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Australian Government's role in the development of cities

Homelessness NSW is a peak not for profit organisation that works with its members to prevent and reduce homelessness across New South Wales (NSW). Our members include small, locally based community organisations, multiservice agencies with a regional reach and large state-wide service providers all of which provide services and support to people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Key services that we provide include policy development and advocacy in working to end homelessness, public education about the changing face of homeless people and those at risk, information about the diverse mix of initiatives operating in NSW and elsewhere and advice and support for member organisations and others about organisational change and improvement.

Homelessness NSW welcomes the opportunity to make a submission regarding the Australian Government's role in the development of cities. There can be little doubt that Sydney and many parts of NSW are in the midst of a housing affordability crisis.ⁱ This is particularly virulent at the bottom of the market. Each year Anglicare conducts a rental affordability snapshot for New South Wales. In 2017, on the Snapshot weekend, 13,447 private rentals were advertised for rent in Greater Sydney and the Illawarra. There were only 26 unique properties affordable and appropriate for people living on income support payments without placing them in housing stress and only 625 unique properties that were affordable and appropriate for people living on the minimum wage without placing them in housing stress.ⁱⁱ

The lack of affordable housing has most impact at the bottom end of the market and is a major cause of homelessness. According the 2015-6 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report on homeless services in 2015-16 the top 3 reasons for clients seeking assistance in NSW were: housing crisis (54%, compared with 43% nationally), financial difficulties (41%, compared with 38%) and housing affordability stress (29%, compared with 24%).ⁱⁱⁱ

The 2011 Census data on homelessness for NSW showed over 28,000 people experiencing homelessness. While we await the release of the 2016 data, Specialist Homelessness Service data indicates that there is an increase in demand for homelessness services. In 2015/16 homelessness services provided support to 69,000 clients – a 35% increase in clients from 2013/14.

Additional data on the increase in homelessness can be found in the City of Sydney street count, a twice-yearly street count of rough sleepers within the city's boundaries. In August 2011, there were 307 rough sleepers, in August 2016, 394, a 28% increase. If this is replicated in the Census data we would have over 35,000 people experiencing homelessness in NSW.

To address this crisis Homelessness NSW believes that all levels of government need to use all available policy levers.

To address the immediate crisis of rough sleeping Homelessness NSW believes the Federal Government should support and fund proven models at scale. Our research strongly supports the Housing First approach. Housing First is a homeless assistance approach that prioritises providing permanent housing and support to people experiencing homelessness, thus ending their homelessness and serving as a platform from which they can pursue personal goals and improve their quality of life. This approach is guided by evidence that people need basic necessities like food and a place to live before attending to anything less critical, such as getting a job, budgeting properly, or attending to substance use issues.

The two most critical factors in a Housing first answer to homelessness are a supply of affordable housing and ongoing support. In late 2015 Homelessness NSW, along with other stakeholders, interviewed 516 experiencing homelessness in Sydney. The data is worth revisiting. 29% reported having a brain injury; 26% reported a diagnosis of a learning development or developmental disability; 53% reported seeing a professional about a mental health issue in the last 6 months; 100% had an income of less than \$400 per week. 51% needed short term support with housing they can afford but not surprisingly 35% require housing with intensive support, in some cases for the duration of their lives.

For Housing First to succeed it will take a level of funding commitment from the Federal Government.

As has been stated we also require a supply of affordable housing. Across Australia over 195,000 people languish on housing wait lists. In NSW it is close to 80,000. As the Anglicare survey clearly highlights the private rental market is not meeting the needs of low income renters. To address this shortfall Homelessness NSW believes the Federal Government has to commit to a program of building social, affordable housing. This needs to be on the level of the Nation Building Program that saw 6,000 new units of housing built. However, it is a program needs replicating at a larger scale and over 20 years to address this shortfall.

Homelessness NSW thanks the Committee for this opportunity to bring these matters to its consideration and would be more than pleased to discuss them further.

To discuss any aspect of this submission please contact Digby Hughes, Senior Policy Officer on (02) 8354 7601 or digby@homelessnessnsw.org.au.

Regards,

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Homelessness NSW

ⁱ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-01-24/sydney-housing-affordability-nightmare-laid-bare-in-survey/8206676>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.anglicare.asn.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/rental-affordability-snapshot-2017.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.aihw.gov.au/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=60129558581>