

INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS AND LOW-COST RENTAL ACCOMMODATION

Organisation: Wagga Wagga City Council
Name: Ms Sue Wilson
Position: Social Planning Coordinator
Telephone: 02 6926 9309
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Wagga Wagga City Council

Submission

Inquiry into Homelessness and Low-cost Rental Accommodation

During the development of the Wagga Wagga Community Social Plan 2009-13 broad community consultation was undertaken, with both community members and service provider stakeholders. These consultations provided the Council with information about people in need of accommodation and also the need for innovative low cost rental housing options. In response to the Terms of Reference for the Standing Committee on Social Issues Council staff can provide the following information:

Models:

For the Homeless:

- There are numbers of local people living rough who are homeless. Many of these have significant mental health issues so it is vital that any accommodation options developed include support for their mental health. Unless this is addressed they will not be able to develop the settled state of mind which will allow them to maintain a regular accommodation option. For those who have been without accommodation for a long time there is a need to put in place connecting support services to encourage them to connect and become willing to actually take up the option of accommodation. This accommodation needs to be placed carefully in locations which will allow them to stay within familiar areas. It also needs to have innovation of design and flexibility incorporated so people who have been living free do not feel trapped by the indoor living spaces.

For those at risk of homelessness:

- There are a second group of people who have the potential to become homeless. These are people who have little or no family support and come into the area on release from prison, or looking for work, or moving on from other aspects of their lives. These people need to have a street front connection point available to them so when they arrive they can plug into support services immediately. In terms of those released from prison there is a need for support services to work with the Corrections in preparation for the person's release and have accommodation in place so they have somewhere to go when they are released. In addition if there are mental health or drug and alcohol problems for those people the support services need to be available at the same location for an immediate plug in. The local Indigenous Elders have requested hostel and short term accommodation options for those who arrive in town looking for work, or to attend another service. This

would obviously provide a solution for this group, but would need to have support services in place.

For young people:

- The anecdotal evidence suggests that the numbers of homeless people are disguised by the fact that many people "couch surf". This is particularly true for young people who will sleep on a couch at friends, relatives or acquaintances if they can no longer stay at home. Young people do not leave home without reason. In the first instance it is important to support those families who can stay together to do so, by providing family conflict resolution services for families in conflict. This could be connected via schools and TAFE Colleges where young people are often in attendance. When young people report conflict with family then a service could be provided. In the second instance when it is apparent that young people cannot stay at home because it is not safe, then counseling services need to be available together with accommodation options where the young people are safe, but also have adult carers in attendance to provide support and direction. The model could be small group homes or hostel style accommodation.

For women:

- There is a need for more housing options for women who are victims of domestic violence which would also allow these women to move out of these violent relationships more readily. The women's shelter model works well for crisis accommodation. Access to other social housing options is important. This could be done via rental support models, or funded social housing, but these homes need to be located throughout suburban areas and not co-located in housing "estates". They need to have access to transport and schools and other services which support the woman reclaiming her life, and that of her children.

For those with disabilities:

- The other group for whom homelessness is a fact of life is the disabled. The fact that many people with significant disabilities live with ageing parents because there is no supported accommodation options for them means that these people are effectively homeless also. This is a deep and worrying problem in every community across Australia, and one which is only going to get worse as parents age. The models required to meet the needs of people with disabilities cover the full range from independent living with visiting support through to fully supported high need accommodation which in some cases will need to be tailor built for the individual. Importantly these housing options need to be placed in the wider community as placing people with disabilities in social housing "estates" often puts them at risk due to the social dysfunction occurring all around them. There are many excellent models used overseas which would work in Australia. There is a need to engage developers in this process by requiring them to provide a proportion of houses

for people with disabilities in each estate they build. This could be done by providing them with the specifications and having them build them with the rest of the estate. In this way a range of housing options in an estate could be created.

For older people:

- Older people on low income who wish to live independently, but with support, also find it very difficult to access suitable low cost accommodation. Location of some of these people within social housing estates places them at risk when these estates have associated social dysfunction. Other options are often not open to them due to their lack of financial independence. In Wagga there is a very good model working known as Abbeyfeld. This is a model in which there are several small units collected around a common living/eating area and with an attached managers unit. This accommodation is only available to older people on full pension, and the cost structure is built around their pension. It is suitable for those who are independent but need someone available for support on occasions. This is an excellent model and while the one in Wagga was built and is run under a community management committee model, there would be a place for developer involvement in building these, with a management committee overseeing the operations. Again there could be a requirement that a developer builds one or two such places in each development they undertake thus providing a supported accommodation model for people as they age, but so they can remain housed locally. Similar models could be developed in a culturally appropriate way for older Indigenous people and those from culturally diverse backgrounds who are ageing because currently they have very limited options for housing which is suitable to their cultural requirements.

Methods for fast tracking delivery of low-cost rental accommodation:

- The delivery of low-cost rental accommodation can only be fast tracked by providing incentives for that housing to be delivered. In addition there is a need to create smoother and more effective bureaucratic requirements and responses around this. The providers of these types of accommodation must be in a position to make it attractive for the private sector to deliver a cost effective, quality product within a time frame. The solution to this is to make the whole sector more competitive.

Methods for attracting private sector investment in low-cost rental accommodation:

- Private sector investment needs to be encouraged and made financially rewarding. The carrot and stick method is the most effective and can be created by providing incentives for land-lords to rent to that demographic through rental compensation for properties rented to low-income renters. Increases in rental assistance may also support people with low income levels affording rental properties which might otherwise be out of their reach.

- In addition the private sector needs to be encouraged to build low-cost rental properties by both financial incentives and also through legislative requirements for developers to deliver a proportion of each development as housing stock for low-income earners, older people and those with disabilities as discussed above.

Barriers to growth in low cost rental housing:

- The most obvious barrier is the fact that rental vacancies are low and so landlords can ask and receive a rental premium on properties.
- In addition there is no incentive to build low cost rental if it is more financially attractive to build and rent high end property.
- Finally there is the capacity for people with socially challenging behaviors to maintain rental properties. Landlords have even less incentive to rent at the low-cost end of the market if the properties are not maintained and therefore create reduced overall income for landlords through the up-keep on the property. There is a need for support services including Housing NSW to provide education to people about how to maintain a rental property so they do not lose the properties they are able to rent.

Strategies to avoid concentrations of disadvantage and grow cohesive communities:

Two key strategies need to be undertaken; one for the future and one to manage the present.

The future:

- In the future all social housing/supported accommodation options need to be fully integrated into the wider community development. This will require the types of initiatives discussed above, with incentives to the private sector and legislative requirements to developers re local housing development.

Managing the present:

- Managing the present requires gradual dispersion of all social housing estates and purchase of housing in the wider community across all communities making housing available to people to live in their local area where they can have the support of family and friends.
- It also requires the provision of support services locally so that people who require support to live, due to mental health issues, drug and alcohol dependencies can access support easily. A current project being undertaken by Council and funded by Housing NSW in one social housing in Wagga has given clear evidence of the large numbers of people in social housing already who have mental health issues and it has provided clear evidence that getting appropriate support services co-located with housing is best practice in terms of meeting the needs of those with mental health issues.

Service Provision:

In conclusion it is important to reiterate the importance of support services to people living in social housing and supported accommodation options. Housing NSW is a provider of accommodation to people with mental health issues, drug and alcohol dependency, disability, ageing, ex-prisoners and low-income. These people have challenges with living that require support services and they require those support services at easily accessible points. The community centre/community hub model of service provision is a very effective one. Consideration must be given to the coordinated service delivery models that are required to support the clients of social housing in all aspects of any changes which are considered. It is essential to the success of the outcome.

For further information on this submission please contact Council's Social Planning Coordinator on 1300 294 442.
