



Ending homelessness in Victoria: Consultation paper – May 2013



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Homelessness services in Victoria are facing significant challenges and change. Demand is increasing, there is a severe shortage of affordable housing and a number of reforms across the community sector will affect homelessness services and people experiencing homelessness into the future.

The Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) is the peak body representing individuals and organisations with an interest in, and commitment to, ending homelessness. In late 2011 and early 2012, CHP hosted forums across Victoria to hear from service providers and consumers about service responses that are effective at preventing and ending homelessness.

These forums helped CHP to identify the key service elements that make up a system to end homelessness. This paper details those service elements, which are also supported by local and international evidence.

From May - July 2013, CHP will host another round of consultations with specialist homelessness service providers across Victoria to inform CHP's policy position in relation to the Victorian Homelessness Action Plan. This paper provides a starting point for those conversations.

Following these consultations CHP will develop a position statement on future directions for the Victorian Specialist Homelessness Sector (SHS).

Homelessness in Victoria

There are 22,000 people experiencing homelessness on any given night in Victoria. From 2006-2011, the rate of homelessness increased by 20 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2012).

The reasons that people become homeless in Victoria are complex and interconnected. According to the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (AIHW 2012, p.5), financial difficulties and domestic and family violence are the most common reasons that people seek homelessness assistance. A number of interpersonal and health issues also contribute to individual experiences of housing instability.

Chamberlain and Johnson (2011) have identified five typical pathways into adult homelessness. These pathways - housing crisis, family breakdown, substance abuse,

mental health and youth to adult - show that the experience of homelessness has various causes and characteristics, and affects people differently over the life course.

Housing affordability

Across Australia there is a chronic shortage of housing that is affordable to low income households. The National Housing Supply Council (NHSC) estimates that there is a current shortage of 600,000 rental dwellings that are affordable and available to households on the lower half of income distribution (NHSC 2012). Wulff et al (2011, p.15) estimate that there is an absolute shortfall of 31,700 properties in Melbourne that are affordable to households in the lowest 20 per cent of incomes.

The shortage is most acute and severe for households in the lowest 20 per cent of the income distributions. In Victoria, just ten per cent of all rental lettings in Melbourne are affordable to households on a low income. For single people receiving Newstart and single parenting payments, the number of affordable properties falls to 0.4% and 2.5% respectively (Department of Human Services [DHS] 2012b). There is no guarantee that these properties are let to low income households. Many are occupied by higher income households 'renting down.'

The shortage of affordable rental housing places pressure on public housing waiting lists. Single people and single parent households make up the majority of the 37,000 people currently waiting for public housing in Victoria (DHS, 2012c, p.20).

In the context of decreasing affordable housing options, the SHS is being asked to assist more and more people to end homelessness.

The Victorian SHS

In Victoria, the SHS comprises approximately 145 organisations that deliver around 500 programs. The SHS provides initial assessment and planning, a variety of support models that may be attached to accommodation or provided on an outreach basis, and housing brokerage.

Through voluntary work, in-kind contributions and leveraging other funding sources, organisations responding to homelessness add significant capacity to their funded homelessness services.

In 2011-2012, 76,952 Victorians accessed services through the SHS (AIHW 2012). This equates to one in every 72 Victorians¹. One third of those accessing the SHS did so as a result of family violence (AIHW 2012). Taking population growth into account, there

¹ Based on the number of clients accessing services and the 2011 census of population and housing.

has been an 87 per cent increase in the number of people in Victoria accessing homelessness services in the five years to 2012².

However, the sector is not able to engage with every household that needs support. In 2011-12, Victorian homelessness services recorded 6,898 instances of unmet demand (AIHW 2012, p.30). For those people who did receive assistance from the SHS, almost 15 per cent of support periods ended because clients disengaged or lost contact with the service (AIHW 2012, p.13).

Demand for homelessness services currently exceeds the sector's capacity to respond. This demand, combined with historical and inflexible funding models, means that services and practitioners operate in a system that constrains their ability to deliver the interventions that households really need. Instead, many specialist homelessness services are geared to provide crisis and transitional responses to homelessness.

Despite these challenges, homelessness services do end homelessness and provide critical support to individuals. People working across the SHS find scarce resources and connect vulnerable people to the services they need through persistence and personal networks. Effective interventions often occur in spite of the service system rather than because of it.

Human services in Victoria: A state of reform

A number of reforms are currently underway across Victoria that will affect disadvantaged people; the most disadvantaged being those who are currently experiencing homelessness. The reforms described below will affect how human services are delivered into the future.

The Victorian Homelessness Action Plan 2011-2015

The Victorian Homelessness Action Plan (DHS 2011a) outlined a reform plan built around early intervention and prevention for different cohorts who have experienced homelessness for different period of time.

The VHAP comprises:

- funding to trial and expand new service responses
- an interdepartmental committee to advise on whole of government approaches to end homelessness
- a ministerial advisory committee to provide reform options to the Minister for Housing
- a project to review and reform the SHS.

² Based on the number clients accessing services in 2006-2007 SAAP data report (AIHW 2007) and 2011-12 AIHW SHS data collection.

The work program outlined in the VHAP suggests that a new homelessness service system, informed by the work outlined above, will be implemented in 2014-15.

Allied sector reform

Both Psychiatric Disability Rehabilitation Support Services and Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Services are also undergoing reform. Both sectors have approximately 100 services delivering assistance across the state. The reform directions suggest that intake for these services will now be delivered in 16 areas, aligned with Medicare locals in the metropolitan area. Full recommissioning frameworks for these sectors are expected to be released in mid-2013.

One DHS and Services Connect

In December 2011 DHS released *Human Services: The case for change*, which set the scene for a new service model for consumers of DHS services. The new service model, Services Connect (DHS 2013), aims to cut down the complexity of the service system by introducing a key worker model and a single family plan.

Depending on a person's ability to independently plan and access the assistance they require, Services Connect will provide three different models of support; managed support, guided support and self-support. This service model is currently being trialed in Dandenong, Geelong and Portland/Warrnambool and an additional \$12 million in funding was committed in the 2013-14 budget to expand and trial this model in more regions.

System Reform Project

More recently the Victorian Government has commenced the Service Sector Reform Project lead by Dr Peter Shergold. Currently, the Victorian Government allocates \$1.3 billion a year in program funding to approximately 1,000 community service organisations.

This project is independent of government and will provide advice on reform options for the whole community services sector, focusing on issues such as funding, outcomes and system design. The project group will deliver final recommendations to government in June 2013.

Pathways to a new Social Housing Framework

A new social housing framework is being developed in response to the Victorian Parliament's *Inquiry into the Adequacy and Future Directions of Public Housing* (Family and Community Development Committee 2010) and the Victorian Auditor General's report, *Access to Public Housing(2012)*.

The Social Housing Framework reforms are focused on the need to address the structural deficit in the public housing operating model and the imminent loss of 10,000 social housing properties.

KPMG (2012) and DHS (2012a) have produced two discussion papers to inform the new framework. These papers focused on tenant experiences, the financial viability of the current system, models for growth and managing losses. Victorian housing peak bodies produced a joint statement in response to these papers, which was endorsed by 177 organisations and individuals. These peak bodies continue to consult informally with DHS.

Key themes of government reform

These reforms are united by a number of common themes, including:

- centralised intake and assessment
- client attached funding
- key worker models
- a person centred, client directed, family inclusive approach to services
- service and systems integration
- a focus on early intervention & prevention
- outcomes based funding
- broadening the service provider base.

CHP wants to see a service system that delivers the key services and practice approaches that prevent and end homelessness, and supports workers and organisations to do this in partnership with consumers.

The role of the SHS

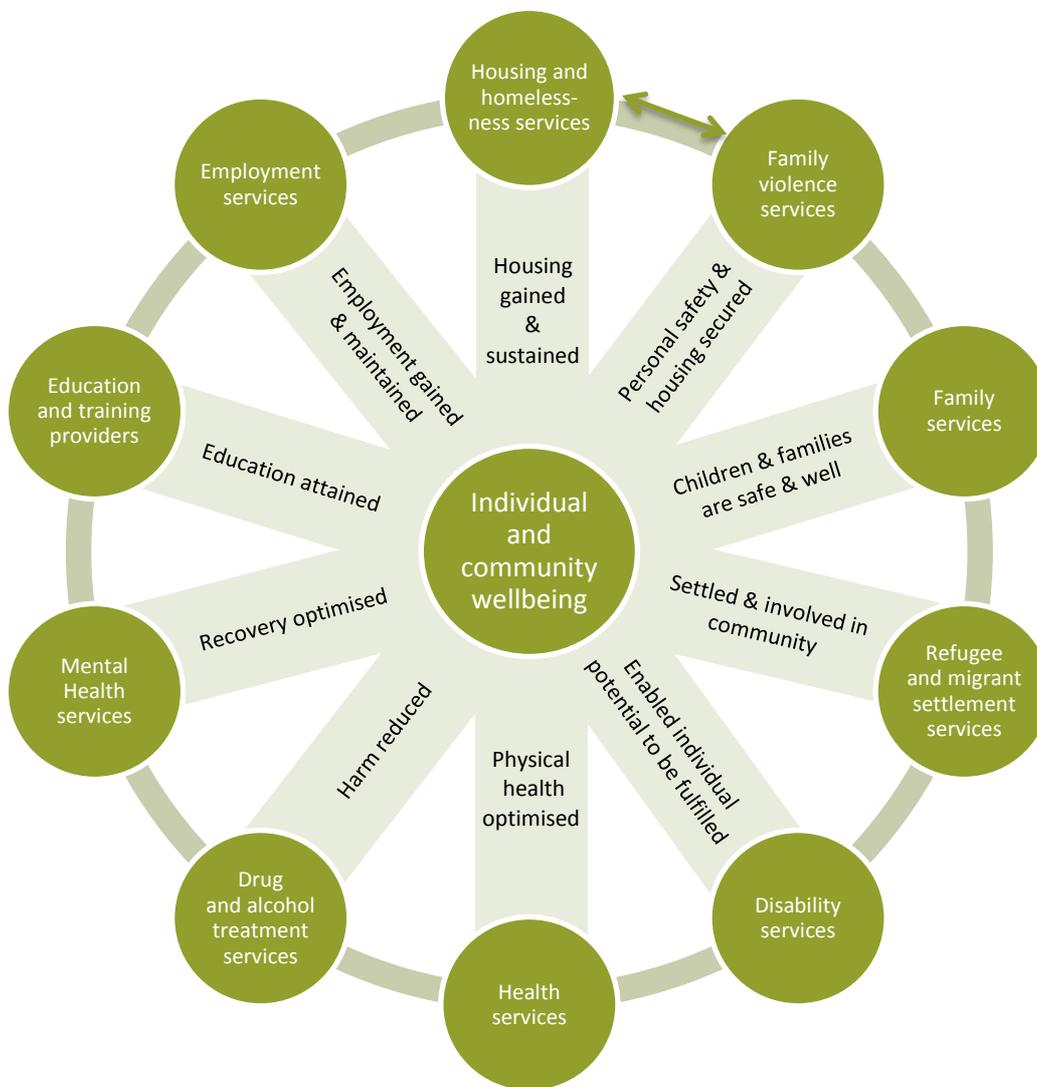
While experiences of homelessness have varying causes and characteristics, having a place to call home is fundamental to individual wellbeing.

International evidence shows that when households have secure and affordable housing, even challenges such as poor health, substance abuse, family breakdown, disengagement from education and employment, and social isolation, are unlikely to cause housing instability (Shinn, Baumohl and Hopper 2001, p.108). That is, responses to homelessness don't need to address to every cause; homelessness can be prevented and ended through the provision of secure and affordable housing for many, and support for those who need it.

The next page depicts homelessness assistance as part of a complement of services that vulnerable Victorians might seek in order to improve their wellbeing. In an integrated human services system, the role of the SHS is to help people gain and sustain housing that is affordable and suitable to their needs (Gronda, Ware and Vitis 2011). In the case of family violence services, the aim is to not only gain and sustain housing but to secure personal safety.

This is a considerable shift in the way homelessness services are currently delivered and would need to be supported by new funding and service arrangements.

For some groups, such as Aboriginal Victorians, specialist or targeted services may need to work in partnership with generalist service providers in order to achieve the best outcomes with clients.

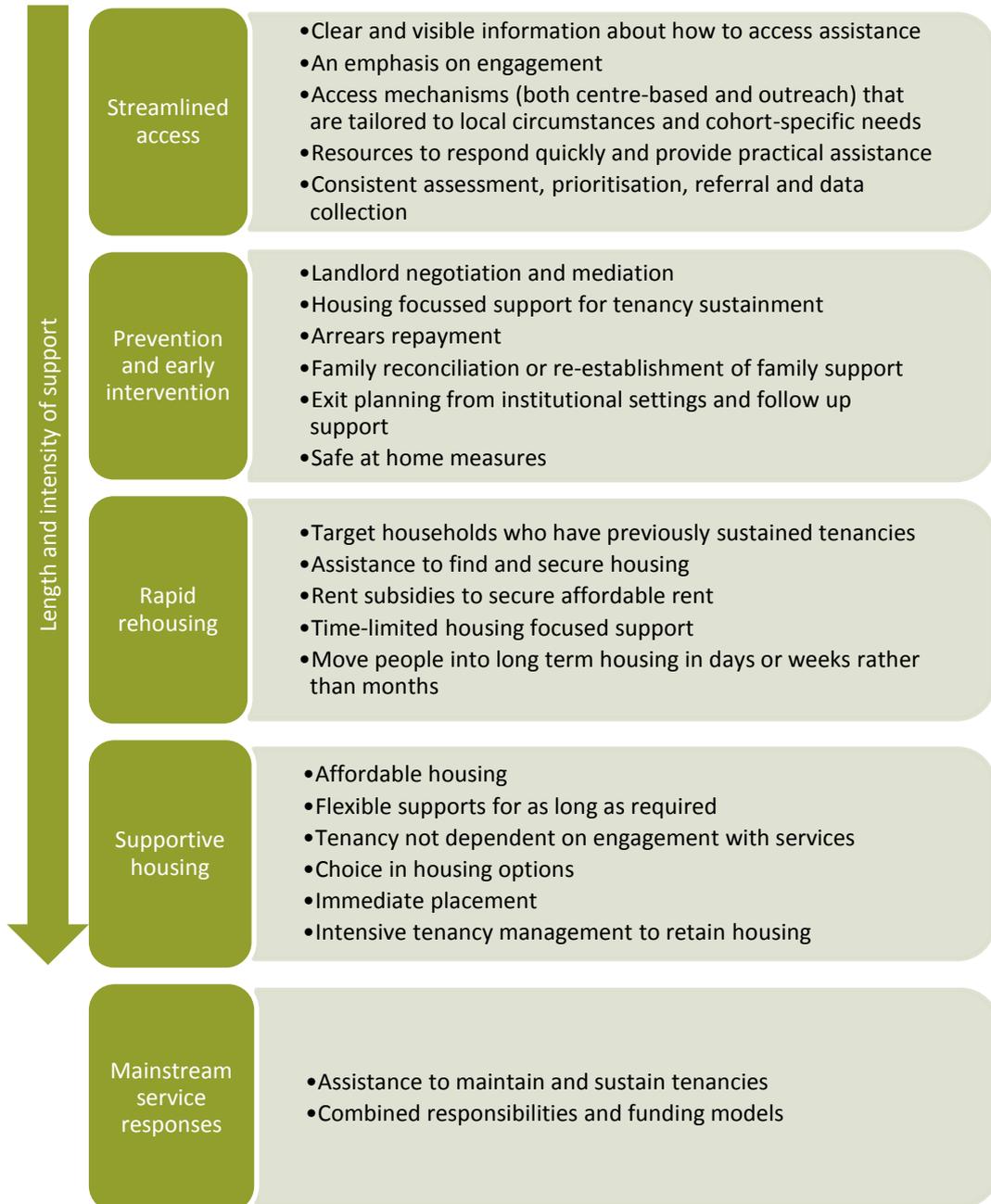


What are the key outcomes that specialist homelessness services should work with consumers to achieve?

What do you think the role of the SHS should be in relation to the broader human services system?

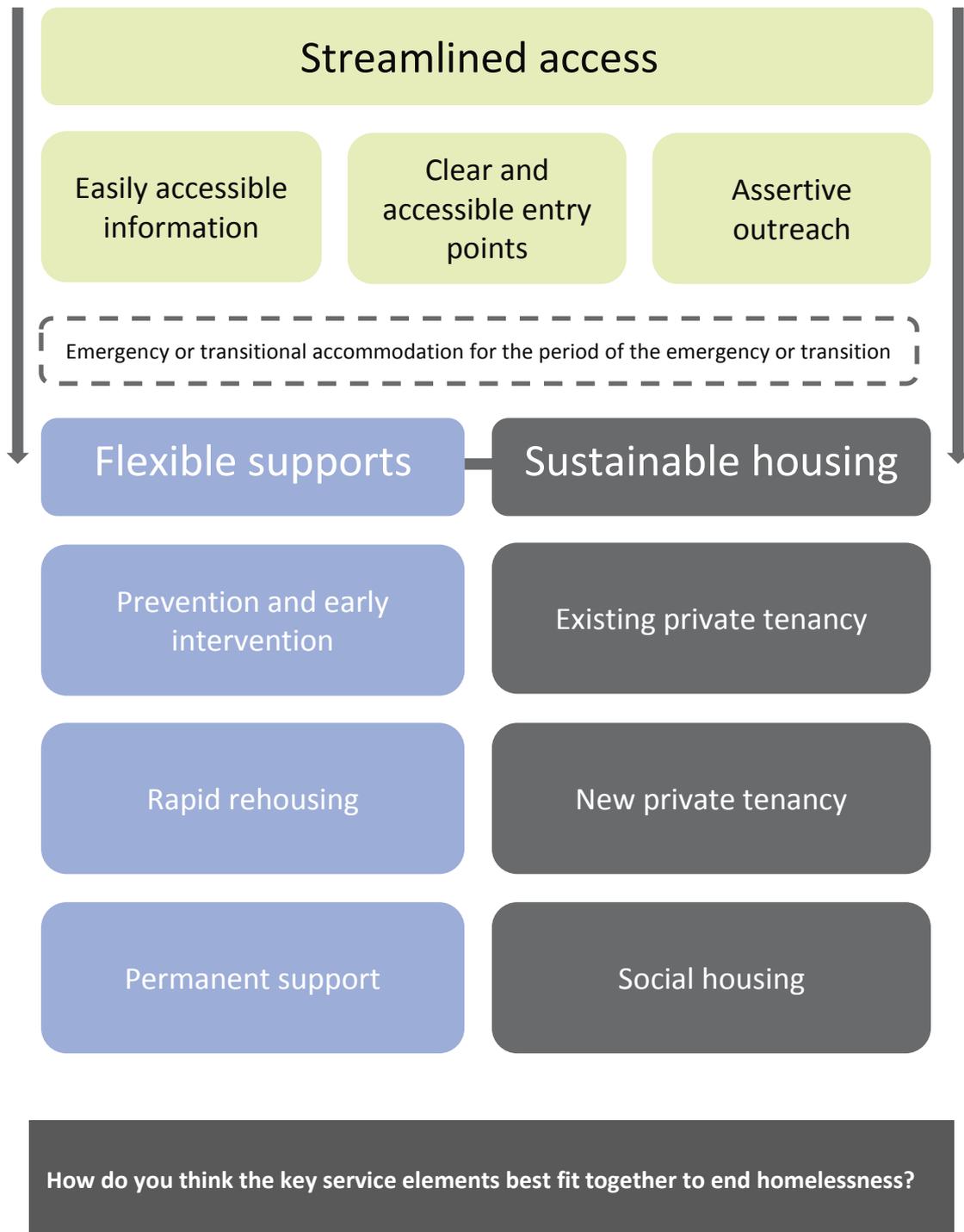
Key service elements

Based on a review of local and international evidence CHP has identified the following service elements that are critical to ending homelessness:



Can you identify any other service elements that are critical to end homelessness?

A system to end homelessness



The transition to a stronger SHS

While the SHS has the skills and expertise to deliver the service system above, changing the way services are delivered will require new funding streams and a number of supporting processes to embed new service elements and practices.

The supports needed will form the basis of CHP's advocacy to government in the reform process.

These include:

- the development and implementation of new funding streams
- support to change practice at an organisational and systemic level
- practice development to redirect the skills and focus of practitioners working with people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness
- support to strengthen the cultural competency of the SHS, and the capacity for homelessness services to work alongside specialist Aboriginal services.

What other processes and resources will be needed to develop a stronger service system to end homelessness?

Further feedback

Your feedback will help to inform CHP's policy position in relation to the Victorian Homelessness Action Plan.

If you have further thoughts or feedback contact either:

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before 28 June 2013 so that your feedback can be included in CHP's final position paper.

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