



Submission on the Commonwealth Government's green paper on homelessness

Which way home? a new approach to homelessness

Shelter NSW welcomes the opportunity to comment on the government's green paper on homelessness, *Which way home? a new approach to homelessness*.

Shelter NSW is a non-government, non-profit, social change agency, and we work to advance the housing interests of low-income and disadvantaged people in New South Wales.

We support the creation of a new national strategic response to homelessness which includes strengthening the accommodation and support services provided under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), and improving the response of mainstream services to those who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of it.

Our main focus with respect to homelessness is on the issue of affordable housing supply.

We need an affordable housing system which prevents homelessness, facilitates an effective response to homelessness when it occurs and reduces the likelihood of its recurrence.

We agree with the statement in the green paper that Australia needs 'a significant increase in supply' (p. 59) given the extent of homelessness in Australia.

We are concerned that the green paper has not adequately addressed the need for the supply of affordable housing for those who are experiencing homelessness – housing which is affordable, long-term, safe and appropriate (on the basis of disability, cultural and other requirements). Such supply is necessary to create exit points from SAAP services and also to create options for those living in housing stress and at risk of homelessness.

Ensuring an adequate supply of long-term affordable accommodation is a critical factor in responding to this complex social crisis – enhancing stability and fostering social inclusion (supporting opportunities to connect

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with others, to participate in work and other activities, to access services, to have a sense of belonging, to have an experience of home).

1. New Commonwealth housing programs

Shelter NSW commends the National Affordable Rental Scheme (NRAS) for its focus on increasing the supply of affordable rental dwellings for low to moderate income households, and for its encouragement of large-scale investment in affordable housing. To create 50,000 new affordable rental properties by June 2012 would be a significant contribution to the insufficient supply of affordable rental accommodation.

This scheme will potentially benefit low-income households who are generally housed in the private rental market and are at risk of homelessness due to after-housing poverty.

Shelter NSW also commends the A Place to Call Home program for its provision of 600 homes for people experiencing homelessness and for its 'housing first' response to homelessness. After a 12-month period of support, the accommodation will be transferred to the pool of public housing; however the tenants will not have to exit the housing at this stage and their tenancies will be extended under public housing tenancy arrangements.

We welcome the addition of 600 homes to the supply of social housing and the provision of tenancy and other support services.

However we submit that the length of support should not be fixed at 12 months as proposed. A Victorian survey by Hanover Welfare Services found that after SAAP clients had obtained a public housing tenancy, 25% had an ongoing need for SAAP services and 20% were unable to maintain their tenure for more than a year (E. Kelly, *Use of SAAP services by people living in public housing*, 2006, p. 55). This research demonstrates that those who have experienced a crisis related to accommodation and/or other factors may require support beyond a 12-month period to ensure the ongoing sustainability of the tenancies and to reduce the likelihood of homelessness recurring. We suggest that A Place to Call Home should allow for the extension of support services beyond 12 months in accordance with individual tenants' needs.

Our other concern regarding the A Place to Call Home program is scale: 600 homes are not enough.

Shelter NSW supports the call by the Senate Select Committee on Housing Affordability in Australia for the government to reassess whether the program's funding is sufficient to address the level of unmet need (*A good house is hard to find: housing affordability in Australia*, 2008, p. 169), and we call for the funding of this program to be significantly expanded.

2. Social housing

David Wright-Howie from the Council to Homeless Persons notes that, 'those countries with larger social housing sectors with more ability to assist and enable low income people to access and sustain housing have a better record in responding to homelessness' (*Australia's strengths and challenges in responding to homelessness: an international comparison*, 2008, p. 35).

Real expenditure on assistance under the Commonwealth–State Housing Agreement declined by 16.7% between 1997–98 and 2006–07, public housing being the largest form of assistance provided under the agreement (Productivity Commission, *Report on government services*, 2008, p. 16.5–16.6).

The number of public housing dwellings in Australia declined from 372,134 to 341,378 from 1996 to 2006 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Australia's welfare 2007*, 2007, p. 457).

As at 30 June 2007, a total of 176,321 households were on waiting lists for public rental housing, 11,700 classified as being in 'greatest need' (AIHW, *Public rental housing 2006–07: Commonwealth–State Housing Agreement national data report*, 2008, Cat. No. HOU 172, p. x).

However we do not consider public housing waiting lists to be a reliable indicator of the extent of housing need in the community. The eligibility criteria for public housing have become much more stringent over the last 10 years in most jurisdictions. This restrictive redefinition of need has created a new category of households not needy enough to meet the public housing criteria yet unable to find affordable housing in the private rental market. These households are experiencing housing stress and they have significantly expanded the numbers of people at risk of homelessness.

We note with interest that the Senate Select Committee on Housing Affordability recommended:

- (a) that the pool of social housing be increased to at least 6% of all housing stock in Australia, to meet the current need for social housing for highly disadvantaged households; and
- (b) that the pool of social housing be increased to at least 10% of all housing stock in Australia by 2020, with a view to increasing the sustainability of social housing in the longer term (facilitating the entry into social housing of a more diversified mix of low to medium income earners and so contributing to the ongoing sustainability of that sector) (Senate Select Committee on Housing Affordability in Australia, *op.cit.*, p. 167).

Given the government's agenda for reforming state and territory funding arrangements and the preparation of a National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA), we call on the government to ensure that under NAHA, the states and territories are sufficiently funded to expand the supply of social housing:

- (a) to provide affordable housing to those who are experiencing homelessness (that is, to enable the implementation of objectives similar to those under the A Place to Call Home program); and
- (b) to provide affordable housing for those who are living in housing stress and so are at risk of homelessness.

3. Support services to ensure sustainability of housing

Shelter NSW urges an increase in funding of support services for people who are housed but are at risk of homelessness (whatever their tenure). Such services can lessen the likelihood of those people becoming homeless and entering crisis accommodation services.

Support services have to be appropriate and accessible, and where possible, people should have a choice regarding the provision of support services.

4. Consumer participation

Shelter NSW supports the creation of mechanisms for ensuring that those exposed to homelessness can contribute to policy debate and the development of services. This contribution could take the form of:

- (a) receiving feedback and complaints from other consumers regarding homelessness and mainstream services;
- (b) contributing to the development of policies relating to the national strategy on homelessness, homelessness services and mainstream services in their dealings with people who are experiencing or are at risk of homelessness;
- (c) enhancing an understanding of the experience of homelessness amongst those working in the areas of homelessness services and policy; and
- (d) contributing to community education about homelessness.

This consumer involvement in decision-making has the potential to create a two-way process of improving homelessness policies and the sector, and empowering the consumer-participants.

It reflects one of the core elements of the government's social inclusion agenda: 'To be socially included, all Australians must be given the opportunity to ... have their voices heard' (Social inclusion, Canberra, viewed on 3 July 2008, <<http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/default.htm>>). Setting up a model for consumer participation also accords with Australia's obligations under Article 25 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights: to provide an opportunity for citizens to take part in the conduct of public affairs.

5. Targets

Shelter NSW agrees with the following targets proposed in the green paper:

- (a) a decrease in the number of people moving from social housing and private rental housing to crisis accommodation services;
- (b) a decrease in the number of people seeking crisis accommodation who first experienced homelessness as children; and
- (c) an increase in the percentage of school-age children who remain in school, education or training after being in crisis accommodation.

We support the amendment of the following target proposed by Homelessness NSW.ACT:

- (d) 'an increase in the number of women and children remaining in their own home following domestic and family violence' should be changed to 'an increase in the number of women and children safely remaining in their own home following domestic and family violence' (Homelessness NSW, Green paper submission, 2008, p. 6).

Shelter NSW suggests that targets should address the many pathways to homelessness. For example, the following targets could be added:

- (e) a decrease in the number of people accessing crisis accommodation services who have exited or been in contact with criminal justice, corrective, juvenile justice, out-of-home care, health and disability services;
- (f) a decrease in the number of people exiting caravan parks and boarding houses accessing crisis accommodation services;
- (g) a decrease in the number of rough sleepers accessing crisis accommodation services; and
- (h) a decrease in the number of people being placed in caravan parks and boarding houses as emergency housing.

A national strategic response to homelessness should schedule an annual evaluation of actions, results and statistics as against any overarching goal and targets set out in the white paper, to feed into the ongoing development of strategies to counter homelessness.

We call for the Australian Bureau of Statistics to develop a mechanism to measure homelessness and housing affordability on an annual basis, to assist in an annual evaluation as against the white paper.

6. Principles for change

Shelter NSW supports the following principles for change outlined in the green paper:

- (a) preventing the causes of homelessness is a main focus;
- (b) safety and well-being are a prime concern for all clients;
- (c) rights and responsibilities of individuals and families are paramount;
- (d) joined-up service delivery needs joined-up policy;
- (e) transition points are a priority;
- (f) evidence-based policy helps to shape priorities for action; and

- (g) targets are set to reduce homelessness and hold ourselves accountable.

We suggest these amendments to principles proposed in the green paper:

- (h) 'a national commitment and strong leadership from all levels of government, the not-for-profit and business sectors and the general community is needed' should be changed to 'commitment and cooperation are needed from all levels of government, the non-government and business sectors, and the community';
- (i) 'social inclusion drives our efforts' should be changed to 'social inclusion and social justice drives our efforts'; and
- (j) 'everyone is treated with dignity and respect' should be changed to 'everyone is treated with dignity and respect, and consumer participation is valued'.

We also propose the following addition to the above list of principles:

- (k) 'housing should be affordable, safe, secure and appropriate to the needs of individuals and families'.

7. Research priorities for a national homelessness research agenda

We propose that the research priorities for a national homelessness research agenda should include research on:

- (a) the impact of housing affordability on homelessness;
- (b) after-housing poverty (including analyses of the adequacy of Centrelink benefits in meeting tenants' basic needs and of eviction rates from public housing); and
- (c) the working poor and their experience of homelessness and the risk of homelessness.

Shelter NSW values the opportunity provided by the white paper process to contribute towards the development of solutions to homelessness as well as towards the development of a fair and just housing system.

In summary, we call for:

- (a) increased funding for the A Place to Call Home program and for social housing, in order to expand affordable housing supply;
- (b) increased funding of support services for people who are housed but are at risk of homelessness (including under the A Place to Call Home program); and
- (c) the creation of mechanisms for consumer participation in the development of homelessness policies and services.

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