

Key findings from the Early Review of the NSW Specialist Homelessness Services Program

Snapshot

- There has been a considerable increase (37%) in the number of people being supported by Specialist Homelessness Services since the reform in 2014.
- The number of clients being supported by Specialist Homelessness Services to sustain tenancies has increased by 33%, in response to growing demand.
- There are many examples of networks and partnerships supporting service integration and Joint Working Agreements are working effectively for the majority of organisations.
- Changes in the capacity of the Specialist Homelessness Services sector to support Aboriginal people, women and children escaping domestic and family violence and young people as a result of the reform are not yet clear.

Introduction

Specialist Homelessness Services are a vital part of a broader system in NSW that supports people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The program funds non-government organisations (NGOs) to deliver prevention and early intervention services, rapid rehousing, crisis and transitional responses and intensive responses for complex needs.

Since 2014, the NSW Government has been implementing reforms to improve access to Specialist Homelessness Services and deliver a better balance between prevention and early intervention, as well as crisis and post-crisis support.

This FACS Analysis and Research (FACSAR) Evidence to Action Note outlines key findings from the Early Review of the Specialist Homelessness Services Program reform. The Early Review looks at what is and isn't working well and identifies key areas where FACS and the homelessness sector can work together to improve outcomes for clients.



Importantly, the Early Review was conducted at the outset of the reform period and the report notes there was little baseline information in areas targeted for improvement, such as prevention and early intervention, and outcomes for key client groups. This made it challenging to determine impacts. The full report is available at: https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/about_us/publications/facs-analysis-and-research

What did the Early Review find?

The Early Review notes the implementation of the reforms had a number of impacts on clients and service providers, discussed below. These reflect that, on the whole, there are signs that the capacity of the sector has improved, as demand has increased; and that providers, networks and partnerships are supporting service integration and a greater focus on prevention and early intervention.

How have the reforms impacted on clients?

- **More people were supported by Specialist Homelessness Services.** In the pre-reform period from 2011–2014 approximately 51,000 clients were supported each year compared to approximately 70,000 clients following the reform. The 37% increase in client numbers in NSW was substantially above the general national growth rate of approximately 2.6% (based on 2011–12 to 2014–15 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare figures).

Some of the increase in Specialist Homelessness Services client numbers is likely to be driven by the introduction of No Wrong Door, which provides clients with assessment, information and referrals at their first point of contact with a service. However, it is not clear how much of the growth in client numbers is due to changes in the categorisation of clients and provided services.

- **Support for families has increased** at a higher rate than for other client groups, such as single men, single women and young people. These increases are notable for both families experiencing homelessness (12,000 from approximately 7,000 pre reform) and those at risk of homelessness (14,000 from below 8,000 pre reform) representing 41% of the total number of clients post reform.
- **Support for Aboriginal people has increased** by around 60% post reform. This is proportionately larger than the increase in non-Aboriginal clients accessing Specialist Homelessness Services (37%). The Early Review also shows the number of clients choosing not to disclose their Aboriginal status has fallen by about a third (32%). It is therefore possible that the increase in Aboriginal clients accessing Specialist Homelessness Services may be due to an increase in clients declaring their Aboriginal status.
- There has been an **increase in assistance for women and children escaping domestic and family violence**. In 2015–16 Specialist Homelessness Services assisted 23,171 clients experiencing domestic and family violence, an increase of 4,731 (26%) from 18,440 in 2013–14. Interviews with a small sample of clients also indicated high levels of satisfaction with the support received.

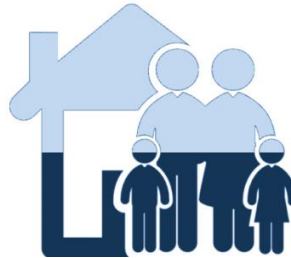
Specialist Homelessness Services after the reform, 2015-16:

70,000 people

who were homeless or
at risk of homelessness
received assistance

22,000 people
helped to sustain tenancies

41% of clients
were families



77%

of 60 Specialist
Homelessness Services
clients surveyed
said that the service had
helped them 'a lot'
in meeting their
most important needs

Source: Early Review of the Specialist Homelessness Services Program: Final report, AHURI 2016.

Note: Client Information Management System 2015–16 figures for the first nine months post reform have been annualised on a linear basis to represent a 12 month period.

What was the impact of the reform on the homelessness sector and service providers?

- **Demand has increased.** Since the reform was implemented, there has been a substantial increase in the demand for short-, medium- and long-term housing, which has led to an increase in services provided as well as an increase in unmet demand, reflecting in part a shortage of affordable housing across the state.

Stakeholder interviews suggest that increasing public awareness and concern for domestic and family violence has in part contributed to demand for domestic and family violence services, and unmet need has increased from 839 clients in 2013–14 (6.2%) to an estimated 1,955 in 2015–16 (13.9%).

- **Changes in the capacity of the Specialist Homelessness Services sector to support Aboriginal people, women and children escaping domestic and family violence and young people are not yet clear,** and opinions of service providers and other stakeholders about the impact of the reforms on service provision is mixed.

There is strong support for prevention and early intervention, with reported improvements in practice as a result of the reforms. Alternatively, some of the negative impacts reported included the loss of specialist services and a reduction in the capacity for women's refuges to support women and children. Some interviewees also talked about the need for more effective collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations, more resources to build capacity in Aboriginal services and to build cultural safety and competence in non-Aboriginal organisations.

- **The capacity of the Specialist Homelessness Services sector to provide tenancy support has increased, in response to growing demand.** The number of clients receiving assistance to sustain a tenancy increased from approximately 21,500 to 28,700 in the post-reform period (representing over 40% of clients). Relationships within and between sectors, access to brokerage funding and clear guidance that early intervention is a core responsibility were all described as key to early tenancy support, and preventing the tenancies from escalating into high levels of risk.
- **There are many examples of networks and partnerships supporting service integration** and Joint Working Agreements are working effectively for the majority of organisations. While there were reports that the reform process had caused disruption to some service providers and to relationships between service providers, the majority who talked about this agreed these relationships are now starting to be repaired. Despite unmet need for transitional housing limiting capacity, there were reports that crisis and transition responses are improving in several locations because of improved collaboration and service integration.

What are the limitations of the review?

There were several limitations that should be taken into account when considering the findings. The major sources of data for the Early Review were surveys of the views of Specialist Homelessness Services providers, other sector stakeholders and administrative data from Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and FACS Specialist Homelessness Services Client Information Management Systems reporting (see the box 'More about the Specialist Homelessness Services Early Review', page 6). The surveys and case studies had relatively low numbers of participants and participants' views may not be representative due to selection bias. While the case studies provide in-depth information on the service context for particular geographic regions, they cannot be generalised to other areas.

There was very little baseline information in areas where the reform was expected to make improvements, such as prevention and early intervention, and the outcomes for key client groups, such as women and children escaping domestic and family violence. This makes it challenging to determine the impact of the reform.

The usefulness of the administrative data in allowing comparisons to be made before and after the reform was limited by changes in data definitions over time, gaps in data availability from some Specialist Homelessness Services providers (missing data) and the related dependence on aggregated figures.

What have we done?

- The Early Review noted that while the provision of support by Specialist Homelessness Services had grown across population groups and service responses, it was not possible to determine the quality of services provided to clients. A new Specialist Homelessness Services Quality Assurance System has

been introduced alongside the reforms to improve the quality and integration of services that clients receive and achieve better outcomes for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The Quality Assurance System will also support continuous improvement as organisations aspire to meet good practice standards.

- To enhance the capacity of Specialist Homelessness Services providers to deliver responses to women who are experiencing or who are at risk of homelessness after hours, \$20 million has been allocated to 44 service packages across NSW in 2016 (over 24 months). In June 2017, an additional \$10 million was allocated to homelessness providers through the Domestic Violence Response Enhancement (DVRE) to increase the level of crisis and temporary accommodation available, head leasing arrangements, flexible brokerage funding, safety planning, monitoring and follow-up, and case management.
- While most service providers indicated the availability of youth accommodation had not changed as a result of the reform, some reported a decline in youth-specific accommodation. In response, in 2015/16 and 2016/17, a total of approximately \$30m over two years was allocated to 24 service providers (30 service packages) to operate existing youth refuges 24 hours seven days a week and enhance the quality of care and supervision for young people accessing youth crisis accommodation services.
- Rent Choice Youth has also been expanded from current locations in Hunter New England, Central Coast, Murrumbidgee, Western NSW, Nepean Blue Mountains and South Eastern Sydney to South Western Sydney, Western Sydney, Southern NSW and Northern NSW.
- Integrating Specialist Homelessness Services client information management systems was identified as a priority by the Early Review, and this has now been completed. This provides a complete picture of the Specialist Homelessness Services program and more timely reporting and analysis compared to the annual Specialist Homelessness Services reports prepared by AIHW.

Where to from here?

A number of recommendations made by the Early Review are being addressed through the implementation of an improvement plan. These include:

- **Better understanding of demand for services** - FACS has established a Practitioner Advisory Group, with representatives from across the Specialist Homelessness Services sector, to review current issues related to recording service contacts and develop sector guidance and system enhancements. The objective is to have a clear and consistent approach to recording and reporting on how clients engage with Specialist Homelessness Services.
- **Agreeing, testing and evaluating new outcome measures** – through the Specialist Homelessness Services Industry Partnership, the Centre for Social Impact (University of NSW) is developing an indicator framework for Specialist

Homelessness Services. This work will inform testing of new outcome measures and indicators for Specialist Homelessness Services.

- **Developing a capability framework** – the Early Review identified a need for a shared understanding of the Specialist Homelessness Services workforce skills and needs. In collaboration with sector representatives, a Capability Framework is being developed that will describe the capabilities and associated behaviours required of all Specialist Homelessness Services employees. It will include a focus on trauma-informed care and building the capacity of Aboriginal organisations and cultural competence in non-Aboriginal organisations.
- A complete review of Domestic Violence Response Enhancement will be completed by FACS in late 2017.
- The Early Review will inform the future transition to commissioning homelessness services for outcomes, by providing a detailed picture of the progress made since the implementation of the reforms and direction for achieving a greater understanding of client outcomes.
- An outcomes and economic evaluation of the Specialist Homelessness Services program reforms will commence in late 2017. The evaluation will focus on longer-term client and system outcomes, as well as economic costs.

Resources and more information

Information on the Specialist Homelessness Services program can be found at:

<http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/help-with-housing/specialist-homelessness-services>

The Early Review Final Report is available at: <http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/help-with-housing/specialist-homelessness-services/what-we-do/monitoring-evaluation>

KPMG conducted a Post-Implementation Review of the planning and contracting to support the Specialist Homelessness Services reforms, available at:

http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/340559/GHSHPostImplementationReviewKPMG.pdf

The Foundations for Change - Homelessness in NSW discussion paper is available at:

https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/file/0007/380545/3879_HNSW_Homelessness-DiscPaper_WEB_R-2.pdf

More about the Specialist Homelessness Services Early Review

The Early Review was conducted between March 2016 and March 2017, by researchers from the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute and the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW Sydney (the University of New South Wales). The purpose of the Early Review was to assess progress in implementing key Specialist Homelessness Services reform strategies and to identify any emerging risks or unintended impacts. It sought to answer four questions:

1. How have the new service specifications and practice guidelines been implemented?
2. Is the Specialist Homelessness Services system able to respond to the immediate needs of the key client cohorts?
3. Have the streamlined access system reforms been delivered as intended?
4. Have the necessary networks, partnerships and mechanisms been established to support service integration and the coordinated delivery of services?

To address the review questions, the Early Review used a mixed methods design approach comprising:

- A review of Specialist Homelessness Services documentation and analysis of policy context
- An online survey of Specialist Homelessness Services clients, completed by 61 people
- An online survey of Specialist Homelessness Services providers, completed by 95 agencies
- Interviews and focus groups, with 34 clients, 37 service providers and 22 FACS and sector stakeholders (government agency representatives and NGOs)
- Analysis of client data (AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection for the pre-reform period 2011–12 to 2014–15 and data from the newly implemented FACS Specialist Homelessness Services Client Information Management System for the initial nine months post reform during 2015–16).

Produced by

Evidence to Action

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