

NORTHERN HOMELESSNESS NETWORK



PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION'S HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS AGREEMENT REVIEW

NLASN Submission Productivity Commission's Housing and Homelessness Agreement
Review Feb 2022

*The term Northern Homelessness Network and Northern Local Area Services Network
(NLASN) are interchangeable. For the purposes of this submission NLASN is used.*

NORTHERN METROPOLITAN LOCAL AREA SERVICES NETWORK

The Northern Local Area Services Network (NLASN) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission's (PC) Housing and Homelessness Agreement Review. The NLASN commends the Federal Government for requesting this timely review of the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA).



Figure 1 - Map of NLASN (source: nifvs.org.au/about/the-northern-region/)

The NLASN has 30-member agencies, managing approximately 100 homelessness programs across Melbourne's North East and Hume Moreland catchments (Yarra, Darebin, Moreland, Hume, Nillumbik, Banyule and Whittlesea).

The focus of the NLASN's work is to improve responses to people experiencing homelessness in Melbourne's North through:

- coordinated homelessness service system arrangements,
- consumer consultation,
- linkages with allied service sectors and shared professional development.

NLASN RESPONSE TO SPECIFIC PROVOCATIONS

Given the limited timeframe and capacity, the NLASN are unable to respond specifically to the many critical issues raised in the Issues Paper and strongly endorse the key issues raised in the Southern Homelessness Services Network (the SHSN) submission.

Key Statement

We can end homelessness. It requires three key elements- a well resourced homelessness service sector working closely and collaboratively with a healthy social housing system that moves people quickly from experiencing homelessness to being housed, enough stock to meet the current and future demand and adequate options to help people maintain and sustain their tenancies.

Key issues

The NLASN recommends the following critical issues be addressed in the PC NHHA Review and in the development of a future NHHA –

- 1. That the Federal Government work, in conjunction with State, Territory and local governments, to develop a ten year National Homelessness and Low Income Housing Strategy and Action Plan**

Such as Strategy must set strong achievable targets to reduce and end homelessness, provide affordable housing for the lowest income cohorts and include sufficient funding to support the required actions. The NHHA is one of the major mechanisms for Governments to implement such a Strategy.

- 2. Increased affordable, appropriate and safe housing is required for homelessness agencies to achieve sustainable client outcomes**

The lack of housing options is the most common and severe block to funded homelessness agencies achieving NHHA outcomes/outputs. There is a lack of affordability; lack of availability; and lack of access to housing for people at risk of and/or experiencing homelessness. Short, medium and long term housing options (preferably social housing) are required to support the sector to efficiently achieve NHHA outcomes with a focus on increasing sustainable long term housing options as the most effective solution to homelessness. Housing continues to be the most difficult blockage to meeting client needs.

The move towards a greater adoption of the Housing First approach in Australia requires long term housing first, and then the appropriate supports to be available when a client needs them. The Housing First approach has an evidence base to demonstrate its effectiveness, particularly for people with complex needs, but appropriate housing needs to be available for this model to be successful. The NLASN would like to see an expansion of the Housing First approach with the new NHHA designed provide the key elements of long term safe affordable housing and wraparound supports.

Case study of complex tenant who has been well supported

38 year old male history of incarceration, substance misuse, mental health and homelessness, moved into social housing in 2017. Good support services in place at time of moving into the property. Clear lines of communication set up between tenancy managers (there have been a few) and external support services. Support service providing onsite support once a week, and phone or email contact in between. Tenancy manager keeping support service updated regarding any emerging tenancy issues, so they can be addressed early.

Tenant is still currently housed with Community Housing Provider and feels he is supported. This tenancy has now been in place for over 4 years, and issues regarding the tenancy have been addressed early, alleviating stress from the tenant and the tenancy manager. The tenant knows who to speak to regarding issues arising for him, he has established good communication with the tenancy manager, and has the support services to advocate for him, if he feels unable to sort it out himself.

3. NHHA funding for homelessness services should reflect the actual demand for assistance including for complex clients with longer term support needs and expand funding to meet demand in outer metro/growth areas

Funding allocations do not reflect the demand for assistance. Prior to COVID-19, the capacity of the NLASN homelessness service system was only able to support approximately 11% of households seeking assistance. The primary mechanism to offer this support was the Housing Establishment Fund (HEF), initially intended to fund a suite of responses that would allow households to exit homelessness into stable housing. Over time, HEF's primary function has been to purchase very-short-term emergency accommodation, which is triaged for only the most vulnerable and at-risk households. Over 300 new households present to three access points in the Northern Metropolitan Region every month, however only 25 transitional housing vacancies and 50 case managed support vacancies are available. Households not matched with accommodation vacancies join a burgeoning prioritisation list, and as at February 2022 2,000 households were on lists, including children, young people and adults. For high risk and vulnerable households not successful in attaining transitional housing, purchased emergency accommodation is offered if funding is available. During normal circumstances, most emergency accommodation options in Melbourne have been identified as "extremely unsafe and typically of a very poor standard".

Funding for support should provide a flexible spectrum of support rather than a time limited support period that does not equate to the actual needs of people experiencing homelessness.

The NHHA should promote Housing First approaches which provide housing and support (at different intensities) for effective program and client outcomes as a strong evidence-based approach to ending homelessness. Currently, agencies trying to implement a Housing First approach struggle to obtain funding for either the housing or the support component of these successful programs as usually Government funding provides either housing or support, not both. As discussed above, the new NHHA should be designed to promote the wider adoption of Housing First approach in Australia.

Case study where appropriate housing was not available

MG, is a 28-year-old proud First Nations woman who has a long history of homelessness and incarceration. This goes way back to MG being a child who was exited by the Child Protection (CP) system into homelessness after being part of the CP system since she was 12. From the age of 14 MG reports she slept rough or she exchanged sex for a place to sleep. She reports that some of her "relationships" were purely so she had somewhere to sleep. At her most recent period of incarceration, MG was unable to get bail or parole as she had no address to provide to the court. This meant that she served her full sentence. On her release, an access point and support service arranged her crisis accommodation for only 3 weeks. At the end of this, MG couch surfed for a short period of time and she then started stealing cars to sleep in. A goal of her support service was to assist MG undertake a neuropsych assessment for her brain injury and also assist her to apply for NDIS. But as she was constantly in crisis and often uncontactable as her phone had no charge, the support service and MG were unable to progress these essential support needs. There is now warrants out for MG and she will likely get resentenced and the cycle of homelessness and incarceration continues. MG states that she sees NO hope for her future. Lack of suitable long-term housing has left MG in a very vulnerable space.

4. Increase effective prevention and early intervention programs under the NHHA.

Prevention of homelessness occurring in the first place and early intervention when people are at risk of, or first become homeless, are two key areas that could boost the efficiency of the NHHA. Prevention and early intervention programs reduce the inflow of people into homelessness by diverting them quickly and effectively into sustainable options. The continuing prioritisation of support and housing to those people with the highest needs neglects to address the inflow of new clients into homelessness. This is an intrinsic inefficiency in the current funding models of many housing and support programs under the NHHA.

5. The Productivity Commission should allow for a more thorough consultation process both with the homelessness sector and people with a lived experience of homelessness to contribute to this critical Review.

The relatively short consultation timelines over summer holidays with an exhausted and sick workforce due to COVID have left many agencies unable to contribute to this Review. This is a missed opportunity for the Productivity Commission to learn from the practice experience of staff and the lived experience of clients/consumers. The NLASN urges the PC to consult authentically with people with lived experience through running lived experience focus group consultations or interviews. People who have experienced homelessness are not often in a position to make a written submission or even online comment. The Disability Royal Commission provides a range of examples on how to effectively include marginalised people with lived experience in consultation <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/share-your-story> .

We urge the Productivity Commission to make recommendations to the Federal Government based on the critical points made in this submission.

Yours sincerely

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On behalf of the Northern Local Area Services Network

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