

Final Submission

Inquiry into Financial Administration of Homelessness Services in WA

March 2022

Introduction

The Western Australian Local Government Association is the united voice of Local Government in Western Australia. The Association is an independent, membership-based group representing and supporting the work and interests of 139 Local Governments in Western Australia.

The Association provides an essential voice for 1230 Elected Members and approximately 22,600 Local Government employees as well as over 2.67 million constituents of Local Governments in Western Australia.

This submission was endorsed by WALGA State Council on 2 March 2022.

Background

Local Government makes a significant contribution to improving, promoting, and protecting the health of communities through its planning, health, community development and regulatory powers. Homelessness is an emerging community policy issue impacting widely and in varying degrees on the sector and one which Local Government is increasingly being called upon to address.

The Local Government sector is highly diverse with respect to capacity, capability, financial and human resources, local populations, and geographic location (metropolitan, regional, remote). Different Local Governments have adopted a range of formalised strategy, policy and plans, as well as informal ad hoc approaches targeting homelessness and social disadvantage. Therefore, the Association welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Inquiry Terms of Reference.

In March 2019 the Association engaged with Local Governments across WA to develop a submission to the State Government Directions Paper for the 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness, All Paths Lead to a Home ('the Strategy').

WALGA's Advocacy Position on Homelessness:

WALGA recognises that Local Government through its planning, health, community development and regulatory powers can facilitate positive local and regional responses to end homelessness, however, does not see that it has a lead role. Rather, Local Government's role is one of a stakeholder that requires early engagement in the understanding of collaborative approaches that improve the quality of life for people experiencing homelessness in all of its manifestations. [State Council Resolution July 2019-71.5/2019].

Local Government priorities with respect to homelessness are:

- Local Government involvement in decision making, with respect to designing and trialling place-based housing and accommodation options.
- Local Government and service providers having the resource and skill capacity to guide people experiencing or at risk of homelessness to appropriate support; and

- Local Government involvement in the design and implementation of whole of government responses to homelessness.

General Comment

The Association remains supportive of the principles and focus areas of the Strategy and supports a collaborative approach to implementation to ensure that funds spent on homelessness deliver value and maximise returns to the community.

The underlying critical issues of lack of housing supply and affordability mean that without a significant sustained injection of new capital, it will be difficult to eliminate endemic homelessness in line with the stated aim of the Strategy.

The Association welcomes the 2020-21 budget announcements from the State Government with \$2.5 billion to be invested in housing and homelessness initiatives over the next four years.

Overall Recommendations

In developing this submission, the Association undertook an extensive engagement process with Local Government which resulted in five recommendations:

1. Economies of scale should be optimised by directing homelessness funding to the expansion of initiatives that are aligned with the Strategy, supported by strategic partnerships (Local Government and not-for-profit).
2. There should be continued investment in approaches that have a proven track record.
3. The capacity of the state-wide data collection system requires expansion to increase consistency, coordination, equity of access and effectiveness of Homelessness Services.
4. Outputs and outcomes of the Strategy should be promoted through strengthened communication and feedback channels between the *Supporting Communities Forum - Homelessness Working Group* and the Local Government Sector.
5. Priority should be given to community housing and crisis accommodation options in regional areas which can be facilitated through partnerships between Local Government, the Community Housing Sector, developers and State and Federal Government.

Response to the Inquiry Terms of Reference

1. Current Funding and Delivery of Services

Housing and Homelessness Funding

In the 2021-22 State Budget the State Government committed an additional \$884 million for housing and homelessness initiatives. This includes the \$6 million Local Government Partnership Fund for Homelessness (the Fund) launched in August

2021 and developed to assist Local Governments to deliver, in partnership with local service providers, on-ground homelessness initiatives responsive to local needs. Approximately \$1.5 million is allocated each year over 4 years to the Fund. Local Government is committed to working constructively with the State Government to implement the Fund over the next three years and to identify future funding opportunities.

Local Governments welcome additional funding that supports the provision of local services that support localised policy responses to homelessness. However, the Fund encourages competition between Local Governments and within the not-for-profit sector. The Fund positions Local Government as the lead procurer of services which does not align with the role of Local Government as defined in the Strategy.

Local Governments reported that the short application window was problematic as it did not allow adequate time for stakeholder engagement, proposal planning and developing a solid rationale and outcomes for projects. The Fund's co-contribution requirement (including in-kind contributions) was a barrier for many Local Governments which did not have existing budget or resources dedicated to developing new initiatives or in locations where service providers were not present, particularly regional areas.

The Local Government sector recommends that the Fund focus on expanding and improving existing successful programs with functioning partnerships and scope to achieve economies of scale and wider impact. For example, the Library Connect Program, piloted by St Patricks and the City of Fremantle, provides skilled and qualified outreach workers at public libraries to connect vulnerable people to services. This is a proven model that could be applied across several Local Government Areas through a joint application.

Reducing requirements for co-contribution and supporting opportunities for joint applications from geographically proximate Local Governments will make the Fund more accessible to all Local Governments, particularly small and/or regional Local Governments.

Local Government looks forward to further engagement with the Department of Communities on the scope and requirements of the Fund ahead of the second round.

Housing First

Housing First is the primary model and approach underpinning the Strategy. Housing First prioritises providing people with permanent housing with the support of flexible tailored wrap around services.

The State Government allocated \$34.5 million in the 2020-21 budget, as a discrete initiative under the Strategy, to establish the Housing First model at locations determined to be high priority Local Government Areas (LGAs), including Perth, Bunbury, Mandurah, Rockingham, and Geraldton.

Local Government feedback indicates a range of positive outcomes from the Housing First program such as the Moorditj Mia 'Strong Home' program in City of

Cockburn and the recent housing of 19 people experiencing homelessness in the City of Mandurah. However, the sector reports inconsistencies in the roll out of the Housing First model, in part due to the limited capacity of the lead service provider to engage across multiple Local Governments. The ongoing chronic shortage of housing and accommodation is a significant limiting factor to the success of the Housing First program.

The **Zero Project** and **By Name List** is highly regarded as an effective platform to provide coordinated oversight to data collection across the Housing First priority locations. However, the targeted approach to the implementation of the Housing First program makes it difficult to establish a broader data-informed picture of homelessness.

Homelessness Services

The provision of assertive outreach services is invaluable in managing complex health and mental health issues of chronic rough sleepers. From a Local Government perspective, this plays an important role in reducing the burden on Local Government front-line employees such as Rangers, library staff and customer service officers.

Local Government feedback indicates widespread gaps in the provision of specialist homelessness services. The most frequently reported gaps are in relation to:

- Aboriginal Housing Support.
- Specialist Homelessness Accommodation and Support.
- Youth Accommodation and Support; and
- Assertive Outreach.

Often people are required to travel outside the immediate area to access homelessness support services and transport and distance can be significant barriers.

The chronic shortage of social and affordable housing and crisis accommodation results in increased rough sleeping, couch surfing, overcrowding and people sleeping in vehicles. People experiencing family and domestic violence, mental health and alcohol and other drugs issues face long wait lists for housing and shortages in crisis accommodation.

The current funding of Specialist Homelessness Services is inadequate to provide a consistent and equitable level of service across the State. It is understood that some service providers do not have the capacity to service large geographical areas stipulated in their funding agreements.

Local Government feedback indicates that the cessation of the Department of Communities Local Communities Coordination (LCC) program has had a significant impact. The LLC program was highly effective in assisting chronic homeless people

to connect with appropriate services. It is essential that the State Government take a lead role in local area coordination that applies across Local Government boundaries to ensure the collaboration of key stakeholders in place-based approaches.

2. 'All Paths Lead to a Home', Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030

The Strategy is a whole-of-community plan, setting the direction for all levels of Government, business, and the community sector in responding to and preventing homelessness in Western Australia. The Strategy is in its second year of implementation guided by the first *Action Plan 2020 – 2025*.

Local Government supports the Strategy, and it is widely accepted as a valuable resource guiding our State vision for ending homelessness and providing direction on the role of Local Government.

Currently there is inequity of service provision across Local Government areas leading to an emerging culture of 'service shopping' where those localities that provide services end up with a disproportionate number of homeless people seeking help. The Strategy acknowledges the diversity of Local Governments with respect to their varying levels of involvement and engagement in local policy responses. Acknowledging the varying level, ability, and availability of resources, supports and services for people experiencing homelessness between Local Government areas, there is an opportunity to better involve Local Governments in planning and implementing service delivery to improve consistency.

The Supporting Communities Forum - Homelessness Working Group plays an important role in communicating information about the implementation of the Strategy and achievement against the performance indicators. The Association welcomes the opportunity to work with the Supporting Communities Forum to promote Strategy outcomes to the Local Government sector.

3. Existing data systems and how data informs service delivery

The Association recognises the need for data to be managed within a safe legal framework. Establishing effective state level data systems and data sharing agreements to govern the use of data is essential to the effective planning and coordination of service delivery.

The 'By Name List' is used by the State Government to identify hotspot areas, track trends, and allocate critical resources such as Assertive Outreach Services. However, several Local Governments do not have access to the 'By Name List' and therefore not all Local Governments are represented in the data.

There is an opportunity to further develop a shared, centralised, state-wide data system which would assist Local Governments to understand the number of people accessing specialist homelessness services in their area. Local Governments have identified initiatives such as the *Rough Sleeper Count* and *Connections Week* as

important initiatives to establish baseline data about homelessness and to engage stakeholders.

Many Local Governments do not have the resources available to develop data systems at a local level, while other Local Governments are contributing to a coordinated multi-agency approach. For example, one Metropolitan Local Government is a member of the Human Services District Leadership Group and provides the backbone support to the Interagency Homelessness Working Group. Data management agreements have been developed as part of the Metropolitan Partnership Forum.

4. Any other matter

Housing

It is widely reported that Western Australia is experiencing a housing crisis with a severe shortage of social and affordable housing for low and very low-income households, and a rental crisis whereby low-income and disadvantaged households are generally priced out of the market.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has added pressure across all parts of the housing system including exacerbating issues with supply, affordability, security of tenure, choice (limited diversity of housing stock) and associated issues such as overcrowding, particularly in rural and remote communities.

Local Government is increasingly called upon by local communities to address housing supply issues and associated community impacts and to provide timely localised solutions. Many Local Governments work closely with their communities, State Government, developers, and the community housing sector to identify underutilised land for joint housing projects. The high cost of developing land in regional areas is a disincentive to developers and investors.

However, the sector reports that many of these housing projects are at full capacity with long waiting lists. There is a significant lag in delivery of new housing projects resulting in escalating unmet demand, overcrowding, couch surfing and sleeping in makeshift dwellings or cars, which is particularly evident in regional and remote areas.

In remote Western Australia, housing is provided by the Department of Communities, principally, and there is limited room for Local Government in this space without significant funding and resources.

Projects supported by all three tiers of Government can provide positive solutions. An example is the Great Southern Housing Initiative (GSHI), which is a Federal and State joint funded project that delivered jobs and housing to several Shires in the Great Southern Region of WA. The Shires of Broomehill-Tambellup, Cranbrook, Gnowangerup, Jerramungup, Katanning and Kojonup developed between two and six dwellings each for independent seniors and regional employees. The Initiative delivered a total of 52 units, employed several local workers and created 15 sustainable and long term-jobs while also attracting 22 critical regional employees.

Where resources and capability exist, Local Government can lead in the facilitation and delivery of social housing projects. For example, the Shire of Harvey led the development of Brunswick River Cottages, a social and affordable housing model that addresses the shortage of age-appropriate accommodation in Brunswick Junction and provides older people with opportunities to live healthy, positive, and productive lives, connected to and participating in their local community.

The Social Housing Economic Recovery Package (SHERP) is a \$319 million investment into social housing and forms part of the State Governments \$884 million housing and homelessness funding. SHERP is targeted at construction of new dwellings and refurbishment and maintenance of existing dwellings.

There is an opportunity to further develop the SHERP package to align with the delivery of the Housing First program to address immediate housing supply issues.

Local Government and State Government can work together to address complex social issues such as homelessness. As government service provision varies depending on location, demand and capacity, a partnership approach ensures good governance and sound decision making. Local Government brings local knowledge, expertise, and a willingness to work in partnership with the State Government and other key stakeholders.

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