading it you engage with the challenge of what the problem is. The more people to develop some empathy and understanding of the complexity, the better for our society, right? We are not signatories but we would happily be signatories. Obviously I would have to speak to the Lord Mayor but I cannot imagine that we would not because we refer to the Protocol all the time. We may as well have as many as possible sign up.

**Ms MELANIE GIBBONS:** Your submission talks about needing a clearer definition of belongings. At the moment you use bedding, swags or two pieces of luggage. What would that look like and how would having a better definition make a change?

**Ms BARONE:** I might ask Ms Vyse or Mr Swain to comment and then I will join in, if needed.

**Ms VYSE:** A tent, for instance, it is not that the tent is there, it is that the tent is very unsafe if it goes up in flames. Tents do not just ignite; they melt onto somebody, so there are health and safety issues. I guess some of those intricacies of those things being spelt out a bit more in the protocol. The "two bags and a swag" is just something we use. It is not a rule; it is a guide. When we engage with business or when we are engaging with rough sleepers, we are trying to say, "Come on, you're getting a bit much here. Let's pack it up a bit. Let's contain your belongings. Let's look at what you need." Our public space officers do that all the time. They look at, "What do you need? What don't you need? Let's pack that up. You don't really need that", that sort of thing, just so that the belongings are contained. It is not that people cannot have belongings. Absolutely, they need to have belongings. We have done some very good things in the city so people can keep their belongings safe. I guess a bit more definition for other people in the city and for other services.

**Ms MELANIE GIBBONS:** One of the councils that spoke to us in the last public hearing—it was not the council, actually—mentioned that when people go for doctor's appointments and things, they leave their belongings behind and they may then be collected by the council. Are there parameters that need to be in place around that? Do you have certain guidelines there? What would you recommend the protocol have?

**Ms VYSE:** We certainly do not remove anybody's belongings. We never throw out people's belongings unless they have been left for several days. Maybe Mr Swain could explain the notices we give, what we do and how it is managed.

**Mr SWAIN:** Our team is quite familiar with most of the rough sleepers in our LGA. But if we come across belongings that either appear abandoned or might require tidying up, we leave a notice period—like, a letter and 24 or 48 hours' notice—to say, "We're coming back at this time to either remove the belongings if they are abandoned or to assist you to tidy up so that we can access the public space." That sort of mitigates it. It is quite rare that we are throwing—it is pretty obvious when belongings are abandoned. But if there is something within the Protocol, it allows that consistency. It might need a bit of consultation around what an adequate amount of belongings for a person would potentially be. But I guess because rough sleeping is transient in nature, it builds that consistency. The rough sleepers in our LGA who have been there for a long time are quite aware of the rules and the protocols because our public space liaison officers [PSLOs] have educated them over time and they are aware of their rights as well. But if they went to another council area or if they are coming from another council area and that same consistency is being embedded there, I think it will help across the board.

**Ms VYSE:** There is a service called StreetCare, which is the peer advisor. Everybody has a lived experience of homelessness. We engage with that group regularly around working with our street sleepers. Engaging with that group would be useful.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** I have four questions, so I will try to make them quick. The first is in relation to the public space liaison officers. It is something that has come up and we have discussed it in relation to them not being present in some regional areas where there are issues with the challenges of homelessness. I wonder if you are willing to speak briefly to it now, and perhaps provide additional information about how those roles work and maybe even provide job descriptions in more detail. It would be really powerful for this Committee to be able to make recommendations that we look at that more broadly. Feel free to comment now, or else take some of that on notice.

**Ms BARONE:** In the interests of time, definitely, we can provide the job descriptions. Definitely, we can provide any information you would like. It was something we put in place quite a while ago. I remember when we started doing it because we really needed people who could liaise between the rough sleepers and the business community, mostly. But I would have to say many councils would not have the resources of the City of Sydney for that sort of staffing levels. You need to think about that.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Wouldn't it be an amazing New South Wales Government job creation initiative in the regions? Ms Barone, you briefly touched on Martin Place. The so-called Sydney Public Reserves (Public Safety) Act 2017 that was implemented to move people on from Martin Place during Homelessness Week in 2017 was a clear blight on how that was handled. How do you feel that Act is now intersecting with the Protocol? Do there need to be changes around that, given that police now have powers that appear to contradict the Protocol and the approach?

**Ms BARONE:** I reread that Act this morning in preparation. Rather than make any comment, what I would say is that Act speaks to the challenge we had and sometimes have. What would be great is if we could

reconcile a way of dealing with those situations so that it does not become a stand-off. I am not going to say whether it should stay or should go. What I am saying is that happened because we did not have a way to deal with that particular situation. The only way to deal with that situation is to have enough homeless and crisis accommodation. These situations are going to continue to occur and we need to have ways to deal with it. The Protocol helps.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Further to that, we have heard and seen in some of the submissions the suggestion that the Protocol could provide guidance for how signatories to the Protocol and agencies work together and would collaborate together, as opposed to just providing guidance for how individual agencies work with people who are experiencing homelessness. Particularly on the ground, I wonder if either Ms Vyse or Mr Swain think there are lessons from the way the cross-agency and multi-agency work happens in the City of Sydney that might provide some recommendations for providing guidance in the Protocol for how agencies would collaborate together, with the ultimate goal of supporting people who are sleeping rough.

**Ms BARONE:** Ms Vyse, I think we agree, right? It is all about collaboration. You are dealing with housing, health, mental health, drug and alcohol, domestic violence, child protection—you are dealing with the whole range, so you cannot deal with it in silos. You have to have all the people together who deal with that—and public place, as well. The more we collaborate, the more we solve the problem. Whether the Protocol can give guidance to that or not, I do not know. Good idea. But collaboration is the only way to get it done.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** My final question is in relation to non-citizens. Obviously the Protocol does not discriminate and say people need to have an Australian passport to have their rights protected as someone existing in a public space. Sadly, almost all of the pathways from sleeping rough into homelessness services—whether it be temporary accommodation or access to public housing et cetera—include certain restrictions on who can access that. Given the numbers of non-citizens in our city, I wonder if the City of Sydney has any thoughts about how additional support can be provided to ensure that the Protocol has pathways for people who are not citizens so they do not continue to find themselves sleeping rough because there is no alternative option.

**Ms BARONE:** That has been a real problem for us over the years. If people are not entitled to the services, then there is no choice but them sleeping rough. That just cannot be. You cannot, on the one hand, as a society or community say we do not want people sleeping rough and then say, "However, a certain number of you are not entitled." Unfortunately, we have to get our heads around this one. We provide those services for everyone and then look at what comes after that. That is a big problem for us.

**Ms VYSE:** And it has been during COVID.

**Ms BARONE:** Yes.

**Ms VYSE:** People are emerging who are incredibly vulnerable—international students, temporary visa holders—without access to financial support and accommodation.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** Thank you for your submission and for the great recommendations you have made for enhancing the Protocol. Reading through the list, I probably support each one you are putting forward. Because you operate in this space and you have for a long time, do you think the Protocol should be complex or simple in terms of how much is in it? How specific should it be in terms of the criteria so that you limit interpretation?

**Ms BARONE:** I am going to ask Ms Vyse and Mr Swain. My gut reaction is that every situation is different and complex, so I do not know that you can write something that is too specific or prescriptive because you will find all sorts of times when you cannot apply it fully, and then that causes another conflict. Ms Vyse, Mr Swain, do you agree?

**Ms VYSE:** I absolutely agree, Ms Barone. I think the Protocol currently could be tweaked; it could have some of our recommendations put in there. But I think it is a very well-balanced document. Given some education and some more rollout across the sector I think it is a pretty good document.

**Mr SWAIN:** Yes, I would agree with both those statements.

**Ms VYSE:** If you make it too complex you run the risk of people not reading and utilising it.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** You made the statement that obviously if you have to sign it, you have to read it so that helps to make sure that it is understood, I suppose. Do you think the signatories to the Protocol should be just government departments or do you think anybody who is interacting with homeless people should potentially be a signatory to it?

**Ms BARONE:** I think that the more our whole society, our whole community is on board with helping to deal with the issues of vulnerable people, the better. When we all pull together and try to understand a problem

like rough sleeping and commit to working together on that it can only lead to better results in the community. If people want to sign it and sign up to understand, learn and try to abide by it that can only be a good thing, so it can be business and other local government, yes.

**Ms TRISH DOYLE:** I did not say this in the beginning, but as someone who had a loved family member who lived rough on and off for an extensive period of time, it impacts everyone. I would just like to say thanks to your team in particular. You know there are best-practice models and you talk throughout your submission about collaboration. I would just say that the one thing that you guys have not said here but is embedded in your document, and many others have alluded to this, is that we have to have in the Protocol some comment about a trauma-informed response. Thank you for your work.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Chair, I am going to be really cheeky and acknowledge that Ms Barone and I last sat on a committee together when I was first elected to the Youth Advisory Council on the former South Sydney Council. I am having a moment of going how lovely it is that we are now sitting on a committee again. I thank you all for your work.

**Ms BARONE:** Thanks, Ms Leong. Chair, may I just make a couple of closing remarks?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, certainly.

**Ms BARONE:** One of the things we talk about at the City of Sydney is that every rough sleeper is someone's son, someone's daughter, someone's child. Every rough sleeper has a name and we should know their name. These are human beings in our community. They have a lot of complex problems and they have a lot of very high needs; that is why they are rough sleeping. They are not necessarily rough sleeping because they have not been offered accommodation or services. It is because the complexity of their situation means that they cannot even take advantage of that offer. That group of rough sleepers is the most complex that we have in our society and in our community.

One of the things we need to also understand is that often people in the city have relationships with each other. They support each other. They know each other. What we do not understand is sometimes we say, "Well, why can't you just take a home in Blacktown or a home somewhere else?" We do not understand the isolation and dislocation that we are suggesting to them. There is a huge number of homeless people, but they are sort of couch surfing or in unstable accommodation. That is a different sort of problem. The rough sleeper community actually is not huge. We should be able to fix this, but it needs understanding that it is not just a bed; it has got to be the right kind of bed with the right kind of community and the right kind of services.

There have been studies in the past, and I am sure that we can find them again, that indicate that we are spending as much supporting someone on the street as we would spend supporting them in accommodation. It is not a question that we are not spending money on it. We are spending a lot of money and these people are still on the street. If this collaboration could lead to a situation where we spend the same amount of money to support people in the right kind of accommodation with the right kind of service then we would really have accomplished something. The Protocol is what it is. In a way it deals with having failed to have got people off the street. The relationships and the collaboration, though, have got to be about getting people into appropriate supported accommodation so that they are not on the street. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you everyone for joining us today. I appreciate your comments and submissions. As I said earlier, if you have any other submissions you would like to add, due to COVID and how the space has changed, please feel free to get that back to us. We would appreciate if it is returned within the next couple of weeks. Thank you so much for joining us today.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**(Luncheon adjournment)**

**NICK CARLILE**, Public Space Liaison Officer, Byron Shire Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**JENI POLLARD**, City Activation, Community and Place Manager, Penrith City Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**VESNA KAPETANOVIC**, Community Projects Officer, Penrith City Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**CHANTELLE HOWSE**, Coordinator Community Development, Tweed Shire Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**MEGAN ANG**, Acting Manager, Community Service, Hawkesbury City Council, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

**The CHAIR:** Who would like to be the first cab off the rank to give their opening statement?

**Mr CARLILE:** I would like to make a comment about Byron shire and my role as public space liaison officer. It is a brand-new role up here so we have been working actively with the community for the past 12 months and the submission we put together came through the Byron Homelessness Interagency and evidence we came across as public space liaison officers and our working group in council.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Howse, would you like to give an opening statement?

**Ms HOWSE:** Yes. Our response was put together in conjunction with our inter-agencies that we attend up here—similar to Byron.

**Mr JUSTIN CLANCY:** I am interested in homelessness and the Protocol from a regional perspective. We spoke with representatives from the Northern Rivers before about the particular and unique challenges of being in a border region, certainly from a southern perspective. I am interested in that as well but I would welcome thoughts on both matters.

**Mr CARLILE:** I guess to answer about the border region, we are probably not as affected by the border as much as Tweed Shire Council. I am sure they can speak more to that. The unique challenges for us are that we have a very high percentage of rough sleepers up here. I think it is around 45 per cent of the overall homelessness population who are rough sleepers, which is, when you look at city areas it is generally around 8 per cent to 10 per cent, so it is quite significantly higher. We also have a lot of homeless people who live in sand dune areas, so often they are out of sight from the general community but they do impact on local businesses. We get a public space liaison officer often dealing with local business owners. We often have to respond to those issues.

A complication that happens in Byron that I have noticed in the time I have been working here is that the land is owned and managed by different jurisdictions, so often getting a collaborative, cohesive response to address certain issues is very tricky. We had an example in Brunswick Heads recently so you have multiple organisations, whether it be police, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Crown lands, council all trying to work together and it really makes it quite tricky. Everyone is working on a different playbook.

The other issue we have is that we have a high percentage of people with pets or dogs. That can be a challenge in terms of safety concerns, particularly in public spaces, parklands and that sort of thing. Safety for services going in to work with people and trying to provide assistance can also be problematic. It can also potentially be an issue for the animals—the pets—in terms of getting adequate care. From a response point of view for services, at Byron Shire we do not have a lot of response services that are immediately close by to where we are, so if people want to access services, whether it is free accommodation or anything like that, often they will have to travel quite a distance, whether it be to Lismore, to Tweed or to Ballina, so it is half an hour to 40 minutes away. We have no temporary accommodation in Byron shire so it is hard to offer people services because that is a significant distance from where they are. That can be quite a challenge as well. I will leave it at that, if that is okay.

**Mr JUSTIN CLANCY:** Further to that, you talked about all having to be on the same—the gamebook, sorry. Do you utilise the Protocol as a common point of reference across agencies in your dealings with Byron council and out to other agencies?

**Mr CARLILE:** I am not sure about other agencies so much, but definitely from a business point of view, I find that when my colleague and I are out engaging with local businesses and that sort of thing we often refer to the Protocol as a way of providing some sort of reference to what our restrictions are and how we can work with people. But also just as a way of educating people about the Protocol and about how everybody has a



right to be in public spaces as well. It is definitely something that we would use as a tool, if you like, in that sense. Having it more in the public, in the community and more visible for people to understand would be very helpful to my day-to-day work.

**Mr JUSTIN CLANCY:** Do you feel that it is getting similarly received or utilised from, say, the police and the National Parks and Wildlife Service? Do you see that they are using it as their reference point as well?

**Mr CARLILE:** Everyone is definitely aware of the Protocol. I feel that it does restrict that collaborative approach. I mentioned that in my submission. We have people coming from very different angles and points of view in addressing certain issues. This is no criticism of any agency but often there might be a more punitive approach from certain organisations. My background is working in homelessness, even though I am working for council so we are there to try and assist. I guess anything that would make it easier to have a more cohesive, collaborative approach would be beneficial.

**The CHAIR:** I have a question about the Protocol being made more publicly aware. On the first day of hearings we talked about the City of Sydney having some of the Protocol points up on screens in places like train stations. From a regional perspective and your environment, what would be a good way to perhaps get the Protocol out to businesses? We also talked about the Chamber of Commerce, and things like that, having guest speakers involved in that space. Is there any recommendation or something that could be added into the Protocol that you think would enable us to make it more publicly aware for environments like yours?

**Mr CARLILE:** Yes. I know when I first started in this role—it has been almost 12 months—we were focusing on the education side of things and that was internal within council, so the frontline workers, but also for businesses as well. I did actually meet a lot with some of the chambers and we were floating ideas of having public forums or opportunities to talk about these issues and to talk a little bit more about the Protocol. Unfortunately COVID kind of knocked that on the head a little bit, so it has been set back. It is definitely a good idea in terms of a good way of getting it out there and making that sort of relationship. People are coming from different angles and different vested interests that are impacted by homelessness in this area particularly. Just bringing people together to be on the same page would be very helpful.

**Mr DUGALD SAUNDERS:** My question is to Ms Howse. I know in the Tweed you have had a lot of action from the assertive outreach team and quite a bit of a focus on that over the past year or so. Could you share how that works literally on the ground?

**Ms HOWSE:** The assertive outreach has been working well up here for the rough sleepers. We have a lot of similar issues to Byron around accommodation once people are identified. But in terms of the agencies working together, the assertive outreach is working really well. From a ranger's point of view, from a council point of view, we are really now just trying to get down into that finer detail of a range of contacts, the assertive outreach and formalising some of that, and what a ranger's role means, when the ranger's role finishes and when the assertive outreach picks up. Then the same with our customer service and parks staff and how we actually communicate to the assertive outreach team. That is some of the finer detail.

The Protocol definitely underpinned our homelessness policy, which we refer to a lot but we are now looking at more detailed protocols with better roles and responsibilities set out and real practical protocols for how we work with our assertive outreach team. I know there was a question about being on the border as well. Just like Byron, our services are stretched out across regions. For example, our nearest emergency accommodation is two kilometres over the border in Queensland, so we have used the Protocol in the past, especially when we were talking about the Commonwealth Games operation. We used that as an underpinning to have that conversation. There is a lot more work needed cross-border, because a lot of our population move across the border on a daily basis to access food services and other services on each side. With our border closures up in the air at the moment that is something we are looking closely at, what duplicate services might need to happen on this side if there is a hard border closure.

**Mr DUGALD SAUNDERS:** I think the Tweed submission talked about the relationship that you sometimes get. Maybe Byron or others have also included it—the role of the local council and how some ratepayers feel whether council should be involved in this sort of a strategy and how you interact with that in the future as well.

**Ms HOWSE:** Yes. We have looked at that for our community development strategy and homelessness came up as a really high priority, and most of our population are very supportive of council's role in that space from a coordination and obviously rangers and people who are in our public spaces, that sort of interaction. In terms of clarifying what is council's role, that did come up in that consultation as well, where we are not frontline providers in that space but obviously we do a lot in the coordination phase.

**Mr CARLILE:** If I can add to that. When it comes to the Byron point of view, we had very high levels of rough sleepers in the street count, only second to the City of Sydney in the most recent one in February. It has been consistent for the last 12 months or so. We have specifically employed—we have three positions, two public space liaison officers and a project officer to address the homelessness issue. We do not have the same level of services that the Tweed has, for example. We do not have assertive outreach through the DCJ, so I guess from a council point of view there is a lot of pressure on council. People look to council to respond to homelessness because there is a lack of services. There are more services needed, potentially, particularly assertive outreach on the ground.

**Ms TRISH DOYLE:** I would just like to thank everyone who has come along to talk to us today, especially when we cannot actually be in the same room together. It makes it a bit tougher. Thank you for your work. I will just comment on a couple of things that are in Mr Carlile's submission and if some people have some views. With most of our witnesses I have commented on the need for collaboration between services and how we embed that in the Protocol. Often that does not follow through to the implementation of the Protocol but Mr Carlile rightly points out that the Protocol assumes that there are services and referral pathways and often in regional and remote areas there are not. I thank you for making that point because there have been a few other witnesses where there is a plethora of services. We have to make sure that we note that for areas outside the city that is not always the case.

My second point is to congratulate you on mentioning the concept of trauma and how trauma-informed response and trauma-informed care need to be embedded in the Protocol. I am asking some of our witnesses today whether they want to speak to some of the particular types of sleeping rough and people experiencing homelessness at the moment with COVID. For example, we know that domestic violence is a big driver of homelessness. How do we incorporate particular experiences or particular groups of people experiencing homelessness? Would you like to comment on the sometimes lack of services? I am asking just anyone generally who wishes to comment on that.

**Ms POLLARD:** I was just going to refer that over to Ms Kapetanovic. We have experienced different types of homelessness during COVID and Ms Kapetanovic can speak to the detail, but certainly in the early days with the changes to the TA model, we saw a reduction in homelessness or visible homelessness in our city during the first six to eight weeks of lockdown.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Pollard, would you like to make an opening statement on behalf of your organisation?

**Ms POLLARD:** Thank you very much. Really I just wanted to open by thanking the Committee for the invitation to attend today and to be part of the inquiry. Penrith council has a very strong commitment towards reducing homelessness within our city and across western Sydney broadly. We have an approach where we are trying to work systemically not only to reduce homelessness but also to reduce the impacts of homelessness. We have our own protocol for service delivery for working with people who are experiencing homelessness, and that is very much informed by the New South Wales Protocol.

There are times at which we find some limitations with the Protocol in the way that it operates for us on the ground locally but we embrace the fact that it seeks to improve communication and collaboration between services. Council sees ourselves as having a really strong role in working in that space around working and supporting and resourcing local services but also through our people who are on the ground being able to be a touchpoint for people that are homeless as well and having direct contact and working in a way that humanises homelessness within our cities. That would be it from me. Thank you very much for the opportunity.

**The CHAIR:** Given that you have your own protocol for your council, what would you say would be the main difference between your protocol for your council in dealing with street-sleeping homelessness compared to the current State Government Protocol?

**Ms POLLARD:** Ms Kapetanovic, would you like to speak to that?

**Ms KAPETANOVIC:** Certainly the Penrith City Council protocol is very much based on the New South Wales Protocol. The New South Wales Protocol has a role in leadership for a whole range of organisations and local councils as well as providing a consistent approach. Our protocol is certainly very much aligned to the New South Wales Protocol.

**The CHAIR:** Nothing stands out as a thing that could be added to the New South Wales one that you are currently using with yours, or is there no major difference?

**Ms KAPETANOVIC:** Once again, I think it is really important for us for principles of collaboration and working with a wide range of stakeholders. What would be useful for the New South Wales Protocol is maybe looking at a clearer delineation of the roles within the framework in terms of a holistic approach and a

person-centred approach to responding to homelessness. Certainly there would be scope for that but in terms of our protocol aligning us with the New South Wales one, there is certainly much overlap there.

**Mr JUSTIN CLANCY:** I am interested in what you mentioned, Ms Pollard—that there are perceived limitations in the New South Wales Protocol in how it works on the ground. Could you please comment around that, Ms Pollard?

**Ms POLLARD:** I think that we spoke to the point in our submission that sometimes the Protocol is stand-offish with people; that it does not support an assertive or proactive response and in some ways confirms homelessness and kind of normalises rough sleeping rather than supporting us to be able to work in a way where we can approach, obviously in a very respectful way, because these are our residents and our community. We are very keen to work in a way that we can approach, that we can provide some support resources, early intervention, assisting in [inaudible] encampments before they take hold for too long a period of time and become normalised within the community. That is where we would see some of the primary kind of gaps is for us in terms of the New South Wales Protocol.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Ang, would you like to start with an opening statement?

**Ms ANG:** Yes. I thank you for the opportunity to speak today. Hawkesbury City Council did not make a submission but I am very pleased to have the opportunity to come along and address the Committee. Hawkesbury City Council has a long standing history of a collaborative effort to address homelessness. I think we inducted our first policy in 2002 and that was refreshed and revised in 2014 following the release of that Protocol in 2012. The sentiments from Hawkesbury City Council are probably echoed in many of the other submissions in that our council's interpretation and associated application of the Protocol perhaps led to a passive response, similar to what Ms Pollard was saying, possibly inadvertently encouraged all agencies to stick to their bidding, I suppose, in terms of sticking to their core business and not being more assertive or interventionist at appropriate times and obviously in a trauma-informed manner as the Protocol encourages.

Despite our best efforts Hawkesbury City Council saw a significant rise in the growth of tent encampments in our local area, particularly with one encampment doubling in size between 2016 to 2018. It was a growing cause for concern. Again, similar to that which Mr Carlile spoke about before, Hawkesbury, despite nature, is on the rural periphery of Sydney. It has a lot of bushland and some of the encampments were quite hidden. Whilst on land that is deemed to be publicly available, it is not land that was regularly accessed by the public. I guess there was not a lot of public amenity in that expected public urgency around wanting council to do something to address the encampment. The unfortunate reality is that there is a well-known shortage of access to readily available temporary accommodation as well as social housing in the local area so it could be surmised that there was some level of tolerance and acceptance by our local community that this is just the state of being compounded by a whole range of factors that were easily being able to be addressed by the service system.

It resulted in Hawkesbury City Council actually following the lead of Penrith City Council and Wentworth community housing that led a cross-agency approach. I think that was in 2018, around Judges Carpark and I note that Ms Ranft from community housing did reference that project briefly this morning. What is interesting is that we had the same agencies who were working in accordance with our interpretation and associated policy of the Protocol for some years. But having really a time-limited and action-focused project encouraged agencies to move into a new space. We were able to achieve some really significant housing outcomes for people within a really short space of time. But it did require a significant commitment, having all the right agencies around the table at that point in time and, I guess, really drawing the line in the sand quite publicly that as a collective we were not satisfied with the conditions that these people were living in in encampments were satisfactory and we could not keep that up. I am happy to make a submission with some notes about this. I understand I am able to do that at a later date. I note they would have some matters similar to what was experienced in Penrith that I am sure she would like the opportunity to speak to the Committee about.

**The CHAIR:** If we do have some further questions we will email them to you. If you would like to respond we would appreciate it if you could do that within two weeks. If there is anything that you would like to add to a submission you have already provided, or send one in, please do so within the next few weeks. Obviously from when the inquiry started to this date the homelessness space has changed somewhat with COVID-19 and the way the Government has dealt with some of those issues. If you have anything further you would like to add we would appreciate your feedback.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** It is really great to get a local perspective on this matter and to see where things are shifting in terms of the need and space. I acknowledge that today it is a focus on the inner city but we know that the issue of rough sleeping and homelessness expands across our State. I thank you for all the work you are doing. I want to ask about a recommendation that came out of the Penrith submission in relation to the idea of seeing local action committees. A lot of submissions talked about the need for more collaboration and potentially

for the Protocol to include more specific guidelines for collaboration between agencies and how agencies work together as well as how people interact, or agencies interact directly with people experiencing homelessness.

If you want to take this question on notice and provide more detailed examples of where that collaboration works, it would be appreciated. Does anyone have any thoughts about how the Protocol might be further enhanced to encourage better collaboration? Is there support for the recommendation from Penrith around local action committees across the State being established to ensure there is some accountability in terms of the adherence and delivery of the Protocol? Ms Kapetanovic may respond to that and others may indicate if they want to jump in?

**Ms KAPETANOVIC:** Thank you for the opportunity to provide more information on the Local Action Committee. Certainly Ms Ang from Hawkesbury City Council spoke about this and Ms Ranft. Locally we have experienced issues with encampments developing. That has been quite difficult to resolve and the key to resolving this issues has been the establishment of an inter-agency model where there is a whole range of stakeholders, local, State and communities. What happens within these committees is that people's experience of homelessness is reduced. They are referred appropriately. Services often need to work quite closely and with each other in terms of responding to issues. In terms of the effectiveness of that model, we have certainly had a positive experience and can see room for this within the Protocol, or even within the New South Wales Homelessness Strategy. If clearer links can be made within the Protocol and the Homelessness Strategy, that would be quite helpful.

**Ms HOWSE:** At the moment we have at least three inter-agencies within the three areas that have grown from different needs in the past. We are just looking at a review of those. There are already three inter-agencies working under different strategies. We were talking to Byron a few weeks ago and we identified more with them. We are looking at how we can coordinate those. So if it can be driven from the Protocol level it might make it more coordinated in the future. Also at a strategic level of operation and then down to the by-name concept where some agencies can actually share by name so that the people we treat for homelessness are covered for multiple times by multiple agencies. We were just looking at that because if that can be driven from the Protocol level, it would be useful.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** I acknowledge the detailed submission provided by Tweed Shire Council. It is really wonderful to have that perspective and detail before the Committee. I want to specifically ask a question in regard to the recommendation on page 6, which states:

Clearly outline the roles and responsibilities within the Protocol of government and nongovernment organisations contracted on behalf of government in the implementation, measuring and reviewing the delivery of the Protocol and resource accordingly.

In the Government's submission to this inquiry, it made it very clear that it thinks the DCJ is the lead agency and that there are clear protocols for how training and implementation of this Protocol works across agencies, but in every non-government submission we have received there have been calls for more accountability, reporting, reviewing and compliance when it comes to adhering to the Protocol across agencies. Do you have any thoughts about how best that might be done in terms of making sure we are not reporting for the sake of it, while at the same time making sure there is accountability that the Protocol is being adhered to? Maybe we can hear from Ms Howse and then hear from the other councils for their perspective on how that could be managed.

**Ms HOWSE:** Just off the top of my head, we are talking about those action groups—it sort of follows on from the previous question—that they have some clear implementation plans for that Protocol, and reporting and monitoring how this could be [inaudible]. That is my initial thought.

**Ms ANG:** I just note that the human services outcomes framework, which is referred to in the Homelessness Strategy, provides a really good framework as a basis for encouraging more cross-agency collaboration. It is now an opportune time to leverage that as well, in that many State-funded agencies are now developing their funding contracts and associated activities for the next five years in alignment with that human services outcomes framework. It is a fantastic planning framework that really encourages agencies to clarify what their role and responsibilities are in relation to a particular issue. It provides a really solid evidence base, which the State Government has already got some rich data on, but then, importantly, building to contract and performance long-term outcomes that actually stipulate that there is a cross-agency approach in addressing whatever issue it is.

It is absolutely applicable to this homelessness space, particularly when we are looking at factors that influence homelessness, such as DV, family crisis and so on and so forth. It is a fantastic framework. It is already embedded within the Homelessness Strategy. I think the Protocol making reference to the Strategy is fantastic. DCJ is currently investing significantly in a ready-made planning framework for the rollout in terms of educating family services or targeted earlier intervention funded providers. If that is something that could be looked at more broadly across service systems that interface with homelessness, that would be wonderful.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** One of the things that has come up on a number of occasions has been the real support and recognition of the value of public space liaison officers. I note that we have some of them on the call. Do councils have those roles and would they be happy to provide more details about the programs, the kind of job descriptions and how those units or teams work. We have asked the City of Sydney the same. It would be really powerful. One of the submissions makes it very clear and suggests that the New South Wales Government considers funding such liaison officer roles to assist with implementing the Protocol and assisting people into pathways to housing. It would be great to get further details on how those public space liaison officers work in councils that are not in the middle of the inner city.

**Mr CARLILE:** We at Byron council modelled our public space liaison officer roles on City of Sydney, so we worked fairly closely with them. Obviously we are in very different environments and the roles are going to take shape quite differently, but we did base it on them and I am more than happy to share any further information on that. I think it goes back to what Ms Howse was saying previously in terms of the council's response. There is that gap between the rangers and rough sleepers and knowing how to address the situation or get them into services. There definitely needs to be a role there to fill that and I think the public space liaison officer role does that really well.

**The CHAIR:** It is a bit like being a Member of Parliament. Our roles are very similar but our situations are very different depending on where in the State we are, so the role is similar but different in many ways.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** I acknowledge your submissions and the hard work that you have done putting them together. They raise some really good recommendations. We will be looking at them very seriously, particularly about the role of the public space liaison officer, as Ms Leong just raised. The point that the City of Sydney made was that they have the resources to fund such a position whereas regional councils may not have those resources. I would be interested to hear if you think that it would be useful to have that position across all local government areas or whether it would be better to be a hotspot issue, so where there is a highly identified need. The other point that I would like to hear from people about is training. A couple of submissions raised the issue of making sure that staff of Government departments were properly trained in the Protocol and whether that training should be mandatory. I am happy to hear anyone's thoughts on that.

**Mr CARLILE:** I can comment on the public space liaison officer role, given that is my role. I think it is probably a better use of resources if it was a targeted role. I know with Byron we have a very high number of rough sleepers, so I think if it was in accordance with the street count where we know there are a lot of rough sleepers and there are a lot of issues there, it is probably a better use of resources.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** Given that you are in the role, there used to be a road safety coordinator that was a council position but funded by Roads and Maritime Services. Would you see that the role you have has the capacity to be located within council but funded externally?

**Mr CARLILE:** I am not really sure. I cannot really answer that one, sorry.

**The CHAIR:** You said you had another role as well as the public space liaison officer. What was your other role?

**Mr CARLILE:** I am also Project Officer, Rough Sleepers. One is more outward facing and in the community. My project officer role is more internal at council and running the interagency and the internal working group on homelessness, and also the project that Ms Howse touched on about the by-name list and various things that we are trying to get off the ground here, whether it is in Byron or Byron-Tweed, we are not really sure.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you everybody for joining us today. We really appreciate all of your submissions. Keep up the good work. If we do have further questions for you we will send those through. If there is anything else you would like to add to your submission, please ensure you email it back to us. We appreciate your efforts and all of the work that you do out there.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**PAUL VEVERS**, Deputy Secretary, Housing, Disability and District Services, Department of Communities and Justice, sworn and examined

**ANNE CAMPBELL**, Executive Director, Housing and Homelessness, Department of Communities and Justice, sworn and examined

**The CHAIR:** Just so you are aware, today's proceedings are being recorded, both audio and visual. Do you have any questions about the proceeding?

**Mr VEVERS:** No

**Ms CAMPBELL:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you again for joining us today. Would either of you like to make an opening statement? Who is going to be first cab off the rank?

**Mr VEVERS:** If I may please.

**Mr VEVERS:** I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Gadigal of the Eora nation. From our point of view the Protocol continues to be a useful document. We think it is needed because our experience tells us that people from government agencies who are perhaps not familiar with people sleeping on the streets often do not know what to do, whether they should approach someone or not approach someone. We do think it can be improved, especially based on our experience of the last three years. I wonder if I might just very briefly say what that experience has been in the last three years.

The tent city in Martin Place changed everything for us. It told us that the way that we normally work, which is inviting people to come into our office, does not work with people sleeping rough; I do not think a single person came from the tent city into our offices. So we take our office out onto the streets now. In Sydney, Newcastle and Tweed Heads we have dedicated staff and that is their role, to go out onto the streets. We and the City of Sydney together have funded non-government organisations to go out on street patrols as well. But what we think has made a really big difference is having housing staff out on the streets. At the risk of a pun, it is because they hold the keys to long-term housing.

During COVID we have hugely increased the amount of outreach that we do—from those three locations now to 51 locations around the State where we do street outreach—and it has brought us into contact with so many people sleeping rough. In fact, since 2017 we have had 8,500 engagements with people sleeping on the streets or sleeping rough. Often that is the same person multiple times—it is not 8,500 different people, but it is a lot of contact—and we have repeat engagements with many of those people because our philosophy is not to give up unless we have to. There are occasions when a person sleeping rough makes it absolutely clear either they really do not want to engage and then we will give up, but the reason we do that is because so often people sleeping on the streets do not believe that they can be helped.

From my own experience, I have engaged literally with hundreds of people sleeping rough, with our patrols and so many times people have said to me, "I used to have a public housing tenancy. I'm afraid some mates came round and they damaged the place and so I just upped and left and now I'm barred from the social housing system." We do have a policy that says if you damage a place we do ask you when you come back into social housing to pay towards the cost of that, but we are not going to let that policy mean that someone carries on sleeping on the streets or sleeping in a park, so we break our own rules. We actually break quite a lot of our own rules where rough sleepers are concerned. As an organisation we are absolutely passionate about helping people to come off the streets and into a permanent home, so we very much welcome the opportunity to answer to the Committee this afternoon.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Campbell, would you like to make an opening statement as well?

**Ms CAMPBELL:** No, I am fine, thank you.

**Mr JUSTIN CLANCY:** Mr Ververs and Ms Campbell, thank you for your time. I have a couple of questions. What work has been done to ensure that agencies that are signatories to the Protocol have implemented the Protocol according to its guidelines? I am also interested in that one of the previous witnesses spoke about broadening the signatories and offering the opportunity for more signatories to the Protocol and, to their point, they suggested that the more organisations that become aware of this Protocol the more uptake in that regard. Would government have an interest in expanding the signatories to the Protocol? The first question is agency response and implementation and how we ensure that agencies are implementing the guidelines and, secondly, opening the Protocol up to further signatories.

**Mr VEVERS:** I might start the answer to that question and then ask Ms Campbell to join in. It is a self-policing protocol. The Department of Communities and Justice does not actually police it but, as you know, we have issued guidelines to agencies and also offer some training to agencies as well. In terms of expanding it to other agencies, we do think that including local government would be a good idea. Where local government gets involved in homelessness it can make every difference in the world. We work really closely with the City of Sydney; their street count, the rangers that they use, the fact that they provide lockers for homeless people to put their goods in, these are all really, really practical examples, and we have other councils who work incredibly closely with us—North Sydney Council, Byron Bay Council—and I think expanding the Protocol to include local government would be a real bonus.

**Ms CAMPBELL:** The other thing I would add to what Paul Vevers said is obviously a lot of the training around the implementation back in 2014 was some time ago. I think there is an opportunity to update the Protocol given the current environment. Equally, there is an opportunity to really look at how we engage other key players in the implementation of the Protocol and at updating the resources, looking at the resources being increasingly focused on a more trauma-informed response to people sleeping rough. I think what both Paul and I have experienced through COVID-19—and I have been part of the Sydney task force around rough sleeping—is the importance of engaging all the key stakeholders in the local community to really bring to task all their resources to assist people off the streets. That has been my observation more recently. I think we can learn from some of those approaches to make sure that the implementation is not just a one-off but is an ongoing iteration where we update things around for example the NDIS—the current Protocol does not really mention a lot about people with a disability—and also engaging not just State players but the NDIA in this approach to reducing rough sleeping in New South Wales.

**Mr JUSTIN CLANCY:** To your point, the Government response has that the original aim was for the current Protocol to be reviewed formally every two years from date of publication in 2012. The review in 2014 found the two-year time period too frequent and not reflective of change. I understand that was the last review, so we went from seeking a review every two years to six years after the last review. Was there reasoning behind that?

**Ms CAMPBELL:** I think that was fair feedback in that agencies felt every two years was too often. As I understand it we were about to review it back in about 2016 or 2017, but we also then looked towards the Homelessness Strategy. In a sense we really looked at pulling together work around the Homelessness Strategy, which was implemented in 2018. We would have been looking at reviewing the Protocol probably late last year, but we have this inquiry so this is a great opportunity to get broader input into that review.

**The CHAIR:** Training has definitely been a running theme through a lot of the submissions, and consistency, so regularly updating the training. As far as training goes, what initiatives do you think would be helpful to some of the agencies in your department? How do you think you will approach it, moving forward?

**Ms CAMPBELL:** I think it will be different for different locations. Certainly what has been useful more recently is we have partnered with Homelessness NSW, who have really led with DVNSW [Domestic Violence New South Wales] and also Yfoundations, on a number of webinars with staff around new initiatives that are rolling out and using that as an opportunity to get key experts to talk about the specific issues. That seems to have had good feedback. We do have an industry partnership with Homelessness NSW, DVNSW and Yfoundations where we can look at them taking the lead in terms of developing resources. We fund those three organisations through that partnerships approach to really look at what is the most effective way that people are actually going to understand the Protocol. I think Paul mentioned earlier that not everyone touches this Protocol, but when they do, they kind of need to know what to do. It may need to be a tiered approach to training and resources as well as keeping key contacts up to date, so that if a person in a particular organisation has not had contact with a person sleeping rough they know where to go to seek advice.

**The CHAIR:** That has also been a theme that has run through: where do you start to feed down the chain? Almost like a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book where you have page one, and the next question leads you to the next page and the next agency. That has also been a bit of a theme with some of the submissions that we have had as well. From the Government's perspective, moving forward again, have you come up with any strategies of how we may look to change some of that?

**Ms CAMPBELL:** I think certainly within government, the key government agencies having an agreement on what are joint resources and joint training. Different agencies are going to implement resources depending on the particular agency they represent. It is about how you get something that might be on the internet that people can access to people on the ground who are delivering the services. It really comes down to the local implementation and having a greater focus on making sure that frontline staff and their managers know where

these resources are, and perhaps within our specialist homelessness websites having some key contacts so that people know where to go to if they do need to access that information.

**The CHAIR:** That has definitely come through, having it all in the one place for people to find it. It is almost like having Service NSW as your starting point, or something to that effect. I know Housing has online applications, so perhaps there is another aspect to that that we could work on.

**Mr VEVERS:** The other thing that we are trying to do is to give people the opportunity to come out with us when we are doing assertive outreach. That happens quite a lot, especially now that we are operating right across the State as opposed to principally within Sydney. But within Sydney, every Tuesday morning we start in Belmore Park, or other locations, and sometimes half the people there would be people who are not normally involved in this. We try and show them this is how we approach people who are sleeping rough; this is how we try and link them into other support services. That is a really practical way of getting people to understand how they can behave when faced with working with someone who is sleeping rough.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Clancy, Ms Leong and I did an outreach session at Belmore Park.

**Mr VEVERS:** You did.

**The CHAIR:** That is right; you were there that day. It is invaluable for people to have that hands-on experience. Obviously there is a process involved with making that happen, because you do not want to have 20 people lobbing up all at once, but it certainly was beneficial. Again it comes back to the training. It has been a recurring theme just how to train people and get the message out there. There have been suggestions of it popping up on screens perhaps at Central Station, and some of those sorts of things, to get messaging out to the greater public. It is all that assumed knowledge. If you are working in the space you have a certain level of knowledge, but for the general public, it is about how to navigate that a little bit better. I think overwhelmingly most people want to be helpful rather than make life harder for people who are experiencing homelessness. We also need to look at how we can move forward with some of those initiatives, as a Government and as all the different agencies working together, to have some cohesiveness with how we can better do that. We need to try feed it into the protocols moving forward and have on paper how to navigate the system.

**Mr VEVERS:** Absolutely.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** It might surprise everybody that I should start by acknowledging that the COVID response and the issue around making sure that people who were sleeping rough were housed and supported during that time has just astounded me. It has demonstrated in practice what a housing first approach can do to change the lives of so many people. It is an acknowledgement of, and a credit to the way that DCJ has worked with the different agencies that have been offering those solutions. I acknowledge in your submission that you mention that more than 585 people who were living on the streets were housed safely. I imagine those COVID numbers are quite different. I wonder whether you are happy to take it on notice, or maybe you have them to hand, how many people were cumulatively housed during the pandemic? How many now are in temporary accommodation? How many have been housed? How many are back on the street? You may have some of those figures now, but I am also happy if you want to take them on notice.

**Mr VEVERS:** I do. All up—this is not just people sleeping rough, but all types of homelessness—we have assisted 13,428 households since 1 April. Of those, 2,863 told us that they were sleeping rough. Now we are surprised at that number because it is greater than any other estimate of the number of people sleeping rough, but we just take it at face value. If somebody says, "I am sleeping rough", we take it at face value and we work with them as such. On average, people sleeping rough stay in temporary accommodation for 20 nights. That tells you that quite a lot of people leave temporary accommodation. Lately we have engaged Neami, a mental health non-government organisation, to make contact with those people within 24 hours of them arriving in temporary accommodation so we can try and hook people in, if I can use that term, to engage with us to look for a longer-term solution.

More people than we would like come into temporary accommodation and do not really engage and then leave. We have been trying various things during this period. One of the most successful is we turn up in the hotels where we have accommodated people and we run a pop-up session. We get people to engage with us and talk to us. Last night we had 312 people who were sleeping rough in temporary accommodation and we had about 1,400 people in all in temporary accommodation. The majority of people are not sleeping rough. They are people who are couch surfing and that has come to an end or they have fallen out with their family and had to leave, and so on. Most of those people do seem to be able to resolve their own needs.

Since 1 April we have housed 375 people sleeping rough permanently. We would like more. Once we get people into social housing the success rate is phenomenally good. If I go back to the Martin Place tent city, every six months we track all those people that we have housed since then. That is over 700 people just from



Sydney that we have housed and 90 per cent of them are still in their social housing. Some of them go onto the streets during the day because we know that loneliness is the biggest issue for people. But what we do is we check that they are still paying their rent and that they are still in contact with their support service. The retention rate is brilliant once we get people into social housing. Our challenge is to get a higher conversion rate, if I can say that, of people who come into temporary accommodation, and then we want to get them to stay in the temporary accommodation and go onto housing. That is where we lose quite a lot of people back to the streets, but we are learning ways of re-engaging with people.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Do you have real numbers or names of the people that were in temporary accommodation that have gone back on the street? Obviously that is a high-risk and vulnerable category. I do not expect you to have seen the submissions made last week but there was a really tragic situation of someone that was not able to be—I think it is wonderful to hear when government departments say that they are willing to break their own rules to put people first. But in this case we heard a quite disturbing situation of the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre trying to support and get an additional weekend of support because that worker was working part-time. The person had decided not to engage properly with the services, was put out of temporary accommodation and soon afterwards passed away. It would be great to get the Department's response back to that specific incident, if you are happy to go back and have a look at the transcript on notice.

**Mr VEVERS:** I am happy to do that now.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** But more generally I think the idea of how many people have moved back onto the street—why you think that is and where the gaps are in either government protocols or policy that means that can happen and what more needs to be done.

**Mr VEVERS:** Yes. I think what more needs to be done is happening, to a degree. I think much of that is thanks to the Coalition to End Street Sleeping—is to focus everybody's resources on a number of people who are extremely difficult to help. These are people who have often gone into temporary accommodation or gone into a homelessness service. They may have behaved unacceptably. They may have damaged the place and nobody will take them back in again. There is a small number of those people. But, together with ourselves, all the major non-government organisations are gradually beginning to have some success in looking outside the normal box. Health is essential. I would have to say in Sydney we have brilliant support from St Vincent's Health and the other health districts. So, I think it is about looking very, very hard at each individual case.

Specifically in relation to [REDACTED], I will, if I may, leave a statement with the Committee. We work incredibly well with Newtown Neighbourhood Centre. We are actually one of their major funders. The work they do in supporting people in boarding houses is astounding. I have to say we take a very different view to what I believe was said to the Committee about [REDACTED]. He was not barred from having temporary accommodation. In effect, he was not using the hotel that he was given. So, he did not want to have any contact—firstly, can I say, it is absolutely tragic that someone leaves any form of homelessness accommodation and then is found dead. I do want to acknowledge that. But we had on our records that if he approached us again he was to be taken back into temporary accommodation. So, we were not barring him, but the hotel was saying to us they did not even think he was using his room. For us to keep paying—so, we let that run for 10 nights. To be honest, to be paying for a room that it is not clear someone is using is not a good thing to do. But all our systems had a flag. If at any time, day or night, he contacted us again we would have taken him back in, but we never had further contact with him.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Thank you. I appreciate you providing that clarification. Can I ask to turn now to another part of the submission where we talk about the development of the plans around a protocol to strengthen no exits into homelessness from government agencies? There seems to be a direct link between—and we have heard from many organisations, as you can imagine—that ideally if there is enough social and affordable housing then the numbers of rough sleepers would significantly reduce. Particularly in relation to anecdotal stories of people leaving prisons during the pandemic, but more generally people exiting prisons or juvenile justice systems and not having alternative accommodation available to them. What arrangements are currently in place to prevent this from happening in the middle of the pandemic? What could we learn from that, knowing that probably there are more heightened resources right now than there might be at other times to connect that intersection between the protocol around public spaces and no exit into homelessness?

**Mr VEVERS:** Specifically in relation to prisoners, absolutely. They are a group at high risk of homelessness. We do have an arrangement, before COVID and during COVID, that nobody should literally exit onto the streets. So, all prisons have a link to a direct number to book temporary accommodation for any prisoner on release who does not have anywhere to go. That has been in place for some time. I think that is helpful but it probably does not really go to the core of the matter. People go into temporary accommodation. They then link with us. We expect them to look for private rental accommodation. If they cannot find it, we look at them for housing. But what we need to do is get further advanced in doing this just on the point of release. We are running

a pilot now, together with Corrections, in four prisons: Dillwynia, Parklea—sorry, I knew I should never say a list of four—and two other prisons.

Three months before release the prisoner is allowed an hour to engage with us. Normally they get six minutes to make a telephone call. Corrective Services give them an hour and we then do a telephone assessment of their housing needs. That gives us three months before their release in which to start looking at, "Well, is this someone that we think could cope in private rental, so we give them financial assistance into private rental? Or is it someone who really is never going to succeed in finding a private rental?" So, it is a pilot at this stage. We are wanting to see how resource intensive it is. We are wanting to know we can succeed. We are having some successes and we are having some challenges with the number of people who just disappear when they come out of prison. But we are on a pathway to learning what we can do more effectively. I might hand over to Ms Campbell, as well.

**Ms CAMPBELL:** Yes. There was a thing called a Framework for Multi-Agency Client Transition Planning to Prevent Homelessness that was established back in 2012, which essentially was to look at people not exiting government services into homelessness. That was reviewed last year and there was a kind of governance that included health, education, legal aid, Aboriginal affairs, Department of Planning, Industry and Environment et cetera. Out of that review of that previous protocol they have identified a need to focus on different cohorts. So, the different cohorts to focus on are young people leaving care.

You may have heard of the Premier's Youth Initiative which really focuses on young people leaving care so that they get access to accommodation, case management, mental health, drug and alcohol services. That supports about 446 care leavers each year. The second cohort Mr Vevers mentioned is around people being released from adult correctional facilities. The third one is young people being released from youth justice, so we are doing some work around that at the moment in an interagency context. People transitioning from health facilities. Under the Homelessness Strategy we have invested \$20 million in the Home and Healthy program, which is being run by Mission Australia. It started in about August last year and it is focusing initially on South Eastern Sydney and Sydney local health districts.

Once the pilot has been tested to see if it is working and preventing people exiting health facilities into homelessness, we would then be looking at expanding that to up to 1,000 clients so it will be really interesting to see how that goes. So far that program is full and within that cohort there are a percentage of people who are rough sleepers as well. Then the fifth cohort is people leaving social housing following a failed tenancy or they have significant complex needs which means that they get exited for whatever reason. We just invested last year under the Homelessness Strategy in sustaining tenancies, which is really to wrap supports around people with really complex needs in social housing. Under the COVID-19 response, last week Minister Ward announced an additional \$4.5 million for additional sustaining tenancies programs, recognising that going through this period at the moment where people are not necessarily able to see people face to face can cause a whole lot of issues for individuals.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** I will turn to a couple of things that have come out in the submissions around the Protocol and get your thoughts on them. One is the suggestion of looking at more public reporting around the training and implementation. The member raised the issue of a two-year review versus a six-year review and what the timing is but also the potential to include in the Protocol some kind of reporting on what training has been done by agencies and how often that is done. And then linked to that was the idea of looking at location-based local action committees that would be responsible for having multiagency oversight and delivery and implementation of that in areas. Do you have thoughts about the idea of some form of public reporting to ensure some accountability around that to ensure consistency of training? What are your views on the establishment as part of the protocols of local action committees, for example, that may take the responsibility to a local level? We see that collaboration does appear to be working very well in a multi-agency response.

**Ms CAMPBELL:** I think it is probably a good idea to have some public reporting and maybe link it with other initiatives in the homelessness space. I get concerned when we set up yet another committee, particularly in a district because there are existing mechanisms. It is the same people who attend those meetings. It could be added to existing governance.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Maybe we could just give a committee that job rather than start a new one.

**Ms CAMPBELL:** That is right. At the moment in New South Wales what we have in the homelessness space are called district implementation groups, which have NGOs, local government, all the key players who are working in the space of homelessness. If you could add it into that as part of that reporting that would be useful. Those groups usually feedback systemic issues to central bodies and at more senior officers group level across the central agencies of different government agencies there is an interagency group that could loop in, so the group

no exits from government services would be an obvious one that any systemic issues that might come up from the local level where policies may be preventing things happening.

Sometimes it comes down to what the resources are in those local communities to be able to access housing and long-term housing but I think that would be a useful thing to do as long as it is not too onerous to people and it is really critical, like the training is linked. It is one thing to run a training session, but do the people actually understand it? Is it actually making a difference for people who are homeless in New South Wales? It would be good to be really focused as well around the outcomes for individuals.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Can I just ask one question around the potential tensions? What is the model—which I think everyone agrees is a good model—around assertive outreach in terms of assisting and supporting people to get into housing versus the elements of the public space Protocol which are very much about recognising people's right to exist and be in a public space? I wonder if you have thoughts on how those two complexities might be better improved in the Protocol. In addition to that, looking at whether there are any plans around either expanding the assertive outreach programs to other hotspots? We heard just before this from Byron Shire Council and north New South Wales and western Sydney councils that obviously have challenges around that and do not have the same coordinated assertive outreach programs that are currently existing in the trials that were mentioned in your submission.

**Mr VEVEERS:** Yes. Three years ago I probably would not have said this but three years on from doing assertive outreach I think the Protocol probably could be strengthened a bit in terms of people being more assertive than less assertive. The Protocol currently says that a homeless person is not to be approached unless they request assistance, but our experience is so many do not believe they will ever get assistance or do not believe they are entitled to it and unless you are reasonably assertive with them—I mean, there is a point at which I have had people sleeping rough say to me, "Look mate, this is about the sixth time you have approached me and I am really okay." I think when you reach that point you have to say, "We have probably gone over the top here and we should just respect your right to sleep rough." But there are many, many other people who, as I said before, just believe that they have burnt their bridges and nobody will assist them. I think we could be a bit more assertive.

The expansion of assertive outreach has really happened since COVID. Byron Bay is certainly one of the locations where we are now going regularly. We did a street count between February and April and Byron Bay certainly came up with a large number of rough sleepers. We found the council to be keen to work with us and so we are now doing regular assertive outreach. I am not bang up-to-date but a few weeks ago it was weekly that we were going into Byron Bay. There is virtually no social housing in Byron Bay. That of course does pose a bit of a difficulty. Casino is the nearest big centre. A lot of people that we meet in Byron Bay are not willing to consider Casino, so we are looking at that as a challenge but nevertheless we are now getting out. That is true across all of the locations where we did the street count where we found significant numbers of people sleeping rough. We adopt one of two strategies. In about half of the cases we would go out regularly ourselves, in the others we use a sort of call-in mechanism with police, council, sometimes our staff will alter their journey to work so that they can check those locations where there are not always people sleeping rough. We do a mix of both.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** You have answered all of my questions. I had questions about Corrections and mental health as well but you have answered that. Coming from the Central Coast I am interested in whether you think the current Protocol, which was developed for Sydney are 100 per cent relevant in regional areas. You have mentioned already the lack of social housing in some areas and also the lack of services. We have not had a great experience today but through telehealth or these sorts of things, are there any other avenues that could be outlined in the Protocol to give people assistance if it does not exist in their current areas?

**Mr VEVEERS:** There are some locations where people sleep quite remotely and the North Coast is definitely one of those. We equip our staff with a van that is equipped with computer equipment et cetera, so we can deal with a housing application on the roadside or in a park. So we are developing some of those strategies for more remote locations. Specifically in the Central Coast, there is a wonderful collaboration between the non-government organisations and ourselves. A lot of the assertive outreach is actually done by those organisations. There is a hub where everybody works together and seeks to case-manage the individual people sleeping rough. In many ways, that is almost an ideal example of collaboration between services.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** One area that has been raised in a couple of submissions has to do with how you deal with pets. Do you have any thoughts about adding those into the Protocol?

**Mr VEVEERS:** I can tell you how we deal with pets with people sleeping rough. It is actually one of the main reasons why people with pets will not go into specialist homelessness services. They will go into temporary accommodation, so we just try and find a temporary accommodation provider who will take pets or we offer to put the pets—if it is a dog, which it most frequently is—into kennels. We pay for that for people sleeping rough.

Most people sleeping rough, very understandably, do not want to be parted from their pets. It is definitely a challenge because I would say the majority of hotels will not accept pets, but some do.

**Ms CAMPBELL:** I think we are experiencing that now with the Together Home program, which you have probably heard about. That was the recent \$36 million for both head leasing as well as wraparound supports. A couple of the community housing providers have identified that for a couple of those individuals who have been sleeping rough, they do have pets. They are accommodating that. The other point to talk about in terms of the outside of Sydney responses is that a number of the packages have gone out across the State, including to Central Coast, Newcastle et cetera.

What you are now seeing is community housing providers really working with some of the most complex people who have come off the streets and looking at how they access those wraparound supports. So I think you are going to see a greater number of players having a real lens and a focus on assisting rough sleepers. But I think the Protocol is fairly silent on pets in there. When someone is sleeping on the street and they have a dog or whatnot, they are not necessarily going to want to be separated from someone who is a constant in their lives. So I think there needs to be something that makes sure that people take into account the needs of the person sleeping rough and their pets.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** You have talked about agencies being signatories. We have heard from a large number of non-government organisations that they would like the opportunity to be signatories. Do you see whether that is appropriate? Is there a role for those organisations that are dealing with people on the ground being signatories to the Protocol as well?

**Ms CAMPBELL:** I cannot see it being an issue if they are working in the space of assisting people who are sleeping rough. I think local councils should be really encouraged to be signatories to this, because I think certainly the Sydney Council has played a significant role. You cannot do this without working with the key people who are working and delivering services to people who are homeless.

**Ms MELANIE GIBBONS:** Following on from that, are there any ramifications if an organisation does not comply with the Protocol?

**Ms CAMPBELL:** Obviously if it is a service that the DCJ funds and they are refusing to provide a service to an individual on the ground, we have got contractual obligations with those NGOs so that we can work with them to understand why they may not be complying with a particular guideline. But that would be on a case-by-case basis.

**Ms MELANIE GIBBONS:** Would that mean more work and monitoring from your end? Would adding more signatories then create a greater workload for you?

**Ms CAMPBELL:** It would depend on who the signatories are and how material they are in delivering the services. Obviously, if they are unincorporated bodies or local interest groups it is a different issue. But if they are key providers and they are funded by the State to deliver the services to people being homeless, then that should be captured in our existing contractual arrangements.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Is there a similar level of accountability on that for government agencies? That is where we are hearing some of the challenges are, because I think there are contractual arrangements with service providers that are funded through government that would require some adherence to that. Are there any issues around other government agencies not adhering to the Protocol? What are the repercussions of that?

**Ms CAMPBELL:** I think if it came to our attention that one of our government partners was not engaging in the spirit of the Protocol, we would raise that through the normal means. Normally you would try to work it out at officer level, but obviously if it is a significant issue you would flag it with the Deputy Secretary or the Secretary to resolve that issue. But I have not, in the time I have been in this role, had any issues in relation to that.

**The CHAIR:** In relation to the Protocol and our own government agencies—Housing, for example—if someone is new to working in Housing and has just started a job there, I am assuming it is part of the training that they are made aware of the Protocol. Is there a bit of a tick-box test or something that pops up every now and then just to remind people of what the protocols are that deal with people who sleep rough?

**Mr VEVERS:** We now have a standard obligatory qualification for people in Housing, which we did not have before. You have to get qualified to Certificate IV level once you join. I would have to check whether that goes through the protocols. But we do specific training for anybody who is going to be doing assertive outreach. They have a special training program which references the protocols and we are building on that to focus more on—I hate the jargon, in a way—a trauma-informed response, as people say, to understand why people sleeping rough may respond in a way that does not appear to be helping themselves, for example.

**The CHAIR:** The reason I ask is that my office deals with people who are homeless and we try to help them engage with Housing. I think it would even be of benefit to electoral office staff to be made aware of the Protocol. There is a renew password box that pops up every so often. It could be something like that: a regular thing so people could just read it and tick off, "Yes, I have read that for this six months". It is just a bit of reinforcement for people who deal with it but who are not doing assertive outreach so it is not their core business.

We experience that in our office. It is not every day, but we do come across it. I have felt that is something that has popped up throughout people's submissions. Not everyone is across how to manage this all the time. Knowledge is power. That might be something we need to do as a Government for people who work for government, whether it be Housing, electoral office staff or some of the other agencies. As I said, it is not their core business but we do come across it. It is perhaps just a little bit of reinforcement of where to go—tick off reading this. That could be something to look at too, just from an agency perspective with the other agencies.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** We have seen in a number of the submissions the high rate of Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness. We got some good evidence on the first day of hearings around how best to engage if the protocols are to be developed further and adapted, so that we could then engage further so that there are people co-designing the protocols who can connect with communities. Can you talk about how the response during the pandemic has responded in relation to Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness, and also what culturally safe practices have been put in place that could then inform the development of the updating of the Protocol?

**Mr VEVERS:** Yes. In Sydney, our patrols are conducted with Innari, an Aboriginal organisation. We also have a number of Aboriginal staff ourselves. Again, as part of the training for assertive outreach, cultural awareness is a part of that. It does get a bit more difficult when you get outside of Sydney because there are not as many organisations available to do it. But we are very conscious that 22 per cent of the people who come into temporary accommodation are Aboriginal, which is vastly in excess of their presence in the population at large. So making sure that the support services that we contract with do have Aboriginal staff, the largest organisation we contract with is Neami, and I was running over exactly this with them last week about what proportion of Aboriginal staff they have and making sure that we are culturally sensitive and making sure that when we do house people, we are looking at where we can house them. We jump rough sleepers up to the top of the housing queue, with every justification in the world. Because we have 100,000 properties across the State, it does give us some freedom to be able to locate people, hopefully if they want to be placed close to family, to locate them closest to their family.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** The other part around cultural sensitivity is those who are non-citizens or who do not speak English as their first language. When we joined one of the teams on a Tuesday morning it was very evident—and I am not suggesting that we should have the capacity to have every team speak every possible language of people who they come across—that if someone did not speak English as their first language that the only thing they were provided with was a card that had English-written details of how you call the translation service, which is obviously far from ideal.

We are also aware that with this Protocol and the assertive outreach, the idea is to give people pathways into housing and long-term housing. If people are not able to access the other elements of the DCJ support, because they are not citizens, and if there are limits around the idea of engaging with people on the street to provide that support because of language barriers, do you have recommendations on what needs to be done to address this? Obviously it does not work to assertively outreach to people, connect them in with something, to find that there is no pathway for them into housing because they are not eligible for any of the options of temporary accommodation or housing services long term, as well as the issue around the actual initial interaction may be challenged.

**Mr VEVERS:** I need to look at the card. If it is only in English, that does not make sense. I am sorry. I did not realise that, so I will take an action to look at that. Probably more people call than are picked up through assertive outreach. They call Link2Home and 95 per cent of people who come into temporary accommodation come in through Link2Home. The staff there are trained to recognise—and it is not difficult—someone who does not speak English well enough to go through the process. We have links into All Graduates Interpreting and Translation Services. Sometimes when they have to call someone back via the phone it works pretty well. On the streets we can—I will definitely correct that. In terms of citizenship, it has been government policy for as long as I can remember that housing assistance is provided only to permanent residents and citizens of Australia. But specialist homelessness services are able to take non-citizens. It is into public housing that that is a government policy that we must not provide it.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** How does this Protocol work in practice? Obviously the Protocol does not discriminate and recognises people are able to or have a right to be able to exist and be respected in their dignity. I appreciate the specialist homelessness services are good and we have heard from services that offer that scope

to be able to additionally support people and not want to put them back out on the street. What is the solution to that long term? Especially in the current pandemic where people are not necessarily able to leave easily and are here, what is the solution to that? It is not acceptable to just have non-citizens sleeping rough on the streets.

**Mr VEVEERS:** The solution would require a policy change for that to be the case. The Commonwealth Government has just funded Red Cross to provide assistance to homeless people who are non-citizens as well. We refer people in that situation either to a specialist homelessness service or the Red Cross.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Another question that has come up, which your officers would interact with, is the issue around the complexity of the forms that need to be filled out and the level of identification required to get yourself live, if you like, on the housing waiting list and then to be given priority housing. There were two concerns that I would like to have your thoughts on. The first is the application cannot go live, in a sense, until all of those documents and identification have been clarified. Some people, because of their complex mental health issues and trauma, need the housing before they can find themselves in a stable enough position to be able to get all of those other forms of identification and other things.

The other really concerning point that was made is that proving your aboriginality is required before you can have your housing progressed. What is happening in some cases is that people who identify as Aboriginal are unable to provide that proof and are not identifying as Aboriginal so it makes their form go live quicker. They are not identifying that they are Aboriginal because that will hold them off from being able to do that. What could be done to improve that system so that people who are in need of somewhere to live can get that first and have some process afterwards to make sure the necessary documentation is done? It would particularly be great if you could look into the tick-box requirement around aboriginality. It would cause a lot of concern to all of us if that was what was happening, if people were not identifying themselves on purpose when filling out the form.

**Mr VEVEERS:** I can address both of those points. Outside of COVID-19 we have been working with Service NSW to try and overcome the difficulty for people getting identity, particularly when they just do not have documents. That is an ongoing project. Since COVID-19 we took a decision that we were not going to require people sleeping rough to demonstrate their identity until they get to the point of getting a house, that they actually get allocated. Usually it is a good two months before we get to that point of trying to find the right property for them. That gives us a chance to work on their identity and providing the people can come up with something we have relaxed a lot of those requirements, including the requirement to have a medical assessment as well, because in the early stages of COVID-19 people could not even get a medical assessment done. That is easier now.

During COVID-19 there is not an issue. They are outside that streamlined approach that we are developing. In terms of aboriginality, there is no requirement to prove you are Aboriginal to get public housing. We ask people if you identify as Aboriginal and there are certain policies that apply if you are Aboriginal, but for public housing that is all self-identified. The requirement comes from the Aboriginal Housing Office. If you want to get allocated an Aboriginal Housing Office property—and generally you will get that quicker if you can do that—that is a requirement of the Aboriginal Housing Office. I would have to defer that question to them.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Just to clarify, it was not suggesting that someone should be eligible for Aboriginal housing unless they can provide the necessary confirmation, the issue being the option of saying that you were Aboriginal, then you needed to provide that proof before your housing application could be progressed for a general spot. It sounded like there was a problem with the integration between those two elements.

**Mr VEVEERS:** I will have a look at that. Most of our applications now come by phone or online. That should not be an issue. The phone staff are trained to know how to deal with that, and online I think it is pretty clear. I will double check for sure.

**The CHAIR:** When you were talking about going out regionally and having some of the assertive outreach sessions there, is it possible to look at the Service NSW regional buses and perhaps utilise those somehow in that outreach? If they are going out there anyway, working together in some of the other areas, it could be something to look at.

**Mr VEVEERS:** Absolutely, it is. We did that after the fires down south. We and Service NSW went to the same locations, so absolutely we can, yes.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** Mr Vevers, given you just mentioned the fires, a couple of the submissions have looked at the idea of the need for other crisis response measures within the Protocol. Obviously we are currently dealing with one as a health crisis, but extreme weather events have been flagged. Given your recent experience with the task force around COVID, do you have thoughts on what might be included in the Protocol to deal with extreme weather events and other crises that might be necessary? We have also had the issue of communities where there are big activities and events—not that they seem to be happening anymore, but assuming they may

happen again in the future—around Newcastle or areas where car races or other things happen, which then creates challenges and pressures. Are there things that you think would be useful in the Protocol around those?

**Ms CAMPBELL:** I do not think you can write a protocol that covers everything but, perhaps, if you can put into the Protocol something that triggers where there is a significant event in a community, what the mechanisms are to bring people together. What worked particularly in Sydney was bringing all those key players together. Mr VEVERS is currently working around social housing as well. Maybe a trigger point, something that will impact on a significant part of the population in a local area or statewide, that there be mechanisms in the Protocol to tick off that you need to develop something or contact someone to pull together the key people, and make sure that if government has the levers around that that they are engaged in the process. I do not how you would craft it.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** No, I appreciate that, Ms Campbell.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** If I could just expand on Ms Leong's last point, people are suggesting that we are proactive. If we knew that there was a big east coast low coming, that there would be a trigger for a set of strategies to make sure that people sleeping rough would be given dry accommodation during that time, or when the smoke was around. It is not necessarily that there is an event, although an event like the car racing would empty out all your temporary accommodation. It is more about there being a weather event or something that was coming, not to wait until people were in trouble but proactively get out there and assist people.

**Mr VEVEERS:** I think it is something we can look at. On events booking out all the accommodation, we are pretty okay about that because we know when they are coming up and pre-book accommodation. We have an extreme weather protocol between ourselves and the City of Sydney. In extreme heat that triggers our staff, rangers and health staff to go around and check that people have water and that they know where to go to get out of the extreme heat. If there are several days of very cold temperatures and it is raining, the protocol is that we open up a facility overnight—we did it recently, and a couple of years ago we opened up Abraham Mott Hall in Millers Point and our staff and City of Sydney staff took people in and then Missionbeat helped transport them into hotels that we booked. That operates in Sydney and we can look at whether we should trigger more urgent outreach activities ourselves. If I, again, could take that as something to look at.

**Ms JENNY LEONG:** It would also be great to get the department's thoughts on expanding that extreme weather agreement with the City of Sydney more broadly across the State, and whether that could be incorporated into the Protocol in some way.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much for being here this afternoon. We appreciate it and we appreciate your submissions and all the great work you are doing.

**Mr VEVEERS:** It is a real privilege, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** If we have any other questions, we are asking all of the witnesses to respond within two weeks so that we can incorporate them into the papers. Because things have changed due to COVID, if there is anything you would like to add to your original submission you are more than welcome to in the next couple of weeks.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**The Committee adjourned at 16:04.**