

**Supplementary
Submission
No 180a**

**INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL, PUBLIC AND AFFORDABLE
HOUSING**

Name: Cr Irene Doutney

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Councillor Irene Doutney

Sydney Town Hall
483 George Street
Sydney NSW 2000 Australia

GPO Box 1591
Sydney NSW 2001 Australia

Telephone +61 2 9265 9700
idoutney@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au

cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au



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Select Committee on Social, Public and Affordable Housing
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to write on this important policy issue. This is a supplementary submission which follows my earlier submission to the inquiry. This supplementary submission concerns the link between the lack of appropriate housing and the indicators of social disadvantage (clause 1.(b) in the inquiry's terms of reference). More specifically, I will be focusing the provision of crisis accommodation in relation to the Government's new homelessness strategy, Going Home Staying Home, and its impact on inner city services for women escaping domestic violence.

As a Councillor on the City of Sydney I have had the opportunity to oversee Council's work in the area of homelessness. The inner city is a focus for a high number of homeless services, however, there remains a significant homeless population in the area. A key element of the Going Home Staying Home (GSHH) strategy seeks to address the 'inner city drift' when those suffering from homelessness come to the inner city to access services. Providing services for homeless people or those at risk of homelessness in their community of origin is a commendable goal. However, this strategy is inappropriate for individuals, mainly women, who are escaping domestic violence. This strategy will also not assist those who are currently experiencing long term homelessness in the inner city.

The implementation of the Going Home Staying Home strategy will represent a loss of \$6M from inner city homelessness services. This change in approach will also result in the closure of the City of Sydney's referral service, the Homeless Persons Information Service (HPIC). In 2013 HPIC handled 51 741 calls to clients. On average this represents over 141 calls per day for the inner city alone. HPIC is to be replaced by a state-wide referral service which will be the responsibility of Housing NSW. I am unable to comment on the likely number of calls the new service will receive from across NSW, however, the high number of calls received by the City alone would indicate that Housing NSW will need to make a large scale investment in the expansion and training of their workforce.

The GSHH strategy cites obvious advantages of centralising a contact point for homeless services across NSW. In table 1 of the Reform Plan document client service is described under this new model in the following way, "Clients receive

city of villages

seamless services from a system that is better coordinated and connected.” Although the current model of Specialist Homeless Services (SHS) is divided along regional lines the GSHS Reform Plan makes the assumption that the current service model is broken. In the inner city this assumption has been brought to bear on smaller specialised providers such as women refuges who are now unable to meet new tender criteria which favours larger providers who cater for a wider range of homeless cases. This move towards more broad based service providers ignores the complexity involved in dealing with women’s homelessness and domestic violence. It also fails to acknowledge the specific service settings that traumatised women escaping violence require. The inner city women’s refuges currently under threat from this policy shift have spent decades demonstrating their expertise and success in providing a path for women and children out of violence. The inability of these organisations to service the needs of all domestic violence victims in the community is a reflection of the shortfall in resources in funding and not a failure to effectively service and support their clients.

The City of Sydney’s recent February 2014 Street Count identified 346 rough sleepers and 446 people in hostel beds across the local government area (LGA). These numbers, which have been roughly consistent over the past five years, indicate that at least 40% of the City’s homeless population is not being serviced by crisis accommodation. It is important to note that these figures do not include homeless people who may be staying with friends or family to avoid sleeping on the street.

Data compiled by the Australia Bureau of Statistics and Homelessness Australia indicate that women make up 40% of rough sleepers and 48% of homeless people who are currently staying with friends or family. They also represent 28% of people living in insecure accommodation such as boarding houses.¹ While poverty and lack of affordable housing can play a role in women’s homelessness, the most common primary reason for women’s homelessness is domestic violence. The 2011 Census reveals that 32% of all those seeking homelessness services, both men and women, are escaping domestic violence.

While the goal of treating victims of homelessness in their community of origin is a commendable one this framework will ultimately fail women who are escaping from a violent partner (or ex-partner). For these women, and in many cases their children, it is critical that they are found appropriate accommodation and other related services outside their community of origin. It is simply not safe for them to remain in a community where they can be found by the individual perpetrating the violence.

The inner city has a long history of providing women’s refuges. After the first refuge was set up in 1974 the inner city has become home to a number of services dedicated to helping women and their children. In addition to providing crisis accommodation for women, these refuges also put them in touch with other support services. A number of women’s organisations based in the inner city have access to

¹ Homelessness Australia

[http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/UserFiles/File/Fact%20sheets/Fact%20Sheets%202011-12/Homelessness%20&%20Women%202011-12\(8\).pdf](http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/UserFiles/File/Fact%20sheets/Fact%20Sheets%202011-12/Homelessness%20&%20Women%202011-12(8).pdf),

Housing NSW properties to provide victims with housing security in the medium to long term.

Under the Going Home Staying Home strategy the properties under the control of these critical services are to be re-allocated by Housing NSW. As part of the \$6M that is to be re-directed from the inner city to regional areas the government has reduced the tender programs and funding available for specialist women's services. In order to be granted a tender many organisations would be forced to amalgamate with a specialist men's service or to open their existing programs and services up to men. When dealing with women who are escaping violence perpetrated by men it is broadly considered inappropriate to provide services in an environment that also caters for men. Services for men experiencing homelessness are equally important, however it is vital to acknowledge that women and children escaping domestic violence have very different needs that must be met in an environment where they feel safe.

According to Homelessness Australia the majority of people turned away from homelessness services are women with children². All of the specialist women's services in the inner city operate at capacity and experience higher levels of demand than they are able to service. Under the current policy settings I understand two of the almost twenty women's only services in the inner city area are now closing. I am concerned that without adequate funding more may follow. These services have operated for 30 to 40 years and within them hold a vast amount of expertise on dealing with the victims of domestic violence. As it stands, the GSHS strategy completely disregards the complexities that dealing with these victims demands. These services operate differently to those set up to treat people suffering drug addiction or mental illness precisely because they present very different challenges.

I support the emphasis on homelessness prevention, however, the GSHS strategy presents scant detail on how this might take shape. The varied reasons for homelessness – domestic violence, drug addiction, mental illness, lack of affordable housing, unemployment and insecure work - mean that a huge range of policy settings would need to be changed in order to make an impact. It is unclear how the Government intends to 'rapidly re-house' people who face repeat homelessness. In NSW the waiting list for public housing is currently 12 to 15 years. In my first submission to the inquiry I argued that the Government needs to urgently invest in additional and appropriate public housing stock. Without further investment in this area the Government cannot address long-term or recurring homelessness in an effective way.

The importance of 'housing first' principles in dealing with homeless and rough sleepers is well known. However this is reliant on the creation of more public and affordable housing. There can be no improvement in homelessness, the housing waiting list or reallocations if there is not more housing provided. All the aims of the GSHS strategy rely on appropriate housing within both the cbd/metro, districts and

² Homelessness Australia

[http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/UserFiles/File/Fact%20sheets/Fact%20Sheets%202011-12/Homelessness%20&%20Women%202011-12\(8\).pdf](http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/UserFiles/File/Fact%20sheets/Fact%20Sheets%202011-12/Homelessness%20&%20Women%202011-12(8).pdf)

regions. The GHSH strategy encourages a 'rob Peter to pay Paul' type scenario. Rapid re-housing cannot succeed when there is a housing stock and maintenance crisis with over 57 000 people on the waiting list.

As I said earlier, the goals of the GHSH – to focus on prevention and to break the cycle of recurring homelessness – are commendable. However, these goals cannot be achieved by a simple re-allocation of resources. There remains a need for expanded crisis accommodation in the inner city and elsewhere in NSW. Cutting down on crisis accommodation for women experiencing homelessness before strong preventative and long term housing strategies are in place will produce poorer outcomes for the most vulnerable people. For any strategy to be a success there must be an increased investment in these much needed services.

More broadly I would also like to comment on these reforms in light of the current and future Federal Government policy settings. Many of the measures set out in the budget such as the six month wait for Newstart payments for those under 30 and the increased costs of primary healthcare will increase the financial burden on the most vulnerable people. Ultimately these pressures will result in greater demand for homelessness services. Without large scale affordable and public housing available increased homelessness is an inevitability. Long-term housing solutions are critical, however, under these forthcoming policy settings it is not appropriate for the NSW Government to be reducing crisis accommodation in the inner city.

I hope that the committee members make strong recommendations to the Government on the GHSH strategy as part of this inquiry. Homelessness services are often overlooked as part of the housing policy debate and it is important that there are services in place for people with a wide range of needs and situations. As I said in my first submission the provision of long term housing solutions is in dire need of expansion. However, in the current climate it is critical that crisis services are boosted and that women's only services continue and expand to meet the growing needs of our state's vulnerable people.

Yours sincerely,

Irene Doutney
Greens Councillor