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# What we heard

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A summary of feedback from the

## **Foundations for Change — Homelessness in NSW**

Consultation process

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# Minister Foreword

**I am pleased to present the feedback report on the *Homelessness in NSW: Foundations for Change* discussion paper.**

In the past public policy though well intentioned, has too often been focused on managing homelessness rather than breaking the cycle. While the lives of the homeless or those at risk were made more comfortable too often their trajectory remained unchanged.

This year, we will bring renewed focus and energy to creating a systemic response that provides crisis support but is also focused on prevention and early and intervention. We will be guided by what you have told us about gaps in the system and opportunities to bridge them.

The consultations were clear. If we want to make a difference we need to work collaboratively across government, with our NGO partners, the private sector, philanthropists and importantly our clients to better identify and understand risks and improve our ability to provide the right supports to people as they need them.

The NSW Government is determined that by working together we will:

- **Create a mainstream service system that is able to intervene early to prevent homelessness and break disadvantage;**
- **Support our service system to be more integrated and person centered; and**
- **Increase access to supports, including housing that address the underlying issues of homelessness and prevent re-entry into the homelessness system.**

In doing this we will look to the ideas and practice examples and first-hand experiences collected from over 500 consultation participants and 120 written submissions.

I thank all those who shared their feedback, including individuals and groups from the community, business and government whose ideas are central to this report and will help shape the priorities for our new strategy. In particular, I would like to thank the people interviewed who have experienced homelessness or who were currently experiencing homelessness.

Over the next few months we will continue to seek input from those working in direct service delivery to support people experiencing homelessness, as well as those with a direct experience of homelessness, to test and refine elements of our new strategy, so we can deliver lasting improvements to vulnerable people in our community.



**PRU GOWARD**

Minister for Family and Community Services  
Minister for Social Housing  
Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

## About this report

**In September 2016, the NSW Government released *Foundations for Change — Homelessness in NSW*. Following the release of the paper, the Department of Family and Community Services conducted a state-wide consultation seeking feedback, ideas and contributions to help inform the development of a new homelessness strategy for NSW.**

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This report presents a summary of the feedback we heard and the themes that emerged during the consultation process.

Throughout the process we heard stories about people's individual experiences with the system; about the experiences of services trying to support homeless people; and examples of times where the system had created further challenges for individuals and services.

We also heard about programs, approaches and ideas that have been working well to support people facing the risk of homelessness, or who are already homeless.

The ideas, challenges, practice examples and priorities that we uncovered through our consultation will help inform the development of a new strategy to prevent, reduce and respond more effectively to homelessness, and to support better outcomes for people facing and experiencing homelessness.

### WHO WE HEARD FROM

We received 120 written submissions by email and through the NSW Government's 'Have Your Say' website. Submissions came from a range of respondents including individual members of the community, non-government organisations, stakeholder representative groups, advocacy groups, government agencies and legal services.

### WHO WE TALKED WITH

Our consultation process was designed to capture contributions from a diverse group of stakeholders, particularly people with lived experience of homelessness.

As part of the consultation process, StreetCare (an independent homeless consumer advisory committee) conducted interviews with 75 people who are homeless or who have had direct experience with homelessness. Interviewees had a range of backgrounds: some were rough sleeping, some were in crisis accommodation or hostels, and some were in social housing or the private rental

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market. Of the interviewees, 26 had recently left prison, 8 were women who had recently experienced domestic and family violence; and 19 were currently — or recently had been — rough sleepers.

The NSW Advocate for Children and Young People held ten small group consultations across NSW involving 59 young people aged 13 – 24 years. The young people spoke about their experience with homelessness; both the challenges they faced and what they found helpful. The insights from these sessions are reflected in this feedback report.

To learn about the experiences and stories of Aboriginal people who have experienced homelessness and the services that assist them, we held three workshops with Aboriginal people, service providers and their clients. These sessions were held in Lismore, Campbelltown and Dubbo.

We also gave participants the opportunity to provide confidential feedback on sensitive matters such as domestic and family violence.

Fifteen open consultation sessions were held in NSW FACS Districts to provide opportunities for regional differences to be heard and acknowledged. These independently facilitated sessions brought together 430 participants from a range of agencies and organisations.

### External Stakeholders

FACS consulted with the following external stakeholders: non-government organisations; service providers; tenancy advocates; housing services; specialist homelessness services; local government and Commonwealth government services; alcohol and other drug services; mental health services; primary health networks; and community corrections.

### NSW Government agencies

FACS consulted with the following NSW Government agencies: Aboriginal Affairs; Aboriginal Housing Office; Department of Education; Department of Justice; Department of Premier and Cabinet; Legal Aid; NSW Health; Women NSW; NSW Police Force; and NSW Treasury.

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This report features quotes and comments from organisations and agencies who provided written submissions and from people who participated in face-to-face consultations. We appreciate their honesty and willingness to talk about their experiences in supporting people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

We are very grateful to the individuals who shared their stories and their challenges with us, and who helped us to see and hear about their lived experience of homelessness.

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## THE MESSAGES WE HEARD

Across the consultation process, four themes emerged consistently as priorities for us to think about in framing a new homelessness strategy for NSW. We were told the following:

- **A person-centred approach delivers the best outcomes.**
- **Homelessness is everyone's business — the system needs to be integrated and foster collaboration.**
- **We need to intervene early to prevent homelessness and break the cycle.**
- **Do more of what we know works.**

## Theme One:

# A person-centred approach delivers the best outcomes

**Overwhelmingly, there was consensus through the consultation that respect for clients and their human rights should underpin the delivery of homelessness policy, programs and services in NSW.**

Participants and contributors all agreed that a holistic, person-centred approach that puts the specific needs of the individual first is critically important in achieving positive outcomes for individuals, and is the best possible approach for service delivery. Time and again, we heard about the value of case management approaches and the benefits they offer to individuals, families and communities.

### WE NEED TO BE FLEXIBLE

Participants in consultations and those who sent submissions commented that interactions with the system when applying for housing or other forms of assistance can be distressing and dehumanising. We heard from several contributors that homeless people are expected to “jump through millions of hoops”.

Aboriginal people, in particular, spoke of the significant barriers they regularly face when dealing with the system. Difficulty complying with government requirements such as the need to supply specific forms of identification was often a problem in times of crisis.

*“Unfortunately, the majority of these interactions were problematic or distressing for clients due to judgmental attitudes, inflexible rules, differential policy interpretation, requirements for documentation, and unreasonable assumptions regarding accessibility to offices.”*

— Participant, Aboriginal consultations

Participants emphasised that instead services and supports should be designed with flexibility and responsiveness in mind and be based on the particular circumstances of the individual. This includes individually tailoring the intensity and duration of support, and the accommodation setting in which support will be delivered.

We heard about the need for all agencies and services, both government and non-government, to rethink the way things are done so that:

- procedures and processes are more flexible, acknowledging the difficulty many people have in complying with rigid requirements in times of crisis or great stress
- more services — particularly mental health early intervention services — are delivered using outreach models, making it easier for people to get help where they are
- accommodation support services and housing products are tailored to meet the specific needs of individuals
- people can access flexible levels of support, with easy transitions from one type of support to another as people's circumstances change
- a range of services are available outside standard office hours, recognising that housing crises can happen any time of the day or night
- wrap-around services and case management approaches that emphasise a person-centred response are available for people with complex needs.

At a system level we need to ensure that:

- the system includes 'soft entry points' into support services for people with complex needs
- there is better access to quality information about the range of providers, programs and services that are available across the state and locally
- it is made easier and simpler to navigate and access available services
- funding for services is focused on achieving outcomes through local partnerships and activities
- contracting and funding arrangements allow for flexible service delivery to better meet the needs of vulnerable people and people at risk of or experiencing homelessness
- the right services are available to help people move from homelessness to secure and safe accommodation so that people do not automatically exit into homelessness when they leave state care, hospitals and health services, or corrective services and juvenile justice centres.

## WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE VALUE OF RELATIONSHIPS AND PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Across the consultations, and particularly in our conversations with consumers, we heard about the impact personal connections can make for people who are homeless. As people tried to find their way out of homelessness, the impact of relationships with case workers, case managers, youth workers, and social workers, was often profound for them.

A person-centred approach was recommended to ensure services consider all of the issues the person or family is facing and thereby reduce the risk of homelessness. It was widely agreed that if training was available across the sector, it would help embed a person-centred approach. It was also agreed that increased workforce training specifically around respectful engagement with children and young people was needed.

We were also encouraged to find ways to support relationships between service providers in order to improve local networks and build more responsive referral pathways.

## WE NEED TO VALUE LIVED EXPERIENCE

We heard directly from people who are homeless about the lived experience of homelessness in consumer interviews and through feedback from group sessions with young people. We also heard from specialists working with vulnerable groups who are over-represented in the homeless population.

*“Every day I’m out in the park. To me that’s dangerous. I’m trying to stay clean. Stay off the drink, the drugs. Every day at 3 o’clock you have to ring them and you don’t know where you are going to stay until you ring them. Nearly a month and half I think it was until I got a permanent spot somewhere.”*

— Consumer interview

Overwhelmingly, those consulted emphasised the importance of listening to people with lived experience of homelessness and learning about their service and support needs directly from them.

## WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND TRAUMA AND DELIVER TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

The experience of trauma is common to many people who have experienced homelessness. Trauma has been found to be a pre-cursor to becoming homeless, and being homeless has also been found to be a risk factor for trauma exposure.

Traumatic events include the experience of violence, assaults, accidents, and natural disasters. People can also have inter-generational, multi-layered or complex trauma in their personal stories. Such experiences can have a lasting effect on an individual’s wellbeing, health and sense of control over their lives.

*“Trauma profoundly impacts on thoughts, beliefs and behaviours, and an understanding of the effects of trauma, trauma reactions and trauma-informed practice responses is essential for all people working with domestic violence victims.”*

— Written submission, NGO

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## Theme Two: Homelessness is everyone's business — the system needs to be integrated and foster collaboration

### SERVICES, INCLUDING GOVERNMENT SERVICES, NEED TO WORK BETTER TOGETHER

A strong and consistent message was the need for a collaborative approach at the highest level.

Participants felt strongly that the development of a new NSW Homelessness Strategy provided an opportunity for all government agencies to better understand and manage the impact of their activities, policies and services on individuals and on homelessness rates. They called for a renewed interagency focus on homelessness, with a holistic approach that recognises every agency's role in identifying, responding to and addressing homelessness.

*"A cross- agency approach, supported by a senior officer-level forum, facilitates a more holistic response to the needs of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness...such an approach would break down the present 'silos' that exist between agencies, and support the mainstream service system to find more effective solutions for people at risk of homelessness."*

— Written submission, Government agency

Those we consulted identified possible structural areas for reform within NSW including:

- legislative recognition of the human rights of homeless people
- changes to tenancy law to strengthen the protections for renters and to remove 'no grounds' terminations from the *Residential Tenancies Act 2010*
- the operation of tenancy databases
- reducing the impact of a person's past debts to government agencies on their future housing applications.

Participants highlighted the importance of integrating the NSW Homelessness Strategy with existing government plans and reforms, such as:

- *Future Directions for Social Housing in NSW*, under which the NSW Government will increase and develop the housing stock and support the provision of community housing in NSW
- *Living Well: A Strategic Plan for Mental Health in NSW 2014 – 2024*, which will strengthen responses for people with mental illness, putting a spotlight on the importance of secure housing for people with mental health living in the community
- *Targeted Early Intervention Program Reform*, which will support families to not reach crisis point
- *NSW Domestic and Family Violence Blueprint for Reform 2016 – 2021* action ‘Supporting Victims’, which highlights the importance of a system that is responsive to client need and provides access to support, including housing, when it is needed.

In particular, we heard that a ‘zero exits into homelessness’ policy should underpin an interagency approach to reduce and prevent homelessness in NSW. Participants noted the potential positive impact that could be achieved if education, health and justice agencies worked as partners to ensure people are not exited into homelessness when they leave state care, health facilities or corrective services/juvenile justice facilities.

Those we consulted highlighted the need for all government and non-government organisations in direct service delivery to work more collaboratively. We heard that better coordination between NGOs and hospitals at the point a person with mental illness who is experiencing homelessness is admitted can reduce the likelihood of people being discharged directly into homelessness and subsequently returning to hospital. Embedding clinical health expertise within homelessness services is another way of delivering more effective support.

## IMPROVE DATA AND INFORMATION-SHARING

Many participants and respondents identified benefits to being able to share client information between services and agencies to improve collaboration. Information-sharing was seen as crucial to successful interagency, wrap-around and case management approaches that aim to provide collaborative, holistic support. Sharing client information can also improve experiences for clients who do not have to recount difficult or traumatic experiences each time they meet with a new service provider or apply for assistance.

On the other hand, some participants noted that many people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are often fearful of their information being shared with other agencies — to the point where they may avoid seeking help. Finding a balance between respecting and maintaining people’s privacy and gathering useful data to inform service delivery is important.

The tension between sharing information to improve service delivery and managing the risks — real or perceived — of information sharing represents a challenge for all human service agencies and organisations. We heard that the system should require that all services have appropriate protocols and procedures in place to ensure that genuinely informed consent can be obtained from clients to share their information.

## WE NEED TO WORK WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND ENCOURAGE INNOVATION

During the District consultations, participants identified a number of groups within the private or corporate sector who could be potential partners in a whole-of-community approach to homelessness. They highlighted the need for mechanisms to facilitate greater investment by developers, companies and individuals in homelessness services and responses, including:

- **establishing a social investment mechanism to direct private sector philanthropic investment into priority housing and homelessness solutions in local areas**
- **continuing to support and grow models such as The Collective and other local partnerships to harness corporate and community engagement in preventing and addressing homelessness.**

Given the increasing private sector commitment to social responsibility, participants recommended greater incentives for corporates to make financial and practical contributions to homelessness responses. Participants also emphasised the need to create more channels through which businesses can raise their ideas, offer assistance and seek partnerships with government and housing/service providers.

*“... there is room for the corporate sector and philanthropists to get more involved with the issue of homelessness...a barrier in involvement could be that there is not enough clear and concise detailed information of how they can become involved or how they can contribute to alleviate this problem while also making it appealing for them to do so.”*

— Written submission, NGO

Across the consultations, participants recommended that governments introduce innovative financial instruments to encourage private sector investment in the social and affordable housing sector. Government subsidies and tax breaks were also suggested as a means to encourage greater investment.

## WE NEED TO WORK WITH THE REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY

In both face-to-face consultations and written submissions, participants raised the role of the real estate industry in responding to homelessness or risk of homelessness. It was suggested that collaborative relationships between real estate agents and local service providers could make a significant difference for people in financial hardship or facing the termination of a lease. However, participants noted that a significant investment of time and education is required to build those relationships.

*“A real strength has been working with real estate agents to assist with early identification. In Grafton and Murwillumbah, there has been an emphasis on building strong relationships so they [agents] come to service providers as a first port of call. Stopping tenancy failure is the main priority.”*

— Participant, District consultation

## Theme Three:

# We need to intervene early to prevent homelessness and break the cycle

### WE NEED MAINSTREAM SERVICES TO BE BETTER AT IDENTIFYING PEOPLE AT RISK

The 'pathway' to homelessness is, to some extent, unique to an individual's situation and circumstance. However, there are a number of well-known risk factors that increase the chance that a person will become homeless. They include: domestic and family violence, severe and chronic mental health issues, unemployment and underemployment, relationship breakdowns, financial stress, and drug and alcohol misuse.

Early intervention involves providing support when early warning signs begin to show. Participants and respondents encouraged us to think about the various pathways to homelessness and the initial points at which effective early intervention responses might be delivered, including:

- **early intervention mental health services that can identify and respond to emerging issues before an individual requires acute care**
  - **interventions delivered through schools to support young people experiencing domestic and family violence or conflict at home**
  - **targeted support to people leaving custody to find and organise safe and suitable accommodation before they are released, and ongoing support to maintain the arrangement**
  - **life skills training for people leaving state care to help them find a home and manage finances, legal obligations and self-care**
  - **legal advice and referral support for vulnerable renters to help them keep their tenancies**
  - **support to understand, manage and discharge debts to government agencies when it is first accrued.**
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## WE NEED TO BUILD THE CAPACITY OF MAINSTREAM SERVICE SYSTEM TO RESPOND TO PEOPLE FACING HOMELESSNESS

Often, it is mainstream agencies and services that are best positioned to identify risk and make good referrals to specialist services. Every day, people who are at risk of homelessness or who have become homeless interact with mainstream agencies and services, including:

- **childcare centres and pre-schools**
- **maternity, youth, child and family health services, and community health centres**
- **primary and secondary schools, and vocational education and training providers**
- **primary health care services (such as general practitioners, dentists, pharmacists and allied health practitioners)**
- **hospital emergency departments, outpatient clinics and after-hours general practices**
- **Legal Aid and Aboriginal Legal Services**
- **police**
- **public transport.**

Participants told us that building the capacity of these agencies and services to identify people at risk of homelessness using an evidence-based assessment tool is important. It was suggested that establishing an outcomes framework for homelessness would help achieve this.

## WE NEED TO ADDRESS UNDERLYING ISSUES TO PREVENT RE-ENTRY INTO HOMELESSNESS

Across the board we heard that poverty was a significant contributing factor in many people's homelessness. Getting out of homelessness and staying out was linked to the struggle to secure affordable housing and maintain tenancies while having limited or no income. People also identified a number of other factors that make it difficult for people who are homeless to break out of homelessness or to transition from one form of housing to another were raised, including:

- **poor or non-existent rental histories: this can include 'blacklisting' by agents or housing providers because of problems with previous tenancies; young people leaving care not having a rental history to show suitability; real estate agents not accepting a social housing rental history**

*"What I need is an agency or a service or real estate agent or something like that that is willing to look past someone's history that was not their fault and accept people for who they are, not what they were.."*

— Consumer interview

- **lack of documented identification: many homeless people do not have birth certificates or other forms of identification making it impossible to apply for government services or open bank accounts; people often exit prison without sufficient ID; in cases of Aboriginal-specialist services, there is often a service requirement to prove Aboriginality, a process which can take some time**

- **undischarged debts: owing money to Centrelink, other government agencies, or Housing can affect a person's eligibility for services and their ability to maintain a tenancy**
- **lack of targeted support for people with complex needs to maintain tenancy: for example, people with mental health issues or alcohol and other drug dependency may need significant on-going support to maintain a tenancy.**

*“The cyclical challenges facing many Aboriginal families were increased when a car was not able to be registered due to an old State Debt Recovery Office fine...which then meant people were imprisoned for driving an unregistered vehicle...which meant they lost an existing property...which meant their children were taken into care...and so on...”*

— Participant, Aboriginal Consultations

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## Theme Four: Do more of what we know works

**We heard that there are many useful lessons about what works to help people to avoid homelessness, leave homelessness and maintain their tenancies. There are growing bodies of evidence about the sorts of interventions that work for different groups, both here and overseas.**

### HELP PEOPLE ENGAGE WITH EDUCATION, TRAINING OR EMPLOYMENT

Participants noted the critical importance of education, training and employment in breaking the cycle of homelessness. Support to find and maintain employment was discussed as a key enabler to leaving homelessness behind.

They identified a number of successful programs that focus on building confidence and skills in both young people and adults at risk of homelessness, to the level that is appropriate for them. For example, some suggested trialling an adapted version of the *Individual Placement and Support* program (currently a specialised program that helps young people with mental health concerns engage in employment) to assist people who are homeless to enter or stay in the workforce.

### PRIORITISE *HOUSING FIRST*

We also heard that before an individual can engage with education, training or employment, their basic needs for shelter, security and health must be met.

This led to discussion of the *Housing First* approach, which prioritises the permanent housing of a person experiencing homelessness into long-term secure accommodation. Rather than moving people through a series of different accommodation types (for example, from the streets to crisis accommodation, then to temporary accommodation, followed by social housing, and then ultimately a private tenancy), a *Housing First* approach moves an individual directly into permanent accommodation, and provides support services to enable them to maintain that tenancy and address other needs.

*Housing First* was an approach recommended by many participants in the consultations and by organisations that provided written submissions. The model is showing promising results in other countries and Australia, and participants emphasised that expanding a suitable model for the Australian context should be a priority.

## PROVIDE INTENSIVE WRAP-AROUND SUPPORT

For some people who have been homeless, and particularly for those who have spent significant periods of time sleeping rough, finally having a place to call home can be challenging. Intensive wrap-around support is required to help them connect to community, build their skills for independent living, access the support services they need, and establish routines and relationships that support them to maintain their housing status.

For young people, we heard that the most successful models use an integrated approach to prevent them from becoming entrenched in homelessness by providing secure affordable accommodation, co-located with facilities and programs to enhance their employability and life skills.

Some participants in particular recommended expanding the *Community of Schools and Services* model where school students identified at risk of homelessness are streamed into youth focused, family-centred support aimed at preserving relationships at home, maintaining engagement with school and preventing entry into homelessness in the first place.

Participants also wanted to see more funded programs like the *Men's Referral Service* and the *NSW Men's Behaviour Change Network* to address the risk of homelessness faced by perpetrators of domestic and family violence.

## PROVIDE MORE OF THE RIGHT KINDS OF HOUSING

Participants in face-to-face consultations frequently raised the issue of housing affordability and the need to improve the availability of social and other forms of accessible housing. The role of government in improving the supply and affordability of housing was echoed in the written submissions received.

Participants highlighted the very real challenges of insufficient housing stock (particularly social and affordable housing), the need to ensure the availability of crisis accommodation and refuge/safe houses (especially in rural and regional areas), and the increasingly unaffordable private rental market, as three key areas that government (local, state and commonwealth) could influence and shift.

The appropriateness of accommodation can also be problematic. Some participants told us that while housing was generally quite well supplied in their areas, it was poorly maintained or inappropriate for particular groups. And the ability of the system to support Aboriginal women and children in culturally appropriate ways was an issue of particular concern.

## CONSIDER INNOVATIVE MODELS TO INCREASE HOUSING SUPPLY

We also heard about the need to provide step up/step down levels of support so that people could move between types or intensity of housing support as their situations changed. While participants encouraged us to invest in models that had been shown to work in preventing homelessness, they also suggested we consider more innovative ways to address the shortfall in available housing.



Suggestions included new share-house models and subsidies that could support people's entry to the rental market or ownership.

Participants supported models that increase the opportunity for people who are homeless to access the private rental market including specialist real estate services, specialist roles within housing providers (such as rent brokerage services) and private rental subsidies.

New approaches to unlocking 'hidden properties' (such as unused granny flats and vacant investment properties) and repurposing vacant buildings were also suggested.

Given the overall constraints in the private rental market, many submissions recommended the introduction of inclusionary zoning (requiring developers to include a percentage of affordable housing in all new developments).

Options to encourage and allow developers to help address homelessness by supporting the supply of temporary housing (for example, using buildings that will ultimately be demolished or refurbished, but that could provide safe temporary accommodation in the interim) could also be considered.

### **Build awareness of available programs and services**

Participants also raised the need to ensure information about services and accommodation is easily available to improve support to clients. The availability of services varies from location to location because of differences in local needs and the local service landscape. It can therefore be challenging for services to stay up-to-date with available local and regional programs, services and supports.

Service providers wanted a regularly updated service map that identified support services by location, their specialisations, their availability and ways in which they collaborate with other services nearby.

Participants also noted the need to find better ways to provide information to the general community and to people at risk of homelessness about the range of support services that are available both locally and state-wide.

### **Embed research and evaluation within programs**

Participants encouraged us to build a research and evaluation culture and capability into services and programs to provide an evidence base to underpin effective practice.

*"What are the good bits that are being delivered well, and how can we do more of that? And what are the things that are being done because there is money there? There's a lot that could be thought about — we need to understand which programs deliver value and which programs are not worth our efforts and we can deliver in a different way."*

— Participant, District consultation

## What we learned about the needs of different cohorts

**Some groups in our community are at greater risk of becoming homeless than others. Members of these cohorts often have multiple risk factors, leaving them in vulnerable positions if we cannot offer them the right kinds of support and intervention at the right time.**

### YOUNG PEOPLE

We heard that intervening to support children and young people can help young people reconnect with their families and return home where that is possible, or secure safe accommodation where they can be supported to build their skills for independence. Where homelessness is a result of violence, the importance of youth-specific services to address the effects of violence was emphasised. Importantly working with children and young people can also help services reach entire families.

There are proven models that work well with many young people, including school-based support services and youth foyer models (which combine supported accommodation with education and training opportunities). We also heard that ongoing, stable accommodation is required for young people to feel they are progressing and to help them connect into services, education and employment.

Our consultations also highlighted that there are many young people who require high levels of support and assistance and who have complex needs that are not well-met by the system as it stands.

In particular, participants raised the challenge of supporting young people with mental health issues who, in addition to accommodation, urgently need specialist mental health support. Alcohol and other drug support services including detox and rehabilitation facilities were also identified as a pressing need for many young people.

Participants raised the importance of implementing early, collaborative exit planning with young people in out-of-home care to ensure they do not abruptly leave their care arrangement into unsafe situations that puts them at risk of homelessness.

We heard how important it is to ensure children and young people have the means to travel safely to and from their accommodation. Young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness may be supported to obtain their drivers licence by reducing the costs associated with learning how to drive and by linking them to learn-to-drive programs (e.g. PCYC).

## ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over-represented among people experiencing or at risk of homelessness and the rate is increasing.

Participants in the District consultations and in the Aboriginal consultations spoke about a number of factors that create and reinforce barriers to Aboriginal people moving out of homelessness. These include:

- **difficulty complying with government requirements such as the need to supply specific forms of identification was often a problem in times of crisis**
- **historic distrust of many government services based on past government policies of child removal and interventionist approaches**
- **the inflexibility of procedures and policies that do not recognise cultural difference and programs that do not reflect the reality lived by Aboriginal people**
- **the use of tenancy databases, such as TICA, which record rental and tenancy histories**
- **the lack of accommodation options for women and children leaving domestic violence in rural and remote locations, and**
- **fears about agency cross-referrals and the likely consequences of seeking help.**

Crowding is particularly problematic in many Aboriginal communities where kinship and culture mean that family will take in a person experiencing homelessness. This can lead to overcrowding, with negative effects on physical and mental health and family relationships.

We also heard, both in written submissions and in the face-to-face consultations, that Aboriginal people often experience racism when they apply for housing in the private rental market.

*“Discrimination is really high in this area. We do have success [but] we don’t have much success for Aboriginal people in the private rental market.”*

— Participant, Aboriginal consultations

Participants in the Aboriginal consultation also emphasised the importance of including cultural competency in workforce development and the need to build up a workforce of Aboriginal people in the homelessness service system.

## PEOPLE EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

People (mainly women and children) leaving domestic and family violence are particularly vulnerable to homelessness. The availability of appropriate, responsive services to support and accommodate victims of violence when they need it was the subject of much discussion. Participants and respondents highlighted a number of opportunities for strengthening system’s response to people who need support. These included:

- **improving the availability of safe houses in rural communities**

- **reducing the distance women and children have to travel to relocate (which causes further disruption to employment, schooling, and community connection)**
- **providing accommodation options for perpetrators of violence linked to behaviour modification programs.**

The need for exit planning for people leaving prison was again raised in the context of domestic and family violence, where it is vital for a victim's safety and wellbeing that the perpetrator be discharged into appropriate accommodation post-release. In addition, participants wanted more funded programs like the *Men's Referral Service* and the *NSW Men's Behaviour Change Network* to address the risk of homelessness faced by perpetrators when they are removed from the family home and referred to these services.

There was also a call for a consistent, coordinated approach and protocols for working with no income/no visa clients with clear guidelines for client advocates and families on accessible assistance.

## PEOPLE IN RURAL AND REGIONAL AREAS

There are a number of additional issues facing people at risk of homelessness in rural and regional areas. These include: the pressure of distance, long travel times, and relocating people to more distant locations for faster access to housing or following a court order, which can reduce social networks and community connections.

*"Court orders often require people to relocate to another town, where they don't have accommodation."*

— Participant, District consultation

We also heard that young people in regional areas at risk of homelessness would benefit from greater opportunities to access education and training through online courses.

## EMERGING COHORTS

### Older women

We also heard that older women are a growing at risk group requiring consideration and new service responses. Many women who have been out of the workforce raising families or with caring responsibilities face poverty as they struggle to find employment but are yet eligible for pension assistance.

### LGBTIQ

The experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ) people facing or experiencing homelessness need to be considered. There is little reliable data for this group, reinforcing the 'invisibility' of homeless LGBTIQ people. In particular, LGBTIQ young people face significant problems in finding appropriate emergency accommodation, and accessing mainstream services that are not LGBTIQ-friendly.

### **Veterans**

War veterans are a group facing complex challenges. Their experiences in military service can leave them with post-traumatic stress disorder, which is believed to be the leading cause of homelessness in this group. There is a need for better data on service interaction with veterans.

### **Migrants**

The number of people with no income who need emergency housing or assistance is growing. In many cases, they are in Australia on spousal visas, cannot legally work, and are ineligible for government income support or Medicare.

### **People with complex needs**

People with highly complex needs and multiple vulnerabilities are often trapped in a cycle of homelessness. Housing providers, who are the first point of referral for people with complex needs leaving hospital, prison or juvenile justice facilities, are often not equipped to address the underlying issues that may have contributed to a person's homelessness. These overlapping issues can include: mental illness, physical/intellectual disability, cognitive functioning difficulties and trauma.

## **Next steps**

**This feedback report provides a high-level summary of the themes that we heard throughout the consultation process.**

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The full range of participants and contributors' ideas, experiences and perspectives have been recorded and will be fed into the development of the *NSW Homelessness Strategy*, policies and programs.

We appreciate the time and commitment shown by all who participated in this process and value the feedback, comments and contributions provided.

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