



Newtown Neighbourhood Centre Incorporated

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Which Way Home? A New Approach to Homelessness

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to this discussion paper

About Newtown Neighbourhood Centre (NNC)

NNC is an Incorporated Association that has been providing community services in the inner west of Sydney for over thirty years.

Increasingly, a large proportion of our 'drop in' service users, have been people who are homeless, inappropriately or insecurely housed. In response to the demands for homelessness services we provide a range of practical services including:

- A weekly updated accommodation board of properties in the local area
- Information and numbers on crisis, medium and long term accommodation as well as cheaper private accommodation options and Housing NSW information
- We provide the "Housing Assistance and Referral Service which we run in partnership with the 'Inner City Homelessness Outreach Support Service' twice a week to provide one on one consultation, advocacy, referral and follow up to assist people to find secure, affordable and appropriate housing
- Host a Housing NSW Outreach clinic once a month
- Provide free phone and internet access 5 days a week

Background NNC's response to the Green Paper has been informed by targeted and ongoing research, mainly consisting of:

-Discussions held in workshops at our forum on 'Homelessness in Newtown', that in May 2008.

-Interviews conducted at the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre (NNC) and Newtown Mission drop in centre by NNC and Homeless Persons' Legal Service (HPLS) staff on June 2nd and 3rd 2008 with 23 people who were homeless or had experienced homelessness.

-Our day to day work of responding to service users presenting with housing and homelessness issues

- We are well networked with many housing and support services that work with the homeless and regularly attend interagency meetings on homelessness

- We work in partnership with agencies such as HPLS, PIAC, ICHOSS, local community organisations and State and Government authorities to deliver our services.

NNC's Position on Homelessness

Homelessness is a complex issue that touches many areas of social policy including employment, family relationships, economics, addictions, health, mental well being and community. To have an impact on homelessness attention must be drawn to these wider social issues.

In addition to the responses submitted to the set questions in the Green Paper, NNC would like to contribute the following main points, as illustrated by our interviews with homeless people:-

Reoccurring factors in many individuals experience of homelessness are family breakdown and periods of transition in life (leaving prison, rehab, end of ward-ship, family breakdown)

"The rehab didn't set you up into the community. I slept on the street. I didn't have contact at that time with family. Rehab was expensive and I didn't have any money left." Male, 25-54

"You get out of jail then you're on the streets" Female, 25-54

There is not enough Public housing, and the waiting lists to access it are estimated to be between 6-9 years.

"I applied for Department of Housing was put on a six year waiting list, that was 15 yrs ago and have never heard back from them" Male, 18-24

NNC Recommendations

While we have many recommendations in response to the 18 questions, below are some additional recommendations.

1. A state wide register of homeless people, that captures primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness data.

This can be used to provide bench mark data, set targets and inform regional programs that best meet the needs of homeless people in each area and inform where funding should be spent. This would require the state authorities to play a leading role, in identification of need and considered responses. There is currently no adequate data on which the Government can bench mark progress or areas of need. This is a mechanism that could assist that problem.

2. 'One stop Shop' for housing assessment and assistance

The Statewide register would be voluntary and encouraged by developing 'one stop shop' sources of information. In different States, differing authorities, with regional networks, may be best placed to implement this.

This would enable some immediate responses (and referrals) to individual issues. Some examples may be;

- People could be offered a 'housing needs' interview and appropriate referrals made.
- Young people could be offered mediation with a view to enabling them to return to family / friends.
- People who have experienced domestic violence could be offered access to sanctuary schemes and legal remedies.
- The use of private sector 'Rent Start', 'Tenants Guarantee' and 'Brokerage' systems could be accessed –and/or other individual State initiatives could be used
- General Housing Advice could be offered.

3. Learn from examples in other states such as Victoria

Other states such as Victoria have similar 'joined up' schemes already in existence. These have proven highly successful and NNC calls on the Federal Government to look to these examples in planning its new approach to homelessness. One stop shops and service that provide integrated support appear to be effective ways of delivering services in a joined up way.

4. Rent control mechanisms

There needs to be consideration of rent control mechanisms. Private landlords are exploiting the shortage of housing. We recognise the political difficulties this may present, and the impacts created by other factors such as rising interest rates. But believe some mechanisms need to be identified that can inject 'reasonability' into the private rented sector.

5. A National Housing Fund

To be established with Government, private and business sector finance used to fund Capital Public Housing Developments that increase the supply of low cost housing across the country.

6. Tenancy Rights

For people in insecure housing, such as Boarding Houses in NSW need to be addressed and strengthened. Currently people can be evicted with little or no notice. Occupants need greater protection and security. NNC is currently working with Boarding House Managers and owners to reach such an agreement.

7. Emphasis needs to be placed on those hardest to house, often the most vulnerable members of society

8. Review of Centrelink payments

Payments are too low and should be reviewed with a view to providing acceptable income levels that allow for more opportunity to participate in the housing market and civil society.

Further issues for comment

The Green Paper has failed to address the underlying and contributing issue of the provision of low cost housing (as opposed to 'affordable' – which in the Green paper is defined as 20% below average market rents). While this remains unaddressed, the issue of homelessness will not be fully resolved. Market forces alone will not resolve the housing crisis. Unless the issue of the provision of low cost housing to the most vulnerable and poor members of society is addressed, the issues of homelessness will continue.

We note the intentions to address issues of housing affordability, but for many of the people we see, this remains 'unaffordable', and attention needs to be directed to 'low cost' housing options. The income based assessments used by Housing NSW and the State Community Housing providers, provide some guidance as to how this could be addressed.

Should you wish to discuss this submission in more detail, please contact myself Paul Adabie or Coordinator, Lisa Burns, at Newtown Neighbourhood Centre on 95164755,

Yours Sincerely,

Paul Adabie
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Newtown Neighbourhood Centre

1. What Goal(s) should be set to reduce homelessness

1. A decrease in the number of people exiting HOUSING NSW accommodation

-Published figures show 10% of people entering SAAP accommodation were in public/community housing before SAAP
-NNC's own experience is that people that have held Housing NSW or community housing and lost tenancies due to various reasons are left to flounder in and out insecure accommodation (boarding houses, sofa's) and states of homelessness, reflecting a revolving door syndrome. It takes years to regain any housing stability and drains the resources and energies of community services.

- There needs to be greater supports and tenancy sustainment work within Public housing institutions to avoid ending tenancies.

This needs to include early debt intervention work, and the use of 'rent direct Centrelink payments, along with other supports.

- There should be greater published flexibility around creating joint tenancies and the issue of rent thresholds and eligibility levels in

Public housing should be reviewed.

Within Housing NSW there is inflexibility around issues such as transfers. Issues of occupancy rates and household income assessments should be reviewed, stories are frequent of friends accommodating friends and family members, but being forced to turn them out because of fear of eviction, and breaking of tenancy agreements. Consideration around isolation and transfer requests need to be considered.

2. An end to Youth homelessness, reducing the numbers by 66% within 10 years.

- An extremely high number of people who experience bouts and episodes of homelessness throughout adult life had their first experience of homelessness before the age of 21.
- Our own research based on interviews with homeless people reveals 50% of homeless people first experienced homelessness when they were under the age of 18 years. 30% of our respondents first experienced homelessness when they were less than 15 years of age. Often as a result of family breakdown, and or domestic violence, etc. An end to youth homelessness would improve the long term outcomes for these people and the overall number of people affected by homelessness.
- Many young respondents to our interviews declined to access supported accommodation and youth crisis scheme, due to what they perceived as draconian rules and limitations on life style choices.
 - o Alternative models of youth accommodation that provide a range of service models need to be explored.
 - o There is also a great need for more youth crisis accommodation and youth SAAP schemes.

3. Increasing the supply and distribution of public housing.

The lack of affordable public housing is a major obstacle to people maintaining tenancies. All levels of Government should play a role in facilitating Public housing. The crisis is such that it deserves a response as grand as an intervention.

- o A National Housing Fund should be established with Government, private and business sector finance used to fund Capital Public Housing Developments that increase the supply of low cost housing across the country.

4. State and Territory authorities should be required to have strategies for overcoming homelessness – and should be monitored for effectiveness

It is unfortunate that the NSW Government, unlike other state governments, has not developed such a document, thus leaving services and the responses to homelessness floundering in a directionless void.

2. What targets will best help to reach goals

1. Reduce the numbers leaving existing Public housing. -Published figures show 10% of people entering SAAP accommodations were in public and or

community housing before SAAP. The Target should be to reduce this to 5% within five years.

2. States that have Ward responsibilities should have these extended to responsibility for 'community settlement' beyond the age of 18 to 24 by 2012 to ensure these young people are adequately supported during a major life transition period.

There should be an increase in the number of emergency youth accommodation services. The number of bed-spaces should be increased by 20% in five years, reflecting a range of service models

3. To reduce the waiting lists to public housing by 10% each consecutive year
4. By 2010 each State Government should have developed a response to homelessness

3. What is the best way to measure targets set?

1. SAAP services and Housing NSW to record this data.
2. Data should be kept on the follow up support that is provided and what accommodation former wards are in at ages 18, 20 and 22
 - Data collected on rates of youth homelessness and turnaways from youth crisis accom, now and in the future as well as numbers on where people go after access crisis accom and on recidivism.
3. Data on wait list times
4. Federal Govt monitoring of State response

'Results Based Accountably' provides a good model for reviewing services and population outcomes. Information on this can be provided by NCOSS.

4. What are the three research priorities for a national homelessness research agenda?

1. The impact of Domestic Violence (DV) on homelessness and how victims can remain safely in their own home. Our work reveals a large number of victims leaving the home, while the perpetrator remains in residence. We note the National Council on Violence against women is taking some small initiatives, but a lot or needs to be done. –Governments own figures show 54% of SAAP support periods are related to Domestic Violence, the single greatest reason. Children and young people are affected and disadvantaged by DV socially and economically, finding ways to reduce and prevent homelessness related DV will have a major impact on the stress on many services.

2. Youth homelessness / family breakdown prevention and repair. Our surveys showed 30% of respondents first experience of homelessness was under the age of 15. The figure jumps to 50% of respondents first experienced

homelessness when under 18, and in many cases this was related to family breakdown number

3. The integration of services to support people through times of transition. Particularly when people are coming out of institutional or Rehabilitative settings eg, Jail, Hospital, Drug rehabilitation, end of wardship.

This is widely known to be a problem. The work should be done within these settings to ensure people are not released into homelessness. The focus here should be on prevention not picking up the pieces. Much work needs to be done in this area particularly within the culture of prisons. This would also go along way to assisting people with mental health issues after release and drug and alcohol issues.

5. Are principles right?

The ten principles appear sufficient.
But Principle one needs to have Government ownership and federal Government leadership is required –before others will follow. The responsibility therefore should be firmly with Federal Government.

In regard to the others, we would in particular urge progress on:

- Principle 5: -that the service has greater capacity to respond to the needs of women and children escaping domestic violence
- Principle 7; - An overarching policy framework is required to guide all levels of Government and Government agencies.
- Principle 10; - Reporting against targets to ensure all levels of Government are accountable and address issues of homelessness.

We would also argue that the overall aim should be to end homelessness and not just reduce it

We endorse the proposal of HPLS for a human rights response to homelessness

6. How can the business sector be best involved in reducing homelessness?

-At the forum 'Homelessness in Newtown' that we held on May 14th 2008 it was proposed that tax breaks and initiatives be given to developers and builders proposing to develop housing for rent.

-A National initiative such as a National Housing Bank could be established to encourage donations from the business sector. Business is also affected by housing stress, workers are faced with increasing commuting times, inability to find work close to affordable housing.

-In any new housing development a percentage of units should be earmarked for public/ low cost housing. This would promote mixed tenure and social inclusion.

7. How can we develop broader community involvement in homelessness and maximize contribution of philanthropic sector?

-Public education, highlighting the problems faced, encouraging the renting of spare rooms and discouraging leaving properties empty.

-Promotion of Housing co-operatives that encourage greater self help. Co-ops for teachers, older people etc in shared housing.

-Promotion of 'home stay' type schemes where over seas students, young people could stay in exchange for minimum support to elderly or those with low level disabilities, and/or low rent (facilitation of website etc to encourage this). For example agencies such as DADHC could promote the service for people with low support needs.

-Promotion of new ways of living, end the 'ideal' of everyone being entitled to suburban home. There are intentional community arrangements that can meet people's housing needs.

-Promotions to single householders with spare rooms to rent out and share housing and house stay arrangements.

-Community and Neighbourhood centres such as NNC have responded to the needs of local communities where homelessness and poor housing has become a growing issue. Improving the capacity of the community sector to respond to housing issues and develop advice and referral services would allow more points of information, and raise awareness of issues in the wider community. At NNC we have been encouraged by the community response to highlighted issues of homelessness that resulted in individual donations and recognition of the need to 'do something'.

8. What are the barriers to radical change in homelessness services and how can they be overcome?

-There needs to be recognition that homeless services are also about short, medium and long term supported housing. The different sections of the community affected by homelessness require different responses, for some it requires long term support commitments.

-Homelessness responses (and responsibilities) should not be seen in isolation from other services such as substance abuse rehabilitation services, the penal and justice system, State ward and community services, ageing issues. If these were well linked it would prevent many incidents of homelessness, our interviews show that peoples' experience of homelessness could have been prevented if these services were linked.

-Penal authorities need to take responsibility for rehabilitation and resettlement, too often people leave prison with little preparation and supports to prepare for independent living.

-Recognising Joint interests, and developing partnerships, perhaps joint

commissioning of services, that they can provide agencies opportunities to nominate clients to housing, help shape the services available and have greater accountability.

9. How do we develop collective accountability for outcomes in a joined up system?

As the Green Paper notes, there is 'no overarching framework or policy intent to guide state and territory approaches to homelessness'. There needs to be Federal guidelines that create more accountability and benchmarking of the state and territory responses. But overall there needs to be Government accountability

10. Tax payers funds are limited – where across the range of possibilities under option one, should we direct our effort to give the biggest impact?

Defining homelessness services into four client type headings will have little impact or improvement, indeed it would seem likely to create more cracks in the system, as those that do not fit neatly in to one category could fall between 2 or 3. It is easy to imagine individual housing cases that fall into the various categories identified.

However clearly the area of domestic violence, poses the greatest risk to an individuals health and safety, and life! If resources need to be focused on any particular group it is this one!

Undoubtedly there is a need for specialist services targeting particular client groups, but to align the Government's major response to homelessness services under the umbrella of four client groups would be of little benefit. Instead a definition of homelessness that is accepted by all agencies working with the population needs to be adopted and services required to respond to that definition.

In response to homelessness and the recognition of the different client groups within the homelessness population (DV, families, youth, single people) different responses need to be developed. Not only are these client groups interconnected. It needs to be recognised that these responses could involve short, medium and long term solutions.

Along side a sector responding to homelessness issues, a sector of supported accommodation needs to be developed that responds to tenancy sustainment, resettlement and training for independent living that aims to prevent homelessness. There is no reason why Public Housing agencies should not be expected to fulfil this role.

Clearly some SAAP services may be better suited being viewed as short, medium or long term responses to homelessness. The example the 'foyer' model is medium term housing, linked to other issues such as employment and training. That develops an individual's capacity to sustain independent living. Some sections of the homeless community, people with enduring poor mental health, or cognitive development issues, may never be able to sustain a tenancy independently and require long term supported housing. The models of support provided could be shared group housing, or 'drop in' support models where the support is delivered in

the persons own home on a as required basis.
-A focus on one particular client group may vary from region to region

11. How would the investments and reforms proposed in option 2 improve outcomes for SAAP clients and reduce homelessness?

It is likely that greater investment will yield greater results:
-Removing time limitations, so people get support for as long as necessary is a positive change. But this could lead to reduced access to services, as 'bed blocking' occurs. Other forms of support such as 'floating' and 'drop in' models that are more flexible and not tied to particular accommodation may go some way to addressing this. But for many services now, the issue at the point of move on and ending support is the lack of suitable available accommodation. The private rented sector is unable to meet the increased demands and unless there is an adequate stock of low cost homes, people can not move out of supported accommodation to independent living.

-Our surveys and research with homeless people has identified the need to increase crisis accommodation, 40% of respondents identified the need for more supported accommodation, and 20% the need for more emergency accommodation.

-One stop assistance that puts people directly into permanent housing is desirable, but unless there are support systems in place, there is the likelihood of tenancy failure. 20% of our respondents cited improved advice and access services as being part a preventative measure.

-Any initiatives that improve workforce capacity in this area will be of benefit to service delivery.

12. What else might be needed to ensure collaboration between SAAP services and the mainstream service system?

Joint commissioning by authorities for SAAP services that meet identified local needs. Joint commissioning bodies made up of (in the example of NSW) DADHC, DOCS, Health, Probation, Local Government and the Community sector could be responsible for the identification of unmet housing needs and the commissioning of services to meet those needs. i.e. In some regions it may be recognised there are insufficient services for women escaping Domestic Violence, the 'Housing joint commissioning body' could responsible for commissioning (and funding) such a service, that would be required to meet agreed targets and outcomes. Such a system could lead to a framework for SAAP services based on local/ regional needs.

13. What incentives are needed to forge strong ongoing links, between homeless response services and main stream services?

- Main stream service accountability
- Joint commissioning bodies that include community sector representation

15. Taxpayer funds are limited – where, across the range of possible improvements to SAAP in option 2 should our effort to give the biggest impact?

- Removing time limits on interventions would help to end the 'revolving door' syndrome, and thus make savings, but the risk would be bottlenecks to service.
- Increasing the supply of emergency accommodation is clearly required, given the number of reported turn away's now, however there is still a need to address the medium / long term options. In interviews carried out by NNC, 40% of respondents identified increased support as being required to prevent homelessness; A further 20% identified increased number of emergency / crisis bed-spaces being required to reduce homelessness.
 - In particular an increase in Youth Crisis Accommodation is needed urgently. The longer young people are homeless, the longer it takes for stability to be re-gained
 - Encouraging one stop assistance by putting people directly into permanent housing may be more cost effective over the long term. Perhaps Community Housing providers can be encouraged to provide housing and support service.
 - A national accreditation process for SAAP service should be encouraged to ensure quality of service and outcomes, but who would be the driver of this?-and what costs would this involve
 - Long term outcome require medium term investments, the longer people have experienced homelessness the longer it will take to regain stability. Supported accommodation needs to be across a range of service models including short term (crisis and emergency), medium term (linked to skill development and training) and long term for those with enduring mental health issues, and ongoing support needs.

16. Will option three bring change at a pace and scale to reduce homelessness over the long term?

- By its self No! The underlying issue of increased supply of low cost housing has not been addressed.
- Mainstream services need to respond to homelessness. But an underlying need for more low cost public housing remains. Without this where do people more to after crisis emergency housing is exhausted.
- Clearly there is a role for 'mainstream' services to work together, but in different

states there are different state infrastructures, -some are able to work closer together than others. –There needs to be further clarification around the definition of 'mainstream'.

It is not clear if by increasing the capacity of the 'mainstream' to respond' would allow or justify the winding back in the role of SAAP. Are mainstream services really in a position to take on some of the many and varied roles currently undertaken by SAAP services. It would be interesting to see what main stream service would take on some of the more innovative services provided by agencies such as *Mission Beat* or some of the emergency access hostels that are available.

17. What else is needed to help mainstream services better respond to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness?

-Each identified agency (Probation, DOCS, Centrelink etc) should have a senior nominated lead officer responsible (and accountable) for homelessness issues. That person can lead on the homelessness response strategy for the particular agency. If on a local (or regional) level there is joint commissioning of housing related services that could be responsible for commissioning role.

Many of the people we surveyed identified the use of Crown land, and empty property as a resource that could be used to address homelessness issues. Local mechanisms need to be in place to allow the identification of unused land. Local Government needs to be allowed greater flexibility in facilitating Public Housing, and identifying unused land.

18. Taxpayer funds are limited – where, across the range of possibilities for mainstream services should we direct our efforts to give us the biggest impact?

The development of an integrated supported housing sector. A supported housing sector that provides short, medium and long term supported housing options for households with support needs. Models of support should include shared supported housing, individual accommodation with drop in (or 'floating' support) and tenancy sustainment teams that seek to maintain people in existing tenancies need to be established. Such services would be preventative, improving long term outcomes, reducing incidents of housing crisis.

Increasing the supply of low cost housing. Its limited supply is an underlying cause of homelessness. We note the *National rental Affordability scheme* and Housing Affordability Fund initiatives, which are designed to increase the supply –but over what time period will these units be delivered? The private rented sector itself cannot respond to housing issues. Increased demand leads to increased profit taking by landlords, the rising of rents.