# INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS AMONGST OLDER PEOPLE AGED OVER 55 IN NEW SOUTH WALES

**Organisation:**    Homelessness NSW

**Date Received:**    12 June 2022

Standing Committee on Social Justice Issues
NSW Parliament
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear committee members,

**RE: Submission to Inquiry into Homelessness amongst older people aged over 55 in New South Wales**

Homelessness NSW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Homelessness amongst older people aged over 55 in New South Wales.

Homelessness NSW is the peak body for the homelessness sector in NSW. We exist to build the capability of people and the capacity of systems to end homelessness in NSW. We have a vision for a future where there is enough quality and safe housing and support services to ensure no one is homeless in NSW. We work with our members and broad network of partners to understand drivers of homelessness, advocate for solutions, build skills and knowledge, and scale innovation.

Our brief submission makes recommendations based on our experience of working with specialist homelessness services, people with lived experience, first nations communities and government partners. Our recommendations call upon the NSW Government to:

1. Commit to investment in a significant net increase of the supply of social and affordable housing with a minimum target of 15,000 homes per year for 14 years to meet current and future demand.
2. Fund a specialist older person's housing information and support service similar to the Home at Last model in Victoria.
3. Commit to ongoing funding for the Together Home program to support older people with complex needs to successfully maintain their tenancies and connect with their community.
4. Lower the eligibility age for social housing priority access
5. Ensure all new social housing builds align with the basic requirements of the Liveable Housing Design Guidelines and retrofit existing social housing stock where possible.

NSW is experiencing a homelessness crisis. From 2011 to 2016, there was a 43% increase in number of people aged 55 and over experiencing homelessness (from 4,475 to 6,407).[1] The NSW Department of Communities and Justice reports that there were 46,530 applicants on the NSW housing register at 30 June 2019, with 4,484 considered priority applicants. The average wait time is 10 years and even for those deemed high risk many can wait up to two years to access long term housing. It is also widely accepted these figures grossly underrepresent the actual community need particularly considering the impact of recent bushfires, floods and economic losses through Covid-19.

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[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness 2016, Accessed Online. Table 1.3.

**Recommendation 1: Commit to investment in a significant net increase of the supply of social and affordable housing with a target of 15,000 homes per year for 14 years to meet current and future demand.**

We cannot solve homelessness without housing. Services are reporting the number of older people experiencing homelessness is increasing as a result of a lack of availability of social and affordable housing, rising rent costs, reduced home ownership and impacts from domestic and family violence and elder abuse. The most recent snapshot of rental affordability from Anglicare Australia found that less than 1% of available rental properties were affordable for a single person receiving the Aged Pension and for a single person receiving Jobseeker, no properties were affordable.[2]

Housing – as shelter – is a fundamental human right. Safe, adequate, affordable and appropriate housing is critical to health, wellbeing and social and economic security, but many Australians cannot find housing in the private market, and the social housing system, incorporating public and community housing, is under-resourced and unable to meet demand. Findings show there is a need for approximately 213,000 new social and affordable housing properties in NSW to meet the current and projected need by 2036.[3]

**Recommendation 2: Fund a specialist older person's housing information and support service similar to the Home at Last model in Victoria.**

On 30 June 2021, there were 15,036 social housing applicants on the NSW Housing Register where the head of the household was aged 55 years or older. The digitalisation of government services has led to the exclusion for disadvantaged older people who have limited access to equipment and low digital literacy. The difficulty in navigating online systems including My Aged Care, My Gov and other online applications can be a contributing factor to older people's homelessness. Funding specialised services for older people at risk of or experiencing homelessness to quickly access support they are eligible for would reduce instances and duration of homelessness among this group.

Operating since 2013, the Housing for the Aged Action Group, Home at Last service model provides accessible, equitable and appropriate support and housing information for older people who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. Services range from providing tailored housing information to assistance with housing applications, support during the move, establishing a new home and referrals into aged care and other supports. This successful model could be applied in NSW.

**Recommendation 3: Commit to ongoing funding for the Together Home program to support older people with complex needs to successfully maintain their tenancies and connect with their community**.

Launched in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Together Home program supports people street sleeping across NSW into stable accommodation, linked to wraparound supports and connection to community. It is being delivered through a partnership between the NSW

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[2] 2022. Anglicare Australia. Rental Affordability Snapshot National Report. Available online: https://www.anglicare.asn.au/publications/rental-affordability-snapshot-2022/

[3] 2019. AHURI. Social housing as infrastructure: rationale, prioritisation and investment pathway. Accessed Online: https://www.ahuri.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/43214/AHURI-Final-Report-315-Social-housing-as-infrastructure-rationale-prioritisation-and-investment-pathway.pdf

Government, Community Housing Providers and the specialist homelessness services sector. Currently, more than 700 people have been housed through the program. The program supported by Homelessness NSW demonstrates the success of applying a housing first model with support. The success of the program is attributed to the ability to support people with complex needs to retain their tenancy and improve their connection to community beyond the standard 3–6-month support periods. Extending the program to become a permanently funded ongoing service will ensure sustained outcomes for the most vulnerable and a long-term reduction in homelessness.

**Recommendation 4: Lower the eligibility age for social housing priority access**

People experiencing homelessness, have increased prevalence and severity of health problems this can contribute to higher admissions to hospital, chronic health conditions and premature death. These complex heath factors can rapidly age a person and their vulnerability is not always typical of their age in comparison to the general population. At present the priority eligibility for access to NSW social housing is aged 80 or for Aboriginal and Torres's Strait Islander persons aged 55. Evidence shows this causes significant barriers for vulnerable older people who have limited financial assets or support. Many of whom have health issues and are forced to live in substandard and unsafe accommodation that exacerbates their health risks as they are ineligible for priority access to social housing and must endure up to 10-year housing wait times.

Lowering the age of priority access would enable priority access for vulnerable older people aged 55 and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members from aged 45.

**Recommendation 5: Ensure all new social housing aligns with the basic requirements of the Liveable Housing Design Guidelines and retrofit existing social housing stock where possible to ensure people can successfully retain their housing into old age.**

Universal housing design is a key concept within the Liveable Housing Design guidelines that enables living spaces to be more easily and cost-effectively adapted to meet the changing needs of home occupants across their lifetime. The guidelines recommend the inclusion of features that make homes easier and safer for all occupants, particularly including people older people and people with a disability.[4] All new social housing in NSW should be built to ensure tenants can retain their tenancy into old age.

The physical condition of current public housing stock in NSW requires significant further investment. The standard of housing has direct impact on the safety and wellbeing of tenants. In 2010, Land and Housing Commission reported that between 30 and 40 percent of its properties were not at its own 'well-maintained' standard.[5] Where possible, buildings should be retrofitted to meet the requirements outlined in the Liveable Housing Design Guidelines.

Homelessness NSW welcomes the commitment of $270 million outlined in the 2020- 2021 NSW budget for repairs and maintenance and upgrades of existing public housing properties across the state. Further investment is necessary to improve the quality of housing in NSW to ensure older people can maintain their tenancy and connection to community.

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[4] Liveable Housing Design Guidelines. (2017) Available online: https://livablehousingaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/SLLHA_GuidelinesJuly2017FINAL4.pdf
[5] NSW Auditor-General's Report, Performance Audit, Making the best use of public housing, Housing NSW/NSW land and Housing Corporation, 2013, p 22
https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdf-downloads/2013_Jul_Report_Making_the_Best_Use_of_Public_Housing.pdf

If you would like to discuss this submission in more detail, please contact Trina Jones, Chief Executive Officer at

Yours sincerely,
**Trina Jones**



Chief Executive Officer