

**INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS AND LOW-COST
RENTAL ACCOMMODATION**

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The Director
Standing Committee on Social Issues
Parliament House
Macquarie St
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Homelessness and low-cost rental accommodation

Dear Ms Simpson

Homelessness NSW is the peak body for the adult homelessness sector in New South Wales. We represent homeless services for single men, single women and families. We work collaboratively with Governments, other peak bodies, community organisations and the private sector to advocate for homeless people and services that support them.

Being homeless is a complex issue, created by the failure of a variety of service systems. Homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless are affected by common themes that include social exclusion, an ineffective service system, lack of access to housing that is affordable to people on low incomes and a lack of support and supported accommodation services.

Most people don't choose to become homeless – it is not a life style choice. Being homeless is being without: without shelter, without resources, without support, without recognition, without power to influence society.

Homelessness NSW is delighted that this inquiry is being undertaken. For too long people experiencing homelessness have often been shadows – unseen by the rest of the community. On any night in NSW over 27 000 people are homeless in NSW.¹ For couples, with or without children, financial difficulty is the primary reason for presenting at a specialist homelessness service.² Decisions by governments that

¹ Australian Census Analytic Program: Counting the Homeless, cat 2050, September 2008

² SAAP National Data Collection Agency (NDCA) report series no. 12, October 2008.

enable people to either access housing, or remain in their existing housing will have an impact on the levels of homelessness.

When we recognise that homelessness is about more than 'houselessness', it becomes clear that an integrated approach that takes into account the many factors that lead to homelessness is required.

For most people experiencing homelessness there is a need for support services, relevant to their needs. It is generally accepted that the longer an individual, or family, experience homelessness the greater the level of support that will be required.

The advice Homelessness NSW has been consistently receiving from our members informs us that the rate of homelessness has increased in the past 15 months, and that there are a new type of person approaching homelessness services. These are people who have previously never had any contact with the homeless service system. For many of these people what is required is an early intervention scheme that diverts them from the path of homelessness. For most, but not all, this would then require minimal support.

This is supported by evidence from Housing NSW. Last year Housing NSW recorded an increase of more than 7600 in the number of people seeking immediate housing assistance, which is an average increase of 643 people per month on the previous year.³

The demand for temporary housing cost the Department more than \$9 million, a 51 per cent increase in spending compared to last year.⁴

One of the areas Homelessness NSW has been investigating is better use of existing housing stock. The capital cost of building housing has been one of the major hindrances to increasing the stock of housing. Most people experiencing homelessness would still require support, but with the capital cost of building taken out of the equation this should become more reasonable for governments.

³ <http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/84EB3BBB-02F2-41CE-A1C7-EC6A9BC952B1/0/StatisticsshowmorepeopleneedinghousinghelpNSW.pdf>

⁴ *ibid*

What should be noted is that none of these schemes by themselves will eradicate homelessness, but all of them will assist to reduce homelessness. With over 27,000 people in NSW experiencing homelessness it is imperative that governments and the community investigate and invest in a variety of solutions. It is often said that 'one size will not fit all', and for homelessness this is a truism.

One scheme currently operating in NSW that allows for the better utilisation of existing stock is CRASH - Construction Industry Relief and Assistance for the Single Homeless. This is based on a similar scheme in the UK which currently has the capacity of housing 20,000 people throughout the UK with the assistance of 1,000 volunteers. It is supported by property developers, building suppliers and charities that provide any necessary support. This will only ever be temporary housing, but it does allow for people to be supplied housing without the need for major additional capital cost.

Another project that is currently being rolled out is taking place in the small rural community of Cumnock. This has been labelled by some of the media as the 'rent a farmhouse for \$1 a week' scheme.

The Cumnock project started to help boost Primary school numbers so the community would not have to lose their second teacher. The community also knew that there were a large number of unused farm houses in the district, many of which had been empty for a number of years due to the rural downturn.

The project was launched with 4 empty farmhouses around Cumnock and ended up using 12. They received 128 applications for these farmhouses. Four of the applicants were living in a caravan park when they applied, and as such are classed as tertiary homeless. The successful applicants have been able to bring skills and expertise to the local community.

Ongoing support for the successful applicants will be supplied by Anglicare, as well as the local community. There have been a number of community functions to welcome the new residents.

While this scheme appears to be operating it is still in its infancy. What should be noted is that this is a local response to a local issue. Resolving homelessness will always require recognition that localised input is necessary.

Currently Homelessness NSW is working with both Parramatta and Blacktown Councils in the development of their homelessness strategies. The development of localised action plans is recognised in the Federal Government's White Paper on homelessness *The Road Home* and Homelessness NSW believes that these should be encouraged and funded as part of the NSW Government's response to homelessness. As part of these strategies local councils could be encouraged to investigate methods for additional new low cost accommodation.

Low cost accommodation is being pursued by the City of Sydney with their proposal to charge developers a levy in order to increase the amount of affordable housing in the city. The City estimates that this will add 8,000 new dwellings for affordable and social housing.

There is an increasing need for local and state government to take a proactive role due to the failure of the market to provide low cost accommodation. One of the main reasons for this has been the demise of low-cost boarding houses, especially across Sydney.

The term 'boarding house' can have a pejorative meaning, especially as many of current boarding houses across Sydney are in poor condition. Homelessness NSW would not be surprised if the current stock of boarding houses across Sydney were similar to those in South Australia where 54% of residents surveyed stated that facilities such as toilet, bathroom and kitchen were 'poor' or 'fair'.⁵

There are many perceived disadvantages to living in a traditional boarding house, including lack of privacy, low standard of facilities, small size of rooms, lack of tenancy rights, having to share facilities and in many cases bedrooms and concerns for personal safety. It was largely due to the known failings of the current boarding house market that a proposal by Northern Sydney' Central Coast Health (NSCCH) to build an 18 bed facility in Northern Sydney area for people living with a mental illness failed to obtain community support and was withdrawn.

For these reasons Homelessness NSW would support boarding house style accommodation with appropriate support. This could be similar physical structure to Bowering House a Mission Australia facility on the northern beaches of Sydney.

⁵ *It's No Palace*, DHS, p.40

