



Western Homelessness Network submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness

"Being homeless has ruined my life."

"A massive impact - you want the best for your kids and when you can't provide a safe and affordable home for them you start judging yourself and making yourself feel smaller than you already did. It takes a toll mentally, emotionally and physically. Knowing you can't provide a roof over their heads and make them feel safe as you can't afford to give them the basics."

Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness

Prepared by the Western Homelessness Network



Introduction

The Western Homelessness Network would like to thank the Parliamentary Legal and Social Issues Committee for initiating a Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness and for this opportunity to lodge a submission to inform the Inquiry.

The Western Homelessness Network is a Network of twenty Specialist Homelessness and Family Violence Services (SHSs) managing 90 programs, operating in Melbourne's West (comprising the Local Government Areas of: Maribyrnong, Melbourne, Melton, Moonee Valley, Hobsons Bay, Brimbank and Wyndham). These services meet every six weeks to manage the coordinated homelessness service system, undertake and respond to consumer consultation, improve linkages with allied service sectors and undertake shared professional and systems development.

Membership of the Western Homelessness Network:



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Section 1: Summary: Homelessness in Melbourne's west

We live in a city that is growing by 1,850 people a week¹. Melton and Wyndham, in Melbourne's west, are growing faster than any other area of Melbourne². Our supply of housing is insufficient to house our population. Plan Melbourne estimates that Melbourne will need an additional 1.6 million new homes by 2051 in order to meet this current and growing need³.

Lack of supply has resulted in an all-time low in private rental affordability. Anglicare Australia's Rental Affordability Snapshot 2019 identified that less than 1% of private rental properties in Melbourne are affordable for a single person with children in receipt of Parenting Payment. In March 2019, Anglicare noted there were no properties available in Greater Melbourne that were affordable for a single person on Newstart⁴.

Whilst Melton and Brimbank still rate in the top 10 most affordable local government areas (LGAs) for people earning a minimum wage, none of the LGAs in the West are represented in the top 10 most affordable Victorian LGAs for people who are receiving Centrelink payments.

This reflects a significant change for the West, which was one of the last bastions of affordability⁵ in Melbourne. In Maribyrnong, Melbourne and Moonee Valley fewer than 2% of available rental properties are affordable for a household on a Centrelink income. Even in the outer West, where a greater proportion of rental properties are affordable, only **three** available one-bedroom properties were affordable for someone on a Centrelink payment.⁶

In Melton, the average rental for a one-bedroom property is \$324 per week. The Newstart allowance is \$280 per week.

The Productivity Commission reported this year that Victoria spends less on public housing, per capita, than any other State. (Victoria allocates half the national average to public housing). There are 14,766 social housing properties in Melbourne's west and approximately 12,000 households on the waiting list for access to those properties. **So, at a minimum, a doubling of public housing is required in the West, to meet the current need: with a focus on increasing numbers of one bedroom and large public housing properties.**

Not surprisingly, the ABS Census data shows that there has been a corresponding increase of 40% in the numbers of people experiencing homelessness in Melbourne's west (compared with a 14% increase across Victoria)⁷. Census 2016 identified that the numbers of people living in severe overcrowding in the West has increased by 79%. The ABS defines severe overcrowding as people living in housing that is four or more bedrooms short⁸. These people are likely to become the next wave of people presenting to the homelessness service system – a system that is already beyond overwhelmed.

A growing number of people are sleeping rough on the streets of Melbourne's CBD and suburbs. The numbers of people sleeping rough in Melbourne's west has increased by 120%. This is the visible face of homelessness but is only the tip of the iceberg (5%) of the number of people who are experiencing homelessness. Those experiencing homelessness in the West represent 23% of all those people experiencing homelessness in Victoria⁹.

The impact of being without a stable home is devastating for the individuals and families who are experiencing it (see Section 2: What do consumers say?).

Melbourne is experiencing a housing crisis. 1.6M more properties will be required by 2051.

Consequently, the numbers of people with nowhere to live is increasing and the number of people reporting that they are homeless increased by 40% in Melbourne's west between 2011 and 2016.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016*, (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2019)

² North West Primary Health Network, *North West Population Growth*, (NWPHN, 2019)

³ *Victoria in Future 2016* and Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, internal analysis, estimated employed persons derived from Victoria in Future 2016, quoted in Victorian State Government, *Plan Melbourne 2017–2050*, (Victorian Government, 2017).

⁴ Anglicare Victoria, *Rental Affordability Snapshot 2019: Regional Reports and Snapshots* (Anglicare, 2019)

⁵ The National Minimum Wage as set by the Fair Work Commission, *Annual Wage Review 2017-2018*, (Fair Work Commission 2018)

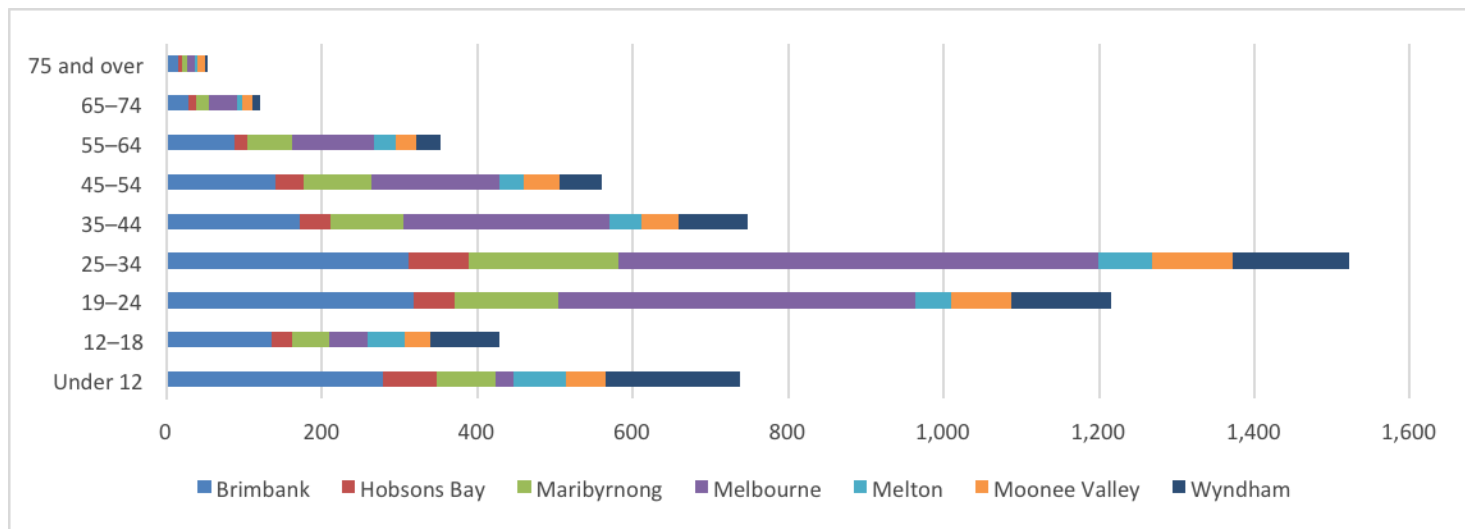
⁶ Department of Health and Human Services, *DHHS Rental Report, September quarter 2019*, (DHHS, 2019)

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2011 and 2016, Special request – Statewide Networkers*, (ABS, 2018)

⁸ Additional bedrooms required are calculated taking into account age and gender

⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016*, (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2019)

Figure 1: Homelessness in Melbourne's West by age: Census 2016



When people have nowhere to live, they turn to the homelessness service system for assistance to find the housing and support that they need. Homelessness services in Melbourne's west do what they can to provide support to the 13,546 households¹⁰ who present annually to our services seeking assistance—but the numbers of people who present to homelessness services well outstrips our capacity to respond (see Figure 2, p. 6). Victorians would be shocked to know that the service system only has capacity to provide support to 11% of those presenting and only 1.6% of those presenting were able to access transitional [medium term] housing.

It is extremely distressing for a workforce aimed at helping vulnerable people, to be unable to respond to the needs of so many thousands of individuals and families who don't have a safe or stable home.

What do we need to end homelessness in Melbourne's west?

The Western Homelessness Network believes that the key to addressing homelessness is two fold:

- **increase the supply of long term affordable housing; and**
- **work to prevent homelessness from occurring.**

Victorians would be shocked to know that the homelessness system in Melbourne's west only had capacity to support 11% of 13,546 households experiencing homelessness, who presented for help.

Sufficient long-term affordable housing will both prevent homelessness occurring and will provide the most essential component in responding effectively to homelessness when it does occur. The Network strongly advocates for a Housing First model – providing people with safe and appropriate housing as a priority in order to provide the safety and security for people to address, with support, other factors that may affect the stability of their housing.

Ending family violence, addressing poverty, intervening early in housing issues, providing adequate safety nets for people with mental health issues, a housing and support guarantee for young people leaving State care and providing support to families and young people experiencing crises will address the vast majority of factors leading to individuals and families becoming homeless.

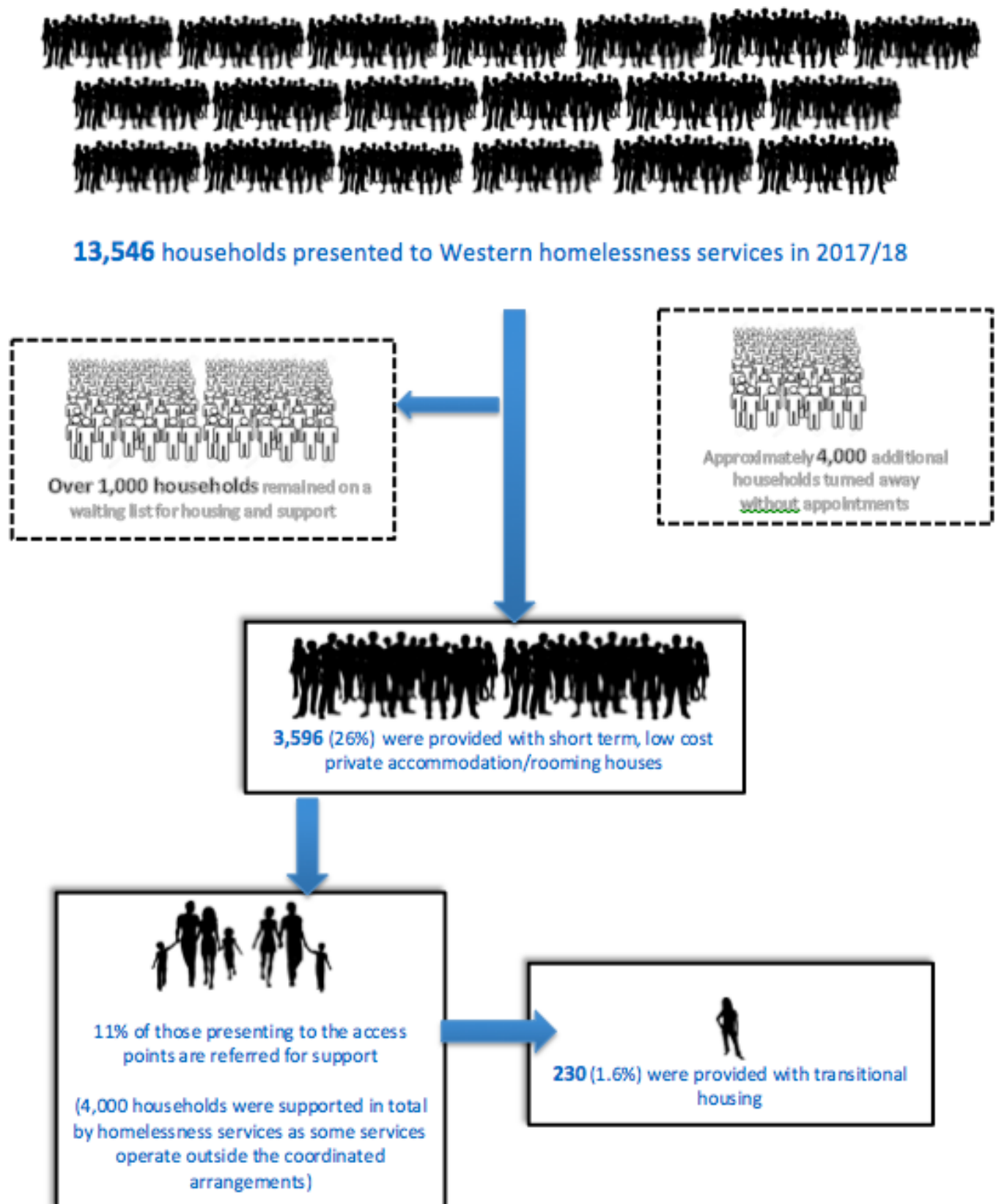
This submission provides:

- information to inform the Inquiry Terms of Reference, from the perspective of the homelessness service system,
- an overview of homelessness and the homelessness service system in Melbourne's West, and
- incorporates our ideas for how we can end homelessness in Melbourne's west.

We are passionately committed to ending homelessness and we would welcome any opportunity to work with government to find solutions to this difficult social issue.

¹⁰ Department of Health and Human Services, 2017/18 Local Area Service Network Data, (Department of Health and Human Services, 2019)

Figure 2: The system is overwhelmed



Section 3: What do consumers say?

Every year the Northern and Western Homelessness Networks survey people who have accessed the homelessness service system, to learn about and utilise their experiences of the system. In 2018, we asked consumers about their experience of homelessness. We also asked what consumers would like to tell the Premier and the Prime Minister about homelessness.

These are some responses about their experiences of homelessness and the impact of being without safe, affordable housing:

"I was so stressed I couldn't eat and then I was sick and couldn't take care of my children properly. We couldn't cook and we couldn't enrol in school."

"The worst thing was having no-one around and no-one out there to help you, as many out there just turn their back and don't realise what others are going through. So, in the end, this experience has affected me mentally and physically as well as my daughter. No-one out there should face or deserves to face homelessness."

Trying to get my stuff around, transport. It was heartbreaking to see my little girl have to carry her suitcase around. Not knowing when we can eat again was also really difficult. Also some of the hotels we stayed at were very scary and we felt so unsafe. I was hugging them all night staying awake because the neighbours were screaming and drinking all night.

"Just being homeless missing out of university and school for two months. Also going back was hard to cover all the content that I haven't studied. Sharing one bedroom with my 3 siblings at the motel was hard. Not being able to do things like going out was hard, as we didn't have money and also purchasing food. We lived in a really hard situation that time."

"Most difficult thing was the instability, the not knowing. If I would be asked to move on by police, or if someone would try to break in to the van at night while I slept, or if I got sick, what would I do?"

"Made me reliant on Drugs (ICE) to stay awake cause I've been taken advantage of and sexually abused touched while I have been asleep I haven't been able to be a mother to my kids/ can't see them and made me suicidal."

What would you like to tell the Premier and Prime Minister?

"How would you like to be homeless for 5 years without your kids?"

"Homelessness is something that nobody should experience and when it happens, it can be unexpected and there is not enough support for people in need. Housing is an entitlement, not a dream."

"It was the hardest time I have been through in my life and there should be more support and help for people that find themselves in this situation; it could happen to anyone."

"Build more houses and create new jobs so people are kept busy and engage in beneficial things for themselves and also the community."

"Absolutely horrific and there are no words that can describe it. I can understand now why so many people just give up, it's so sad. It could so easily be resolved - just buy some more houses, there are so many vacant properties and buildings, why can't these be donated or bought. These places could house so many people. It is so cold at night time and there are so many people doing it, it's unbelievable."

"That the despair and loneliness that you encounter is second to none. I would need much more space and time to explain to them exactly how they need to distribute funds to the right facilities."

"You need to give more help. I lost my job because of my health and now I am losing my home because I don't have enough money. Rent is too high and my Centrelink doesn't cover all my costs."

"How can I get a job if I cannot go to school and cannot have a safe home?"

"There are numerous empty dwellings and an overabundance of new units being built. Mainly investors sitting on the properties. Create some discussion in Parliament in relation to this - also squatter's rights."

"When you are homeless you never feel safe, who will hit you or where you are. When you have a government house, you feel safe even if you have no food."

Section 4: Social, economic and policy factors that impact on homelessness

Members of the Western Homelessness Network have identified the following as the key drivers of homelessness:

- Lack of affordable housing
- Inadequate income security
- Family violence
- Cost of living/cost of housing
- Lack of employment opportunities/underemployment
- Lack of post release planning with those in prison
- Lack of an overarching State and Federal homelessness strategy
- Lack of an incentive for local government to create housing.

Housing crisis/Lack of affordable housing in the West

The primary driver of homelessness in Melbourne's west is the housing crisis. We live in a city that is growing by 1,850 people a week¹¹. Our supply of housing is insufficient to house our current and growing population. Population growth in the West continues to be high. The population of Melton is estimated to increase by 92% and in Wyndham by 64% by 2031¹². Plan Melbourne estimates that Melbourne will need an additional 1.6 million new homes by 2051 in order to meet this growing need¹³.

Lack of supply has resulted in an all-time low in private rental affordability. Anglicare Australia's Rental Affordability Snapshot 2019 identified that fewer than 1% of private rental properties in Melbourne are affordable for a single person with children in receipt of Parenting Payment. People in receipt of income security benefits are competing with those on higher incomes who are also struggling with high rental prices, or who are 'renting down' in order to save a deposit for a house purchase.

In March 2019, Anglicare identified that there were no properties available in Greater Melbourne that were affordable for a single person on Newstart¹⁴.

Melton and Brimbank still rate in the top 10 most affordable local government areas (LGAs) for people earning a minimum wage but none of the LGAs in the West are represented in the top 10 most affordable Victorian LGAs for people who are receiving Centrelink payments. This reflects a significant change for the West that was one of the last bastions of affordability¹⁵.

Private rental vacancy rates are low in Melbourne (2.1%¹⁶) and rents are high. The West has historically been one of the most affordable areas of Melbourne. This is no longer the case. In Maribyrnong, Melbourne and Moonee Valley fewer than 2% of available rental properties are affordable for a household on a Centrelink income. Even in the outer West, where a greater proportion of rental properties are identified as affordable, only three available one-bedroom properties are considered affordable for someone on a Centrelink payment.¹⁷

In Melton, the average rental for a one-bedroom property is \$324 per week. The Newstart allowance is \$280 per week.

Melbourne is experiencing a housing crisis. 1.6M more properties will be required by 2051.

Consequently, the numbers of people with nowhere to live is increasing and the number of people reporting that they are homeless increased by 40% in Melbourne's west between 2011 and 2016.

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016*, (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2019)

¹² North West Primary Health Network, *North West Population Growth*, (NWMPHN, 2019)

¹³ Victoria in Future 2016 and Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, internal analysis, estimated employed persons derived from Victoria in Future 2016, quoted in Victorian State Government, *Plan Melbourne 2017–2050*, (Victorian Government, 2017)

¹⁴ Anglicare Victoria, *Rental Affordability Snapshot 2019: Regional Reports and Snapshots* (Anglicare, 2019)

¹⁵ The National Minimum Wage as set by the Fair Work Commission *Annual Wage Review 2017-2018*, (Fair Work Commission, 2018)

¹⁶ Department of Health and Human Services, *Rental report, December quarter 2018*, (DHHS, 2018)

¹⁷ Department of Health and Human Services, *Rental Report, September quarter 2019* (DHHS, 2019)

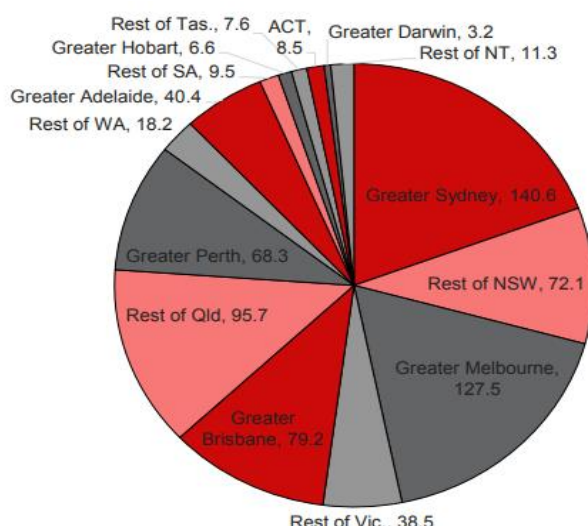
Social housing in the West

Dr Guy Johnson, Professor, Urban Housing and Homelessness, RMIT has identified that social housing is the most significant protective factor against homelessness¹⁸.

There are 14,766 social housing properties in Melbourne's west but 12,000 households on the waiting list.

The Productivity Commission (2019)¹⁹ identified that Victoria spends less on public housing per capita than any other jurisdiction in Australia (spending only half the National average). Figure 3 below shows that Victoria needs 127,500 more social housing units by 2036. There are 14,766²⁰ social housing properties in Melbourne's west but approximately 12,000 households on the waiting list for access to those properties. **At a minimum, a doubling of public housing is required in the West, to meet the current need.**

Figure 3: Location and number of social housing units needs to 2036²¹



Note: All figures are in '000s.

Source: Lawson, Pawson et al. (2018).

Figure 4: Social housing property numbers by LGA in Melbourne's west

Local Government Area	Numbers of social housing properties
Brimbank	2,091
Hobsons Bay	1,375
Maribyrnong	2,538
Melbourne	4,014
Melton	665
Moonee Valley	3,034
Wyndham	1,049
Total	\$14,766

Not only is the supply of social housing in the West completely inadequate to need, but the location and configuration of properties disadvantages specific cohorts of consumers. For instance, Melton and Wyndham have the lowest numbers of social housing properties in the West, yet the populations of both areas will nearly double by 2031.

¹⁸ Johnson, Dr G, *Tackling homelessness starts with public housing*, RMIT, August 2019

¹⁹ Productivity Commission, 2019, *Report on Government Services*; Chapter 13 Attachment Tables, Table 13A.36

²⁰ Department of Health and Human Services, *Annual Report 2018/19 – Housing Assistance, Additional Service Delivery Data* (DHHS, 2019)

²¹ AHURI, (2019), Executive Summary: *Social housing as infrastructure: rationale, prioritisation and investment pathway*

Figure 5: Social housing property bedroom numbers in Brimbank

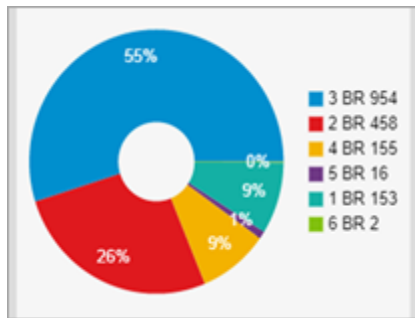


Figure 5 illustrates the low numbers of single bedroom and large social housing stock in Brimbank. This issue repeats across the West, disadvantaging single people and large families.

Impact of a lack of housing

Consumers tell us that, when they have nowhere affordable to live, the most significant impact is the deterioration in their mental health. They experience anxiety about the future, worry, sleeping issues, stress. They report feeling: scared, fearful, unsafe, hopeless, despairing and suicidal. They report breakdowns in relationships, anxiety for their children and often an inability to maintain or find employment.

It is not hard to imagine that not having a stable and safe home, in which to retreat each night, would create chaos in someone's life – making it extremely difficult to manage the stressors of life. Addressing even the most basic needs becomes problematic: how does a mother cook healthy food for her children in a hotel room; how can someone keep antibiotics cold if they have no fridge; how can a young person get to an appointment on time if they have nowhere to charge and no money for public transport?

So, the lack of a stable home creates further issues that increase the complexity of an individual or households' situation.

Family violence

Consumers cite family violence as the most common reason why they contact a homelessness service seeking assistance. Approximately 30% of those presenting to homelessness services identify family violence as their main issue²². However, the Western Homelessness Network (WHN) undertook a data snapshot in 2015 and found that, of the 2,300 individuals supported by the WHN during the snapshot, 62% had experienced family violence and, for 48%, family violence was the primary cause of their homelessness.

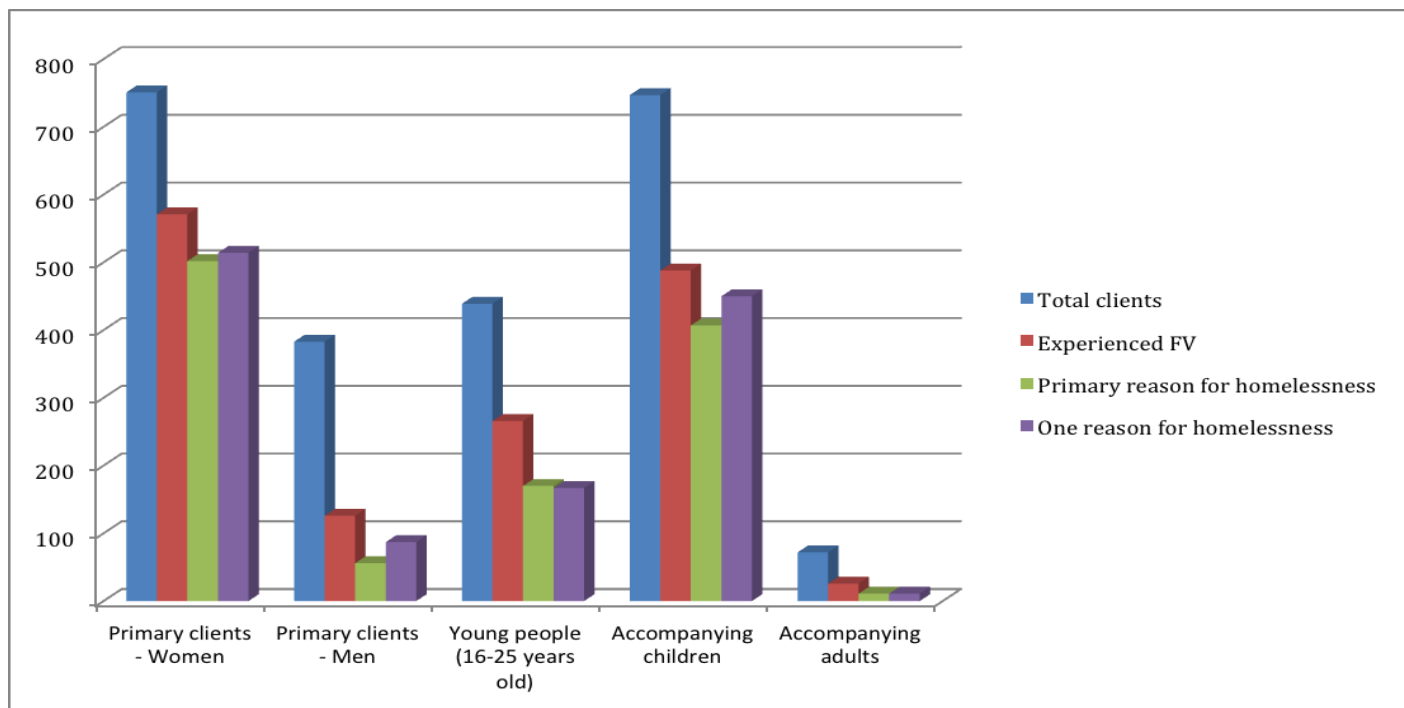
It is an extraordinary indictment on our society that, for many women and children, escaping the family home may free them from the violence and control that they have been experiencing, but frequently leads to extended periods of homelessness and serious intergenerational impacts for children and young people.

Whilst family violence is the most significant trigger causing homelessness, it is the housing crisis that extends periods of homelessness for women and children. Once women feel able to leave a situation of family violence, they often find that they are unable to find affordable accommodation. Single parents are already the most economically disadvantaged group in our community²³.

²² AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) 2019. *Specialist Homelessness Services annual report 2018–19*, (AIHW, 2019).

²³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Social Trends 2007, *One Parent Families* (Canberra, July 2008) and Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Occasional Paper No. 48 Parental joblessness, financial disadvantage and the wellbeing of parents and children* (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Canberra, 2012)

Figure 6: Western Homelessness Network Family Violence Snapshot, 2015



The incidence of family violence in Melbourne's west is significant. In 2018/19, police reported 13,206 family violence incidents in Melbourne's west. In the same year, 5,381 households presented to the homelessness service system who reported that they had become homeless because of family violence²⁴ in the home.

Many women and children leave their home to escape violence without access to an adequate income, which, in combination with the current crisis in affordable housing, severely limits their options for future housing. Case study 1 shows the devastating impact of the current housing crisis on the options available for women leave situations of violence and the difficult decisions they have to make, for themselves and their children.

The Royal Commission into Family Violence has shone a much-needed spotlight on the impact of family violence in Victoria but there are still many instances in which the system further jeopardises the wellbeing of women and children, rather than holding the perpetrators of violence to account.

Case study 2 highlights the disjuncture between the role of Child Protection in protecting children and the role of the broader services system in holding perpetrators to account.

²⁴ Victorian Crime Statistics Agency, 2019.

Case study 1: Ana

Ana is an 84 year old woman who is a victim/survivor of family violence/elder abuse. The perpetrator is her son, Gregory. Elena earns the aged pension and resides in private rental. Gregory is emotionally, physically, and financially abusive towards Elena, and has been for the past four decades.

Ana earns around \$1800 per month from her Aged Pension. She is currently paying around \$1700 per month in rent. Ana was previously caring for her grandchild, and received Family Tax Benefit, however this grandchild has recently turned 16 and is no longer living with Ana but may return to her care in future. Ana is not eligible for any senior/aged care accommodation.

Gregory lives at home with Ana without Ana's consent. Ana has frequent specialist appointments at her local hospital and needs to remain in the area. Ana has obtained an Intervention Order against Gregory, however Gregory knows Ana's address and where she attends her medical appointments.

Ana is living in poverty and often unable to afford enough food (she is left with \$27 per fortnight for food) whilst she waits for appropriate, affordable and safe housing to become available.

Case study 2: Shelley

Shelley has been a victim of violence for several years, perpetrated by her partner, Mark, who is the father of children. She had tried to leave Mark several times but never felt that she had options available to support this decision. She would often leave with her children and 'couch surf' with family until they could no longer accommodate her and then she would return home, hoping Mark meant it when he said he was sorry. The children would always beg not to go home.

The recent episode was the most violent. Shelley's 8-year-old daughter tried to intervene physically, to stop her father from choking her mother, after he repeatedly beat her with the kitchen chair. Neighbours called the police with noise complaints, but Shelley and the children had fled to stay with family before the police arrived. The children were distraught after this event and refused to leave their mother's side. Shelley kept the children home from school, as she was concerned that their father would go to the school and take them back to the house to force Shelley to return home. The following weekend Shelley's family apologetically asked her to leave ASAP as the house was overcrowded.

Shelley called the Family Violence Crisis Line who advised that, as the family violence incident happened more than a week ago, she was no longer eligible for refuge: her matter was now about homelessness not family violence. They referred Shelley back to the local Homelessness Access Point service, which meant that Shelley and the kids had to return to an area where Mark or his friends/family may see her: her "unsafe area". Shelley was anxious and the children were distressed. The Crisis Line advised Shelley to be waiting at the Access Point service by 9am the next morning for an appointment, although an appointment was not guaranteed. When Shelley did get to meet with someone at the Access Point service, the worker advised her the options were bleak. The service could only offer to pay for three nights for her and the children in a rooming house, which was incredibly expensive, \$380 a week.

When Shelley arrived at the rooming house with her children, she could see that the property was overcrowded. Three other families were already living there. She and the children slept in the lounge room, which was a converted bedroom. All members of the house shared one bathroom and one kitchen. One of the other household members had recently been released from prison. There was no bedding and the family slept on bare mattresses.

The Access Point service advised Shelley that she would need to present to the office on another day by 9am again to try to get an appointment for an assessment and in order to be included in the list of people awaiting support workers. Shelley did manage to get an appointment. No support workers were available at this time. The Access Point service told Shelley that she would need to call at the beginning of each month to advise them that she wanted to remain on the waiting list for a referral to a support worker. "At the beginning of each month? How long would it take to get a worker?" The service advised Shelley that the wait time for a support worker was unknown, as it depended on the capacity of the support services. Shelley was overwhelmed and heavily depressed.

Over the following weeks, Shelley spent all her money on take away food and clothing for the kids. She could not afford the ongoing rent at the rooming house. She tried calling other Homelessness Access Point services, but all referred her back to the one that she had attended. Shelley applied for private rental properties, but was unsuccessful every time. She and Mark had a debt with the Department of Health and Human Services (previously Office of Housing) so she could not access a bond loan.

The children still were not going to school. Household members violently fought, took drugs openly in front of the children and the police often attended. Child Protection had become involved after receiving a notification of a recent police attendance when another household member had deliberately set fire to his mattress. Child Protection told Shelley that if she did not secure for her kids stable and appropriate accommodation that they would escalate the matter. They were concerned that she could not “protect her children”.

On the third month, Shelley didn't call to remain on the wait list for a worker. She had returned home to Mark.

The Alternative to Shelley's Story:

The Western Homelessness Providers know how work with Shelley but currently have insufficient resources to do so:

No Wrong Door:

A refuge response for this family would only be appropriate if they were 'in hiding' from 'Mark', ie: unsafe to live openly in the community; otherwise, they need immediate access to safe, affordable housing. Flexibly of tenure will enable the required time to settle the family's future housing situation.

- ✓ Transitional Properties fit this need and can be supported by any or all of the homelessness/family violence sector
- X There are not enough
- ✓ Explore solutions such as temporary use of empty properties

Trauma and depression:

The trauma that this family has experienced could be immediately treated via the Primary Health Network, Care in Mind, program, which currently operates in at least one Western Homelessness/Family violence agency

- ✓ Treatment can be provided to all family members in a safe location; swift and easy access
- X Not all agencies have this capacity yet
- ✓ Could be extended via State/Commonwealth negotiations

Connection to School:

The children in this family could have been supported through safety planning, to remain connected to their school, thus reducing the impact of their trauma and increasing their capacity to flourish in the future

- ✓ Family violence trained children's workers, currently operating in at least one Western Homelessness/Family violence agency can work with families, schools and other services to develop safety plans to ensure children are safe at school
- X Not all agencies have such qualified staff
- ✓ Such positions could be introduced

Department of Housing Bond Debt:

The Recommendations from Victoria's Royal Commission into Family Violence made some significant changes to public policy for women who had experienced family violence. For instance, if 'family violence transmitted' bond debt is still a barrier, the matter can be referred back to the Family Violence Taskforce for rectification. Alternatively, the matter can be referred to WEstjustice's family violence legal and financial clinics, operating in at least one Western Homelessness/Family Violence agency

- ✓ WEstjustice resolved approx. \$450,000 worth of family violence related debt in the last two years
- X This service relies on Trust funding to operate
- ✓ This service could be funded and expanded to other services in the region

Child Protection:

'Shelley' could have been supported by Child Protection rather than condemned by them for failing to protect, if they had been trained in Safe and Together' a model that ensures a perpetrators pattern of behavior is revealed and that he is held to account for *his* failure to protect. Child Protection could then adopt a strengths based approach and acknowledge everything that 'Shelley' had done, or attempted to do, to protect her children, thus giving her the confidence and support to continue to resist the call to return to a violent relationship.

- ✓ Melbourne University has been working with the Safe and Together Model for some years now, with the latest manifestation called the STACY project
- X Some uptake in training by some Child Protection regions – needs extension
- ✓ The State Government has the capacity to facilitate/mandate such models

Employment:

Going beyond the immediate aspects of this case, 'Shelley' could be assisted to explore her employment options. At least one Western Homelessness/Family Violence agency has a specialist women's employment program that can assist 'Shelley' find sustainable employment, which will fit in with her family's requirements

- ✓ This service is now available for women who have been unemployed for a minimum of 6 months and who have multiple barriers to employment
- X The current contract doesn't provide for work which may be required to 'save' jobs at risk of being abandoned due to family violence related matters
- ✓ The State Government has the ability to amend the provisions of the contract and extend the program throughout the Western Region

Social Connection:

Given Shelley's trauma and possible need for peer support, at least one Western Homelessness/Family Violence agency has a social and recreation program which could be accessed on an 'as needs' basis to help rebuild confidence in community living

- ✓ This service is now available for women who have been connected to at least one Western Homelessness/Family Violence agency
- X Community mental health funding supports this model and is being withdrawn
- ✓ The State Government has the ability to rectify this problem and extend the program throughout the Western Region

In short – we have the knowledge and services to respond appropriately to Shelley's situations but we have insufficient resources. Given adequate resourcing, a better outcome for this family could have been achieved. That then, would free the service system up to put our minds to early intervention opportunities.

The Western Homelessness Network has identified some specific factors that trigger homelessness for particular cohorts:

Young people	<p>Young people most commonly leave home because of family violence and family breakdown in the home. They leave without family support, access to an income that is adequate for independent living, a tenancy history and frequently without the independent living skills that they require. The experience of family violence at home is traumatic and this affects their capacity to manage the further challenges of managing independent living.</p> <p>There is a current gap in service delivery for young people aged around 14 – 16 years who are often couch surfing in an attempt to stay connected to school. These young people are ‘too young’ for youth services and ‘too old’ for child protection.²⁵</p>
	<p>No clear housing pathway for young people exiting state care: State care ends for most young people at 18 years of age. There is no designated post care housing available for this vulnerable group of young people; consequently many exit into homelessness or become homeless soon after exiting from care. Research shows that a high proportion of those people, who are chronically homeless, became homeless at the age of 18 and had been in the child protection system. Similarly, research shows that a high proportion of those who are most recurrently incarcerated, often for minor crimes, also experienced homelessness, having exited the child protection system²⁶.</p>
	<p>No affordable housing options: Unemployment levels are high for young people. Newstart and special benefits are inadequate to support young people in private rental accommodation. Shared rental properties are challenging and often inappropriate for young people who have experienced trauma.</p>
Single people	<p>Newstart is insufficient; In the absence of affordable private rental options, private rooming houses are often the only form of accommodation available to single people. The 2017 Northern and Western Homelessness Networks Consumer Survey²⁷ outlines consumers’ experiences of rooming house accommodation. Not only is this accommodation so expensive that tenants are left with very little money for food and other expenses, but consumers feel unsafe and demoralised by the lack of cleanliness and the challenges created by other tenants.</p>
	<p>Lack of housing options for single people: Even those single people who are prioritised for access to social housing experience delays in accessing housing because of insufficient numbers of single properties. Similarly, there is a lack of affordable single bedroom properties in the private market.</p> <p>The system is also lacking in supported accommodation recovery models for single people (such as McAuley House).</p>
Families	<p>No accommodation for large families: Large families experience the same delays and difficulties in accessing housing as single people. We have an extreme shortage of large public housing properties and large but affordable properties in the private rental market.</p>
	<p>Increasing discrimination: With such high demand for private rental accommodation, real estate agents increasingly discriminate against large families.</p>
	<p>Time limits when staying with friends due to overcrowding: many people move in with friends and family when they first become homeless. Large families create particular challenges for friends and family, leading quickly to the burdens of severe overcrowding.</p>
Refugees/asylum seekers	<p>Refugees and asylum seekers generally have little access to a stable income and a lack of English proficiency limits their capacity to navigate services systems and find employment. There is a huge gap in housing options for individuals and households with no income. Women, and their children, who have to leave home as a result of family violence are particularly vulnerable if they have been on a sponsorship visa.</p>
Older women	<p>Older women are the fastest growing group of people experiencing homelessness. Women generally live longer than men, but have access to lower incomes. Women are generally retiring with half the superannuation men have. Women are often have insufficient income to retain the family home. ABS statistics show that, the number of older women living in private rentals has doubled from 91,549 in 2006 to 180,617 in 2016²⁸.</p>

²⁵ WEstJustice, *Couch Surfing Limbo*, (WEstJustice, August 2017)

²⁶ Eileen Baldry, *Recidivism and the role of social factors post-release*, Precedent Issue 81 July /August 2007

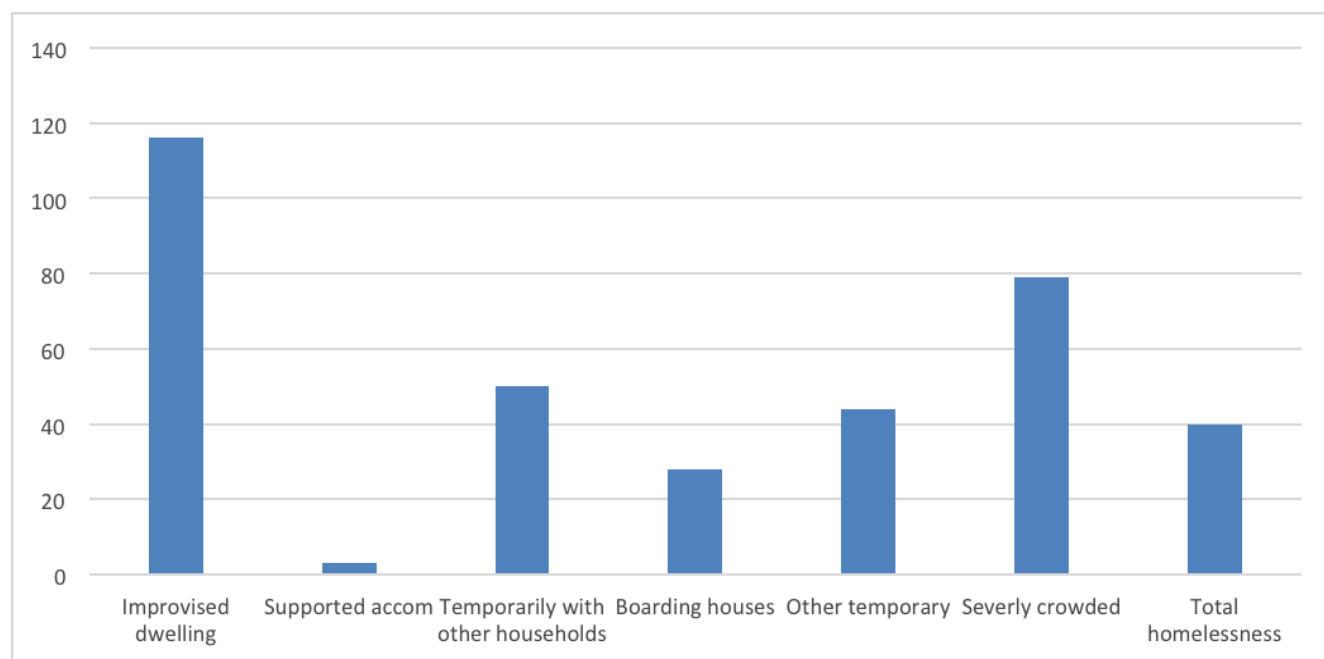
²⁷ <http://www.nwhn.net.au/Consumer-Participation/Consumer-survey-2017.aspx>

²⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing 2016*, (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2019)

Section 5: Changing nature and scale of homelessness

Homelessness has increased in Melbourne's west, across all recorded forms since 2011, as follows²⁹:

Figure 7: Percentage change in homelessness in Melbourne's west from 2011 to 2016



Of particular note is the nearly 120% increase in the numbers of people sleeping rough in the West, the 80% increase in the numbers of people living in severely overcrowded situations and the 50% increase in the numbers of people living temporarily with other households. None of these options are appropriate for a household experiencing homelessness.

Services in the Western Homelessness Network note the specific changes in the cohorts presenting to the homelessness service system in the past five to ten years:

- An increase in the **complexity of issues experienced by those who are presenting for** assistance – this is largely the result of longer periods of homelessness, which impacts on the level of trauma experienced by consumers. As the housing market worsens and there are less options available to people the experiences of those presenting is deteriorating. The service system is increasingly reliant of short-term emergency accommodation responses, which further impacts negatively on consumers' health, mental health and wellbeing. Services are also experiencing an increase in the numbers of people who exhibit aggression as a direct consequence of their level of trauma and distress.
- An increase in the **numbers of people over 60** who are presenting experiencing homelessness, with a noticeable increase in the numbers of older women presenting for assistance.
- An increase in the numbers of **large families** presenting for assistance.
- An increase in the numbers of people from **CALD communities** presenting for assistance.
- An increase in the numbers of **women and children experiencing family violence**. The Family Violence Specialist Services are as overwhelmed by the numbers of women and children presenting as the generalist homelessness services.
- An increase in the numbers of **young people** presenting for assistance, particularly older young people.
- More **veterans** are presenting for assistance.
- More **middle-class people** are now presenting for assistance as a result in the decline in affordable housing available.
- More people are presenting to the service system who are **sleeping rough** or who are living in severely overcrowded situations.
- Increasingly consumers are **'couch surfing'** – staying in insecure situations with family and friends for longer periods.

²⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2011 and 2016, Special request – Statewide Networkers*, (ABS, 2018)

Section 6: Policies and practices from all levels of government that have a bearing on delivering services to people experiencing homelessness

A lack of affordable housing is the key driver of homelessness in Melbourne's west. The Western Homelessness Network has identified the following government policies and practices that contribute to or hinder responses to people experiencing homelessness:

- **Lack of focus on preventative responses:** The key drivers of homelessness are family violence, evictions, poverty and family breakdown; yet government funding is directed to programs that respond to individuals and households once crises hit them, rather than on interventions in these issues, to prevent individuals and households from becoming homeless.
- **Income security levels:** Income security levels are inadequate to cover the costs of housing. This inevitably leads to homelessness, which is costly to the individual and to the community. Punitive Centrelink policies place additional pressure on vulnerable individuals and families.
- **Lack of control on rent levels, rental standards and tenancy rights:** The Victorian Government has progressed amendments to the Residential Tenancies Act in Victoria, but vacancy rates are so low that private rental tenants are still at the mercy of the actions of private property owners, and are often afraid to jeopardise a tenancy by reporting breaches to the Act.
- **Inadequate funding for tailored and flexible support provision by homelessness and allied service providers** (i.e. mental health support, Alcohol and other drugs (AOD) support, family support services): Welfare programs receive funding in siloes and generally receive funding for prescribed durations of support. Homelessness, AOD and Mental Health programs in Melbourne's north and west worked together for four years to improve cross sector responses to shared clients³⁰ and found that one of the key challenges to collaborative cross sector work was the limitations of the participant sectors' funding models. Funding is time limited and insufficient to enable collaborative practice in responding to the needs of shared clients.
- **NDIS:** There are significant barriers for people with disabilities who experiencing homelessness to accessing NDIS resources. The NDIS 'Activity based' funding model discriminates against people with a disability, who are experiencing homelessness. People with disabilities who are experiencing homelessness generally have a transient and chaotic life, with an associated history of complex trauma. These experiences affect the ability of those experiencing homelessness to engage with NDIS services. Their transience means they have difficulty meeting pre-arranged schedules and appointments for activities. Their history of complex trauma means they have difficulty building trust with workers and especially multiple workers undertaking discreet activities. The NDIS funding model relies on the provider agencies undertaking discrete activities with consumers, before they receive funding. This makes it financially difficult for providers to work with clients who have systemic difficulties with service engagement. Similarly, the NDIS reliance on a workforce model, in which a number of casual workers service one client, discriminates against people with complex trauma who have inherent difficulty with building trust. (Anecdotally, homelessness services report hearing that individual packages are being whittled away with invoices for 'no shows' to appointments)

Although the NDIS states it is a people centred approach, this is often not the case for people with disabilities who are experiencing homelessness. This group of people are, and have been, better serviced by agencies that are provided with "block" funding to deliver flexible approaches such as assertive outreach, or can provide 'drop in' supports for meals & other material aid, as well as providing community connection & crisis support - during business and after hours. The WHN recommends that NDIA review its funding and staffing models to ensure it no longer discriminates toward people with disabilities who are experiencing homelessness.

- **Child Protection policies and practices:** Child Protection workers often cite the lack of a stable home as a reason for their intervention with a family. Yet, the housing crisis in Melbourne affects family's ability to find affordable housing. The lack of affordable is not in the control of many parents on low incomes. When Child Protection removes children from parents in receipt of Centreline parenting payments, their payments are significantly reduced, leaving them in a catch 22: they cannot afford housing for themselves and their children on the reduced income, but Child Protection will not return their children to them until they have found suitable housing.
- **Young People Leaving Care** – The Child Protection system exits most young people from care at the age of 18, at a time when most young people are remaining at home until 24 years of age, as a result of the current economic situation (unemployment and underemployment of young people and the housing crisis).

³⁰ See Making Links: An AOD, Mental Health and Homelessness Partnership: <http://nwhn.net.au/Making-Links.aspx>

Young people generally exit care arrangements with a greater level of trauma and lower levels of independent living skills than young people in the general population do. In addition, they then must fend for themselves in the absence of any familial support. The lack of a housing guarantee on exit from care places these young people in an extraordinarily vulnerable situation.

- **Prison release programs** – current bail laws require that a person has access to an accommodation address before they will be bailed. In the absence of a safe address to exit to, people remain unnecessarily incarcerated. It is worth noting that many consumers have reported that gaol is better than homelessness – so some consumers commit further crimes post release in order to be re-incarcerated. It costs approximately \$100,000 to hold someone in prison in Victoria – we could be investing in housing rather than holding them in prison due to a lack of housing options.
- **Lack of community mental health services with ease of access** – The Andrews Government has identified, through the Royal Commission into Mental Health, that the current mental health system is unwieldy and unsatisfactory. Consequently, people experiencing mental health issues do not receive the level of support that they require and so are more likely to fall into homelessness. See Attachment B: *Breaking the cycle of mental health and homelessness: Western Homelessness Network submission to the Royal Commission into Mental Health, July 2019* for further discussion of this.
- **Resources to support people to maintain stable housing:** the length of time that homelessness services now spend assisting people to find stable housing means that there is no capacity to continue to support people into their tenancy. The capacity to support an individual or household who require assistance through the first year of their tenancy would assist in reducing recurring homelessness.
- **Lack of long-term private rental support funds** – the Victorian Government funds a range of private rental brokerage and head leasing programs (such as Family Violence Rapid Rehousing Program and the Private Rental Assistance Program). Programs are not funded adequately to provide ongoing rental subsidies for the many consumers who do not have the financial resources to sustain long-term private rental. Providers of the Family Violence Rapid Rehousing program have found that this program offers stability for families fleeing family violence, until the point that the private rental subsidy runs out. At that point, many of the families can no longer afford the private rental and so face homelessness.
- **Victorian Housing Register policy:** At present households who are on the Victorian Housing Register waiting lists jeopardise their housing status if they explore alternatives such as short-term private rental. This is a disincentive to exploring the sustainability of other options. An amendment to the Victorian Housing Register to enable people to remain on Priority Access Waiting List or Homeless with Support category on the Victorian Housing Register whilst exploring other housing options would ensure that households have a failsafe if those options prove to be unsustainable.
- **Underutilisation of public housing stock:** the limited availability of one-two bedroom stock in Melbourne's west means that people in larger homes who may be prepared to downsize are unable to do so, due to a lack of suitable stock.
- **Resources for asylum seekers and refugees:** the lack of access to an income and/or financial support severely hinders the capacity of refugees and asylum seekers to source housing.
- **Underemployment, low wages growth and casualisation of the workforce:** Australia is experiencing a period of low wage growth and a decline in employment levels³¹. Women and young people are particularly impacted by the increasing casualisation of the workforce, which often leads to underemployment. Income levels are consequently unpredictable and inadequate, in relation to the housing and other costs of living.

³¹ Geoff Gilfillan, Statistics and Mapping Section, *The extent and causes of the wage growth slowdown in Australia*, (Parliament of Australia, 9 April 2019)

Case studies

Case study 3: Rachael's story

Rachael is a single 21-year-old young woman. Child Protection contacted Rachael when she was 8 months pregnant, after they received a pre-birth report due relating to family violence perpetrated by Rachael's ex-partner and father of her daughter. Rachael had ended the relationship at the start of the pregnancy because of the family violence she was experiencing and had minimal contact with the perpetrator throughout her pregnancy.

Rachael gave birth to her daughter Amy one month early and let the perpetrator know of Amy's birth. The hospital discharged Rachael earlier than Amy, who needed a longer hospital stay following her premature birth. The perpetrator attended the hospital to visit Amy. While visiting the hospital the perpetrator stole Rachael's phone. He also followed Rachael one night from the hospital and tried to run her car off the road. Rachael went straight to the police station, reported the incident and requested a full Intervention Order (IVO). Rachael kept Child Protection informed of the incidents.

Child Protection made the decision that the child (Amy) was unsafe, because of these incidents. They stated in their report that Rachael had failed to keep her daughter safe and they would now be involved involuntarily which prolonged Amy's stay in hospital. Child Protection informed Rachael that she would not be able to return to her transitional housing. Child Protection did not provide alternate accommodation or assistance to Rachael to help her find alternate accommodation.

Rachael could not access any other affordable accommodation so was forced to couch surf for six weeks with her daughter Amy. Rachael was still required to pay rent for her transitional housing. The transitional housing tenancy at risk because Rachael was not residing in the property. Rachael engaged with Child Protection, a Maternal Child Health Nurse and a Housing worker weekly. Child Protection have not documented any parenting concerns about Rachael. The perpetrator refused to engage with Child Protection and Rachael received no contact from him following issue of the IVO.

Child protection remain involved. Rachael has attended Children's court three times with further court hearings scheduled. Rachael initially struggled to bond with Amy, who now has developed separation anxiety, because of the enormous stress of becoming homeless whilst a new mother.

Case study 4: Dave's story

Dave is a 25-year-old male who presents with a history of substance abuse, isolation and transience who contacted the Statewide 24-hour homelessness crisis service for assistance to find somewhere to stay. Dave had recently living been in private rental in Footscray and he had been employed but had recently been made redundant from his employment. The service referred Dave to a homelessness access point service closer to him.

Dave has not had stable accommodation for the past four years. David lived in transitional housing for three years but exited as another tenant had been using illicit substances. Dave also advised that his flatmate physically attacked him on several occasions. Dave spent the last four years bouncing between supported accommodations (government funded crisis supported accommodation), at his mother's in rural Victoria, rooming houses, backpackers, sleeping in his car and sleeping rough. Dave finally accessed private rental in 2018, which was not sustainable (particularly after he was made redundant) and was evicted for significant arrears.

Dave recently attempted suicide and expressed suicidal thoughts in phone contacts with workers. He has a history of prior drug use and is currently taking suboxone. Dave has previously disclosed a cancer diagnosis but has not provided further details. He has lost all his identification. He has debts and has a very limited income.

The access point service provided an assessment and discussed housing options with Dave i.e. short-term options (rooming house/backpackers), supported accommodation (government funded crisis supported accommodation), transitional housing and public housing.

The access point service made multiple attempts to secure rooming house accommodation for Dave and made referrals to the statewide crisis accommodation services. Eventually a vacancy became available with a homelessness support services, so the access point service referred Dave there for case managed support and funded two nights respite accommodation in a hotel. Dave has still not secured stable, affordable accommodation.

Case study 4: Bart's story

While Bart was living in private rental accommodation, he jointly invested in a business venture with another person, who he trusted. However, this person misappropriated the business funds, ultimately leaving Bart with no money and no income. He was unable to afford to pay his rent, could not maintain his tenancy, and so started living in his car.

Bart lived in his car for four years, despite regularly seeking help from his local homelessness access point. The only assistance that the access point service could provide was to fund one or two nights respite in a motel. After that, Bart would have no other option but to return to his car. Bart got to the point he no longer felt able to cope and was considering suicide. He felt enormous shame about his situation, about the indignity of having no home, of having nowhere to toilet or shower, the extreme difficulty of managing his health without cooking facilities or adequate space to rest, and the inability to source employment whilst in such a setting.

Eventually a transitional housing property became available, which included the provision of case management support. Bart has now lived in his transitional housing apartment for three years, and, because of this period of stable housing and support, is recovering from the trauma of homelessness, and has been able to face his surrounding issues. He has been able to resolve some legal matters and is nearing resolution of others. Bart has stabilised his finances, is addressing a number of physical health needs with a local GP, and regularly attends local drop in centres, where he is able to share time and experiences with others. Perhaps most importantly, Bart has been able to overcome the shame he was feeling so has been able to re-establish relationships with his family and is accessing psychological treatment to address issues stemming from his childhood.

Although the current tenancy is highly suitable for Bart's needs, it is unfortunate that he remains on the waiting list for long-term community or public housing via the Department of Health and Human Services. As he is yet to obtain housing permanency, the transitional property cannot be utilised to afford another individual experiencing homelessness the opportunity Bart has received.

Bart very frequently expresses how much transitional housing and support has changed his life, identifying that he does not think he could have coped, or worked on the fundamental areas of his life without it. Bart's support workers are impressed with how hard Bart has worked, and that he has had the courage to confront and address the challenges he has faced.

Case study 5: Tom's story

Tom was bailed on 19/03/2019 and referred to a homelessness access point in Melbourne's West. The Initial Assessment and Planning (IA&P) worker explored local shared accommodation options [private low cost rooming houses] and found that client was banned from using the largest shared accommodation provider and no other vacancies were available with any other provider. The IA&P worker secured a room in a motel room for the interim in the hopes that a vacancy would become available in the few days following.

Upon meeting with Tom, the IA&P worker established that the Tom would not be suitable for shared accommodation as an assessment identified extreme vulnerabilities. Tom advised that he had been in shared accommodation previously and had a bad experience of being targeted and assaulted in that accommodation. Tom said he feels unable to compete with "able bodied" people.

Tom requested accommodation near to the area where is his awaiting eye adjustment surgery. Tom reported that he was attacked when he was sleeping rough in 2017. His face caved in after he was kicked in the head and face. Tom was hospitalised and placed into a coma where he remained for some time to recover. Tom sustained an ABI, loss of sight and underwent facial reconstruction. As a result, he is now legally blind with only 30% vision in one eye and no vision in the other. Tom uses a blind stick as a guide. He has no family that can support him with accommodation as his parents and two (2) brothers have since passed away.

After he left hospital, Tom started sleeping rough again, prior to a short stay in a crisis facility. It was then that he reports that he began using drugs to cope with feeling so lonely and depressed. Tom was embarrassed to report being in a drug-induced psychosis on a Friday afternoon to which he said he had begun to smash cars outside of the crisis accommodation and exhibiting anti-social behaviour. Tom was incarcerated on or around 19/01/2019.

Tom said he has been diagnosed with PTSD, Chronic Fatigue and Depression. He said that he suffers from short-term memory loss and often loses track of time. Tom reports difficulty in using public transport, crossing busy roads and identifying people.

The IA&P worker was finally able to find accommodation for Tom in a community managed facility. Tom was extremely grateful for all the hard work undertaken by his support workers and says that he is very happy and comfortable at the community managed facility where he said that he finally feels safe and secure with the around the clock staff at the facility.

Section 7: How does the Homelessness Service System in the West work?

Ten years ago, when need for homelessness services was already well outstripping capacity, the homelessness service system was re-organised in order to create:

- clear access points to the system (to avoid consumers presenting to multiple services ‘telling their story over and over again’);
- a shared and transparent approach to assessing need; and
- an equitable approach to referring to limited resources to ensure they are used effectively.

At this time, homelessness services commenced joint management of coordinated service system arrangements. All the Specialist Homelessness funded services in Melbourne’s west still meet every six weeks to share information and to work on continuous improvement of the homelessness service system. The Northern and Western Homelessness Networks undertake an annual survey of consumers to inform our system development.

Access to homelessness resources in Melbourne’s West is, for the most part, coordinated by two Homelessness Access Point Services: Unison and The Salvation Army. People experiencing homelessness in the West present to one of only four homelessness access point offices for assistance: The Salvation Army in Sunshine, or their part time outpost in Melton³², or Unison, in Seddon or their outpost in Werribee. These services work in coordination with Women’s Health West, as the Family Violence entry point service for the West and Frontyard Melbourne Youth Support Service, as the statewide youth access point service.

The Homelessness Access Point services provide an *Initial Assessment and Planning* response by undertaking assessments of an individual or households’ housing and support needs, immediate risks and level of personal vulnerability. Staff discuss support and housing options with consumers presenting to the services, develop a short-term plan and, where possible, provide assistance in response to immediate issues.

Homelessness support and accommodation options are rarely available at the point that an individual or household first presents to an Access Point service for homelessness assistance. In order to ensure equitable access to the limited resources of the homelessness service system and to enable matching of need to the available resources, the Access Point services maintain prioritised lists of all households in need of further assistance from the local homelessness service system. As accommodation or support becomes available, clients on the prioritisation list are best-matched and referred to each vacancy.

The Access Point services also provide transitional housing tenancy management by overseeing the provision and maintenance of 500 medium-term properties. Transitional housing tenants must agree to participate in case managed support during their tenancy, enter into a tenancy agreement and are subject to the provisions of the Residential Tenancies Act (1997). These properties give tenants a stable base from which to work with a support provider in order to improve their overall wellbeing and pursue permanent housing options.

The remaining programs receive SHS funding to operate as homelessness support services, to assist people to prevent or end their experience of homelessness. These support services provide:

- crisis accommodation and support, such as that provided by a refuge (short term stays, on site support, congregate care)
- short term assistance, targeted support to assist people to either divert away from homelessness or to reduce their crisis while they are awaiting the support and accommodation that they need
- medium to long term case-managed support, including a variety of support models that may be undertaken on an office or outreach basis
- family reconciliation for young people who may be appropriately assisted to return home. The key work that all these agencies do is capacity building with people to assist individuals or households to access and maintain permanent housing
- private rental brokerage programs providing limited brokerage to assist households to access or to maintain private rental accommodation.

³² At this point, the Melton access point office is only staffed by one part-time worker, so the office cannot address crisis needs. Anyone in immediate crisis in Melton needs to travel to Sunshine for a response.

200 people present to The Salvation Army in Sunshine each month, who are unable to get an initial appointment



People queuing for an appointment at The Salvation Army Sunshine office

Unfortunately, many more people present to the Homelessness access point services than there are available appointments. For some people this means queuing for a service, only to find out that there is no assistance available. For others it means waiting at the service all day for their appointment. People generally queue prior to 9am in order to ensure they get an appointment. It is not uncommon for 50 people to be waiting outside The Salvation Army Sunshine office before it opens at 9 am (see photo).

If someone presents who has nowhere to stay that night and there is no appointment available for them, then the reception staff will generally organise a night in local low cost private accommodation. The consumer then needs to return to the service the next day for a full appointment (for families, this means finding their way to the service, usually on public transport with children in tow, two days in a row).

The pressure of the numbers of people presenting is so great that appointments, which should be up to two hours long, are generally no longer than 45 minutes. In this time, an Initial Assessment & Planning (IA&P) Worker works with the consumer/s to identify what they need, provides information about options and works with the consumer on a short-term plan.

The homelessness sector is not a housing sector. The sector has access to two forms of housing: government funded crisis supported accommodation (women's refuges, youth refuges and large crisis services, primarily for single men) and transitional housing (500 properties available for medium term housing).

The Access Point services will try to find crisis accommodation for those who have nowhere to stay. There are 423 government funded crisis beds across Victoria³³. In 2018/19 The Salvation Army and Unison had to fund 3,774 crisis beds at a cost of \$1,050,000.

The only alternatives to government-funded beds are low cost private accommodation and rooming houses. The report "A Crisis in Crisis: the appalling state of emergency accommodation in Melbourne's north and west" (<http://www.nwhn.net.au/Crisis-in-Crisis.aspx> - <http://www.nwhn.net.au/Crisis-in-Crisis.aspx>) outlines how inadequate this is as a response to vulnerable people.

There are 423 government funded crisis beds for the whole of Victoria.

In 2018/19 The Salvation Army and Unison had to fund 3,774 crisis beds.

If the consumer needs further support (to find housing or to address anything affecting their ability to maintain housing) or access to housing, their name is placed on a 'prioritisation list', awaiting referral to available resources. There are over 1,000 households on the prioritisation lists in the West. Only a small portion of those presenting for assistance will be able to access homelessness case management support or one of the 500 transitional housing properties in the West. In 2018, one of the two access point services assisted 4,541 people. The homelessness system only had capacity to provide 411 (9%) of these people with case management support and only 86 (2%) with transitional housing.

Private rental and public/social housing are the two key long-term housing options. Recent Victorian government increases to the Private Rental Access Program have been very effective in assisting people to access private rental. However, homelessness service in the West report an increase in the numbers of people who are presenting for assistance just because they can't find any affordable housing, in the absence of other support needs. This suggests that we are creating a system in which individuals/households now require the assistance of the homelessness system to access private rental.

There are 14,358 social housing properties in Melbourne's west, but 12,000 households waiting for access.

Access to public housing is minimal. For instance, in the last 12 months, 21 of the 3,000 households on the waiting for public housing in the Sunshine Area, were allocated housing. There are 14,766 social housing properties in Melbourne's west but there are approximately 12,000 households on the waiting list for access to those properties.

³³ Director of Housing witness statement to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence, August 2015

Section 8: What are the solutions?



Housing, housing, housing...

The 2018 Victorian Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan³⁴ prompted encouraging service reforms in the provision of services to people who are sleeping rough in Victoria. The Plan offers a clear framework for the provision of services, which should be applied across all responses to people experiencing homelessness: intervening early to prevent homelessness, providing stable accommodation as quickly as possible and supporting people to maintain stable accommodation.

The Western Homelessness Networks advocates for this approach to be utilised to addressing homelessness more broadly. Housing provision is at the centre of this response. Sufficient housing will significantly reduce the number of people who become homeless and will enable a quick and appropriate response to those who do become homeless. This will free up the homelessness services system to respond to those people who 'fall through the gaps', as it was initially designed to do.

The following pages outline our ideas to:

- prevent homelessness
- increase housing availability in the West
- improve the capacity of the homelessness service system in the short term (whilst prevention and housing creation strategies are being implemented).

³⁴ Department of Health and Human Services, *Victoria's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan*, (Victorian Government, January 2018), pg11.

Section 9: Strategies to prevent homelessness		
Federal	State	Local
Ensure adequate levels of affordable housing in Victoria If Victoria had sufficient affordable housing then only those people experiencing a significant crisis or range of complexities in their lives would become homeless. The Homelessness Service System could then assist those who 'fall through the cracks' – the role it was initially designed for.		
Build sufficient public housing to ensure affordable and stable housing for all those households meeting the criteria for public housing. Recent RMIT research indicates that: "The evidence we have is unequivocal – public housing is the most powerful factor that prevents homelessness among disadvantaged households," ³⁵		
End violence against women and children Family violence is the most common cause of homelessness. If we can end violence against women and children, we will reduce homelessness significantly. In the meantime we need to work across justice, family violence and homelessness jurisdictions to enable more women and children to remain or return home safely.		
Provide a liveable minimum wage/adequate income security Sufficient to ensure that all individuals/households can afford housing	Family interventions Increase family support and family mediation services to provide families with the skills and supports they need to address their issues and avoid family breakdown.	
Wraparound services for consumers with complex needs Homelessness causes mental health issues for many people and can lead to substance use to manage the associated trauma. These issues, in turn, create additional complexities. Adequate housing first models with 'wraparound support services' are needed to support people whose lives have become particularly chaotic. Some people will require supported long-term accommodation for life.		
Prevention strategies: Housing guarantee for young people leaving care 500 young people leave State care in Victoria each year. Research shows that the majority of those people most recurrently homelessness and recurrently incarcerated became homeless before they turned 18 and came from the child protection system. Let's break that cycle!		
Prevention strategies: Mortgage and rental stress responses WestJustice are trialling a mortgage stress assistance service. In the past access point services could provide early intervention to assist people in rental stress or at risk of homelessness. Councils could take a roll in identifying people who are potentially experiencing mortgage stress – by identifying those unable to pay their rates or those presenting to Council Community Services experiencing financial difficulties.		
Fund programs, with brokerage, targeted to intervene early when tenancies are at risk – the second most common reason people access homelessness services in Victoria is eviction.		

³⁵ Johnson, Dr G, *Tackling homelessness starts with public housing*, (RMIT, August 2019)

Section 10: Long term solutions to create housing in the West		
Federal	State	Local
Build public housing There are 12,651 households on the Victorian Housing Register waiting for social housing in Melbourne's west ³⁶ . This represents about one third of those waiting for public housing. 129,500 new social housing units are required in Greater Melbourne by 2036. ¹		
The Federal Government diverts \$11.2B in negative gearing and capital gains tax concessions. An estimated \$8.6b is required to build the social housing Australia needs.	The Productivity Commission identified that Victoria spends about half of the national average on social housing.	
Re-establish NRAS		
	Inclusionary zoning A mandatory requirement that a portion of any new development is allocated to social housing providers.	
	Create legislation requiring mandatory inclusionary zoning.	Explore opportunities to provide incentives to developers during planning process to encourage developers' contribution to social and/or affordable housing.
	Vacancy tax and vacancy management Develop/increase taxes on vacant properties. Source vacant properties for flexible use.	
Housing first models for consumers with complex needs Homelessness causes mental health issues for many people and can lead to substance use to manage the associated trauma. These issues, in turn, create additional complexities. Adequate housing first models with 'wraparound services', are needed to support people whose lives have become particularly chaotic. Some people will require supported long-term accommodation for life.		
Rent subsidies/head leasing for those with a problematic rental history or those who do not have the financial capacity to sustain the costs of private rental		

³⁶ Homelessness Australia advises in the Everybody's Home campaign, that Australia will need 500,000 new social and affordable homes by 2026.

Section 11: Medium term solutions to create housing in the West

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Federal	State	Local
Build innovative housing options Housing, such as the Harris Transportables, provides a safe and affordable emergency accommodation that addresses consumers' need for access to their own lockable space with their own facilities ⁱⁱ . Transportable housing can be installed on VicRoads, VicTrack, Utility company and Government land that is permanently or temporarily available. Source land and ease planning requirements for individuals, government and developers seeking to install temporary accommodation.		
Social housing growth Victorian Government establishes targets for social housing growth, requiring that Housing Associations target growth to housing for people experiencing homelessness.		Regulation Increase capacity to effectively monitor and register rooming houses
Tax responses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tax incentives (tax offsets for private landlords with investment properties). Margin free lending Need to stimulate property development to increase affordable housing through Inclusion Zoning (property developers need to sell app. 70-80% off the plan before construction) Currently the Holding Costs for developers in residential properties do not promote 'Build to Own' model (which could be good for affordable housing compared with US and more recently UK). Residential yields are too low (compared with commercial or hotel). 		
Fund additional homelessness support workers At present only approximately 11% of those presenting to the homelessness system receive case managed support. Due to the lack of additional support workers to meet the increasing demands, many consumers remain on a prioritisation/wait-list and does not receive any form of supports. Many people require support to not only to help them find housing, but also supports to assist them with addressing their multiple complex needs that have impacted on their ability to maintain housing or recover from the experience of homelessness.		
		Affordable Housing Agreement Utilising the Planning mechanism to negotiate with developers in the voluntary 'provision of affordable housing' under section 173 of the Planning Act.
	Granny flats/demountables Housing Victoria currently makes movable units available for older people and young people. Increase supply of demountables to anyone who can house a friend or family member without accommodation.	Grants for property modification Provide grants to people living in larger houses (i.e single older women) to temporarily modify them in order to maximise the use of the property. Reduce restrictions on granny flat installation

Section 12: Short term solutions to respond to homelessness in the West

Federal	State	Local
Increase Housing Establishment Funding <p>The two access point services in Melbourne's west currently receive \$77,990 in Housing Establishment Funds each year. Both The Salvation Army and Unison spend more than this but are still unable to assist everyone who presents. A doubling of this funding would enable services to purchase more appropriate emergency accommodation, for a short period of time, until these options 'burn out'.</p>		
Fund three additional Initial Assessment & Planning workers per access point <p>This would enable The Salvation Army to establish a fully functioning outpost in Melton and would enable improved responses in the two key access point sites of Sunshine (The Salvation Army) and Seddon (Unison).</p>		
Fund additional homelessness support workers to provide support to consumers in emergency accommodation <p>Increase the resources of homelessness support agencies to provide additional outreach support responses to people in emergency accommodation such as hotels and rooming houses.</p>		

Attachment A: Emergency accommodation in Melbourne's west

Homelessness access point services in the West purchased: 3,774 stays in 154 different hotels and rooming houses for \$1.05M.

Those who currently have no safe, appropriate or affordable home in Melbourne need long term housing options. These options exist in Melbourne's west in such small numbers that the homelessness service system relies on emergency accommodation options – primarily purchased accommodation from the private sector. As the *2017 Annual Northern and Western Homelessness Networks' Consumer Survey* shows, most of these options are unsafe, unclean and inappropriate. In 2018/19, the two access point services in Melbourne's west purchased 3,774 stays in accommodation from 154 different hotel and rooming house providers, at a cost of \$1,050,781.

When consumers were asked what appropriate emergency accommodation would look like, they asked for [not surprisingly] accommodation that felt safe, clean and which contained the facilities for them to provide for their children. (See Attachment C: *A Crisis in Crisis: the appalling state of emergency accommodation in Melbourne's west.*)

Consumers were asked whether they would prefer large crisis accommodation facilities, with onsite support, or their own lockable space with facilities [even if small]. 85% of consumers identified their own lockable space with facilities as the most appropriate option.

Below are some examples of innovative housing that can be constructed quickly.

Harris Transportable Housing project (<https://www.launchhousing.org.au/harris-transportable-housing-project/>)



In early 2019, six tenants with a chronic experience of homelessness moved into the first six homes of the life-changing Harris Transportable Housing Project in Melbourne's inner west.

The project is a partnership between Launch Housing and philanthropists Geoff and Brad Harris, of **Harris Capital**, with funding from the **Victorian Property Fund**.

The project is using nine parcels of vacant **VicRoads** land in Footscray and Maidstone to create 57 tiny homes for people with a chronic experience of homelessness.

At a time when 116,000 people experience homelessness on any given night (up 14% from 2011 to 2016), this project demonstrates how unused government land can be repurposed to create safe, stable homes for people who urgently need them.

Pre fabricated hotels

Developed for music festivals and sporting events, the temporary and transportable **Snoozebox Hotel** has popped up across Europe. Stackable and available in multiple configurations with anywhere from 40-400 rooms, the hotel can be rendered fully operational in just 48 hours. Each of the two to four rooms per shipping container offers air conditioning, a flat-screen TV and WiFi. <https://www.complex.com/style/2012/07/10-amazing-prefab-hotels/4-snoozebox-portable-hotel>





Developed by [Tide Construction and Vision Modular Systems](https://www.tideconstruction.co.uk/), the Apex House comprises 679 modules with over 580 rooms that'll be ready for students to move into this fall. The modules were [prefabricated](#) in Tide Construction and Vision Modular Systems' factory 60 miles away in Bedford with all the furniture, windows, electric wiring, and plumbing installed before they were transported to the site. The modules were stacked to a height of 90 meters in just 13 weeks. <https://inhabitat.com/europes-tallest-modular-tower-snaps-together-in-north-london/>

Attachment B: Western Homelessness Network submission to the Royal Commission into Mental Health

Attachment B has been attached to the submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry as a separate attachment.

Attachment C: A Crisis in Crisis: The appalling state of emergency accommodation in Melbourne's north and west

Attachment C has been attached to the submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry as a separate attachment.
