

Southern Homelessness Services Network

ROOMING HOUSE SUMMIT

OUTCOMES REPORT



Presenting the outcomes and recommendations of the SHSN Rooming House Summit, 2 April 2019

1. About the Southern Homelessness Services Network

The **Vision** of the Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) is an end to homelessness in Southern Region of Melbourne (comprising Bayside-Peninsula and Southern Melbourne Department of Human Services areas and covering the local government areas of Bayside, Cardinia, Casey, Frankston, Glen Eira, Greater Dandenong, Kingston, Mornington Peninsula, Port Phillip and Stonnington).

The **Mission** of the “Victorian Homelessness Networks is to facilitate, inform and support regional homelessness services and stakeholders to work together to co-ordinate services to people who are experiencing or who are at risk of homelessness.”

The Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) comprises all funded Specialist Homelessness Services in the Southern Region including services providing crisis, transitional, long term, family violence and youth support and accommodation. Our members include Launch Housing, the Salvation Army and Sacred Heart Mission. The SHSN also supports allied service sectors working in homelessness. The SHSN is a resource for the homelessness sector in the South.

The key strategic SHSN objectives are:

1. To promote and support innovation, knowledge sharing and expertise in the best interests of consumers
2. To foster relationships and collaboration between service providers to ensure timely, coordinated and effective responses
3. To act as a conduit between the Department of Health and Human Services and the regional service sector homelessness related data, issues and trends to inform policy
4. Working together to end homelessness

Southern Homelessness Services Network

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2. Why hold a SHSN Rooming House Summit?

The issue of privately run, expensive, sub-standard, exploitative rooming houses has been raised with the SHSN by stakeholders across the Southern Region from inner City to outer metro areas. Stakeholders include member homelessness agencies and local governments in the South. There has been a number of other campaigns, strategies and advocacy pushes around rooming houses that have been building over the last 12 months including the campaigns by associate networks in other regions, local councils and the peak agency for Homelessness Council to Homeless Persons (CHP).

At the beginning of 2019, our associate networks in the North and West of Melbourne released a paper (and associated campaign) called *The Crisis in Crisis Accommodation* - detailing consumer experiences in sub-standard private emergency accommodation including private hotels, motels and rooming houses. The Northern and Western Homelessness Networks prepared this report in response to consumer feedback. This report highlights the appalling conditions that people are required to live in while they wait for more secure accommodation to become available, if at all. Our member agencies refer clients to this accommodation and usually pay for some of their time staying there, using the Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) funded by the Victorian Government's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The conclusion of this paper states that

As a sector we are no longer prepared to refer people to substandard crisis accommodation, nor are we willing to participate in continuing to harm vulnerable people seeking our assistance (North and West Homelessness Networks, 2019:2).

Glen Eira Council developed a draft Rooming House Strategy that was out for consultation in February-March 2019. Glen Eira Council were concerned about the low standards for registered rooming houses and the confusing lines of responsibility for regulating rooming houses. The SHSN prepared a submission to this consultation process based on consultation with member agencies. Some other Councils in the Southern Region already had specific rooming house strategies (such as Casey) or were struggling to deal with similar issues relating to private rooming houses.

Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) recently released its Submission to the 2019-2020 State Budget. CHP identified six key areas requiring increased funding. Firstly CHP identify and quantify the need for vastly increased investment in social housing in Victoria. Secondly CHP called for a "more robust crisis response" which addresses some of the issues raised in the *Crisis in Crisis* Report. Thirdly, CHP called for a substantial increase to rooming house outreach stating that

While reforms have introduced minimum standards, and a fit and proper persons test for operators, the reality is that many rooming houses are still damaging environments for people's health and wellbeing (CHP, 2019:6).

CHP points out that "despite their vulnerability, this [rooming house residents] is an almost completely unserved population" (CHP, 2019:6). CHP is calling for the funding of new homelessness outreach teams to support the wellbeing of this extremely vulnerable group. CHP call on the State Government for funding of approximately \$3 million per annum to support 2,500 rooming house residents annually.

The SHSN also participates in the Melbourne Metropolitan Rooming House Working Group (MMRWG) – a group of local government and community agency staff concerned about rooming houses in Melbourne. In October 2018, the MMRHWG held a well-attended forum at Melbourne Town Hall which featured input from people living in rooming houses.

The most compelling and poignant dilemma arising from the community forum was the acute tone of human despair and fear expressed by consumers. It permeated every table, every discussion ... What is new is the intensity of distress resulting from the cumulative effects of powerlessness, the diminishing capacity of regulatory and support systems (despite their best intentions), the continued fraying of basic safety net provisions such as income and affordable housing with little or no respite to this situation in the foreseeable future.

The key themes identified at the Forum for people living in rooming houses were:

• Living with people in crisis	• Isolation	• Income / poverty
• Lack of support	• Investing in systems	• Safety and security
• Poor physical conditions of rooming houses (MMRWG Forum Report)		

3. About the SHSN Rooming House Summit

On 2 April 2019, the Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) hosted a Rooming House Summit at the Southern Golf Club in Keysborough. The purpose of the Summit was to

To hold a solution focussed summit bringing together all of the different factors/aspects of private rooming houses resulting in ideas/commitment for joint work moving forward to improve the safety and appropriateness of rooming house options for vulnerable people in the Southern Region.

The audience for the Summit was decision-makers, policy makers and advocates, local government, homelessness agencies/managers and IAP staff/coordinators, rooming house outreach workers.

The Summit Program was organised into four parts – Introduction (Network Coordinator), keynote speakers, solutions workshops and a plenary/feedback session.

3.1 Forum Attendance

107 people participated in the Summit (including speakers). 45% of participants (48) were from homelessness and housing agencies. 20% of participants (21) were from allied services and 20% of participants (21) were from local government, including local governments from the Eastern Region as well as the Southern Region of Melbourne. This included local government participants representing all ten of the municipalities in the Southern Region. 11% of the Summit participants were from the State Government including Consumer Affairs Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of the Commissioner for Residential Tenancies. Three participants were consumers with experience living in rooming houses and two participants were private rooming house managers.

3.2 Forum Feedback Summary

69 participants completed the Summit feedback survey online, representing 64% of all participants which is a very high rate of feedback. 75% of survey respondents found the Summit very - extremely valuable. No respondents reported that the Summit was not at all valuable.

The presenters were all rated very-extremely valuable by the majority of respondents (ranging from 73% positive feedback to 83%). 93% of respondents said they would attend another SHSN Forum.

Networking and the opportunity to share knowledge and experience and discuss issues and solutions relating to rooming houses were the most useful aspects of the Summit according to respondents. 44 respondents said they would be interested in further work on this issue.

The following comments were made in relation to what respondents found most useful about the Summit:

Coming together of professionals - sharing knowledge and experiences

Being able to brainstorm with other workers with a solutions-focused approach in order to improve circumstances for individuals in rooming houses.

Networking, and information sharing, various perspectives

Learning about how others are involved in rooming houses. Contacts.

Hearing the experiences of tenants.

Workshops, presenters/guest speakers and panel discussion

Discussion about the breadth of issues facing the rooming house sector and potential opportunities to address the issues.

The different perspectives and recognising opportunities. It's stimulating when you turn up and already think you know the solutions to have this value added to from a completely different sector.

4. SHSN Rooming House Summit Presentations Overview

The Summit included six presenters as well as an overview from the SHSN Coordinator. The six presenters were selected to address the diverse range of aspects of rooming house issues. The speakers also participated in a panel discussion, answering questions from the Summit participants.

Below is a brief overview of each presentation. The presenter PowerPoint presentations are available on our website at <https://www.shsnetwork.online/shsn-forums>. The Summit introduction (by the SHSN Coordinator) explained the background of the Summit (see section 2) and raised the following issues regarding rooming houses in the Southern Region of Melbourne:

- About 500 registered rooming houses (CAV register) in the South
- Greater Dandenong has the largest number with Frankston, Casey, Stonnington and Glen Eira having large numbers of registered rooming houses
- 1604 people counted as homeless and living in rooming houses in the 2016 Census (ABS data) – undercount
- Change from emergency housing to longer term housing
- High cost of rooming house accommodation – residents can't afford food and other necessities.

Heather Holst – Commissioner for Residential Tenancies

Heather provided an overview of the history of rooming houses in Victoria including the Rooming House Standards Taskforce of 2009 and the subsequent introduction of rooming house standards and the more recent Rooming House Operators Act 2016. Heather also explained about the public Rooming House Register on the consumer Affairs Victoria website. Heather explained the different roles and responsibilities in the rooming house space. She outlined some of the main issues - illegal rooming houses; meeting the needs of the residents; cost; property condition; sense of home and belonging (certainty of tenure); dangerous situations; and resolving disputes. Heather also outlined key opportunities for change – including ensuring that the current powers are well used and working towards protecting and strengthening renters' rights; increase renters' understanding their rights and renters exercising their rights.

Jason Russell – Council to Homeless Persons, Peer Education and Support Program (CHP PESP)

Jason spoke about his stays in private rooming houses (including the Gatwick Hotel) over a number of years. He described the danger and fear of living with strangers, the lack of dignity and the unsuitability of private rooming houses as a viable housing option. Jason spoke about unscrupulous landlords/managers preying on vulnerable residents. He explained that some people prefer to sleep rough rather than live in private rooming houses and that rough sleeping will continue to increase if safe and appropriate housing is not provided. He called for urgent action to find alternatives to rooming houses.

Neil Matthews – Dynamic Housing

Neil runs three high quality rooming houses in the City of Casey, providing safe, comfortable, affordable housing options to women and children in need including women and children escaping family violence. After identifying a shortage of suitable housing options available to vulnerable women and children in the Melbourne metropolitan area, due to family breakdown, violence and sometimes just the circumstances they find themselves in, Dynamic Housing Systems Pty Ltd ventured into making accommodation of a safe, clean, affordable type available to those in need. Dynamic Housing is not associated with any religious, charitable or government agencies but do work closely with various agencies and support services to place vulnerable women and children into our facilities. Dynamic Housing's mission is "to help give you a place you can call home". Neil's presentation included photos of their quality accommodation.

Aldo Taranto - Rooming House Outreach and Support, Peninsula Community Legal Centre

Aldo explained about his role as the Rooming House Outreach and Support worker at Peninsula Community Legal Centre which covers 17 local government areas in the Southern and Eastern Regions of Melbourne. The program objectives are to contact the maximum number of residents; identify inappropriate housing; reconnect to health and support services; offer Residential Tenancies advice; and report breaches. Partnerships are key to the success of this role. Aldo's presentation included photos of problem rooming houses including dirty and unusable kitchens; properties with unsafe features such as holes in floors and dilapidated walls; and properties strewn with rubbish and graffiti. Aldo provided a breakdown of his client profile including age, gender and needs. 83% of his clients reported tenancy issues and 55% felt unsafe. Based on his experience, Aldo stated that we need to identify and call out deficiencies with regulations and processes.

James Calder – Planner, Casey Council

James spoke about the role of local governments in regulating and managing rooming houses. He pointed out that Casey Council has a Rooming House Strategy which outlines the scope of work and responsibilities and associated actions of Casey Council on rooming houses. James explained the links between rooming houses and more Councils advocating for increased affordable housing including developing affordable housing strategies and specific affordable housing projects. James felt that from a local government perspective there is a need for more rooming house regulation and a greater role for councils in advocacy on these issues. James explained that in this area needs both an internal focus (coordinating all relevant areas of councils) and an external focus looking at partnerships. James gave the example of the Casey Council partnership with Wayss to provide a rooming house outreach worker in Casey which is an effective model of responding to the needs of these Council residents.

Simon Okely – Housing Options Worker, Launch Housing

Simon spoke about his role as the Housing Options Worker at Launch Housing. Launch Housing (as do other homelessness agencies) refer clients to rooming houses and other accommodation including hotels, motels and caravan parks as emergency accommodation. This is paid for through a State Government fund called the housing Establishment Fund. Simon's role includes liaising with and working with rooming house (and other emergency accommodation) providers to ensure they meet the requirements of Launch Housing. This work has included visiting rooming houses and describing the accommodation on an internal web-based accommodation directory. Simon has also developed a Rooming House Provider Working Agreement which outlines the requirements of rooming house providers who seek to house Launch's clients and attempts to circumvent some of the identified poor (and illegal) practices of some providers. The agreement covers issues such as:

- Launch Housing cannot fund accommodation if tenants are moved to addresses other than those agreed to at time of booking
- Use of a Rooming House Residency Agreement or equivalent is suggested
- Launch Housing cannot fund bonds or security deposits. Launch expects that if a bond is charged, it will be lodged with the RTBA
- Launch expects tenants to receive receipts for all rental payments.

Simon's learnings in this role include the need to acknowledge the complexity of rooming house environments; work to improve the interface with the homeless service system; and the need to centralise our knowledge.

5. SHSN Rooming House Summit Recommendations

There were a range of recommendations from the Summit's solution-focussed workshop discussions. The workshop groups were:

- Local government collaboration
- Incentives for good practice for rooming house providers
- Policy and advocacy
- Regulation and planning
- Homelessness Entry Points and coordinating buying power (HEF)
- Outreach support to rooming house residents
- Rooming house alternatives for vulnerable people

A summary of the workshop discussions under each workshop topic is at Attachment A.

Based on these discussions and the Summit presentations, the SHSN makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: That the State Government (CAV or DHHS) fund the development of a standardised accommodation ratings system for private rooming house providers.

The ratings could be provided by community outreach staff, local government staff, CAV and even residents. The ratings system should be linked with incentives for good practice from proprietors and stronger consequences for poor practices. Incentives could include renewable energy supplements or equipment to reduce ongoing costs of providing accommodation. The ratings system could be extended to other forms of privately purchased emergency accommodation such as hotels, motels and caravan parks.

Recommendation 2: That the role of housing options workers be adequately funded and extended to other homelessness agencies with an online accommodation directory accessible by Initial Assessment and Planning (IAP) staff at all homelessness entry points.

This work would also develop and use agreements with rooming house providers in receipt of HEF to ensure basic residents' rights are upheld. This work would be based on the successful model used by Launch Housing including the housing options worker role and the online accommodation directory. This work should be linked to the development of a ratings system (see Recommendation 1).

Recommendation 3: That the State Government fund the Council to Homeless Person's Budget proposal for outreach teams of homelessness workers and community health to support the wellbeing of this extremely vulnerable group and more effectively break the cycle of homelessness ([see CHP's 2019/20 budget submission](#)).

This would expand on the current work of the two funded positions covering the entire Melbourne metropolitan area (through Peninsula Community Legal Centre and Tenants Victoria). These outreach workers would provide a focal point for collaborative work in rooming houses building relationships with rooming house proprietors, community services, residents, local government, etc. The outreach workers would also educate and support residents around their rights and responsibilities.

Recommendation 4: That CAV be adequately resourced to inspect every registered rooming house annually to inform operators and residents of their rights and responsibilities and to ensure the minimum standards are met.

This could also be linked with the ratings system (Recommendation 1) with CAV staff feeding information into the ratings system and online accommodation register. Rooming houses exceeding the minimum standards on a regular basis may be exempted from annual inspections for a period of time unless a complaint is received, forming another incentive for good practice. A review of the minimum standards would also be welcomed to ensure a higher standard of accommodation provision.

Recommendation 5: That local governments be adequately resourced to inspect suspected unregistered rooming houses.

Resourcing local governments to respond quickly and effectively to reports of unregistered rooming houses will reduce the number of unregistered rooming houses in the South. This will potentially increase the number of registered rooming houses and the safety of those rooming houses if those operators then register their operations. Community agencies will feel more confident reporting unregistered rooming houses to local councils if they know councils have the capacity to respond.

Recommendation 6: That local governments in the Southern Region (or through the MAV/VLGA) take the lead by establishing a local government working group for collaborative work on rooming houses issues.

Most local governments in the South are dealing with similar issues around rooming houses so collaborative work would share approaches, resources and advocacy thereby multiplying the impact of individual councils.

Recommendation 7: That homelessness agencies continue to work collaboratively to use their Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) bargaining power to lift standards of accommodation.

This may include sharing data on HEF expenditure, temporary bans on providers who do not meet the minimum standards and favouring providers with higher ratings using the ratings system (see Recommendation 1).

6. References

City of Casey, 2015 *Rooming House Strategy* <https://www.casey.vic.gov.au/policies-strategies/rooming-house-strategy>

Council to Homeless Persons 2019, *Pre-budget Submission 2019/20* <http://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CHP-Pre-Budget-Submission-2019.pdf>

Glen Eira City Council 2019 *Consultation on the Glen eira Rooming House Strategy* <https://www.haveyoursaygleneira.com.au/draft-glen-eira-rooming-house-strategy>

North and West Homelessness 2019, Networks *Crisis in Crisis Report* <http://www.nwhn.net.au/Crisis-in-Crisis.aspx>

Southern Homelessness Services Network 2019 Rooming House Summit presentations <https://www.shsnetwork.online/shsn-forums>

Southern Homelessness Services Network 2019 *Submission to Glen Eira Council Rooming House Strategy Consultation* https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/776f42_7fa5ba4e6dd0448fb1c78a3987a7db53.pdf

Attachment A. Summit workshop topics and discussion

This attachment provides a summary of the workshop discussion under each workshop topic.

Incentives for good practice for rooming house providers

- Proprietors to complete/receive education regarding homelessness, including awareness of regulations etc.
- Support rooming house providers with more outreach support to residents.
- Residents to have access on site to information regarding their rights, services available. etc
- Homeless services need to use their bargaining power more to attract the best proprietors
- Develop a ratings system for rooming houses with incentives for good performing, quality providers and penalties for poor/inadequate performance/quality. Incentives could include rates rebates, other financial rebates, tax incentives, services (utilities) rebate, solar energy rebate, and insurance rebates.

Policy and advocacy

- Percentage land tax for affordable housing –advocacy involving people with lived experience of homelessness
- Clear complaints process around rooming houses
- Increased supply/stock of affordable housing through campaign aimed at government and philanthropic sector – lack of appropriate affordable housing is an issue for all of these sectors – AOD, mental health, disability and family violence
- Increased public awareness eg Everybody's Home Campaign, community/citizen education including lived experience and diverse stories
- Open website for lodging concerns/breaches of standards. Databases that are fully accessible – like Trip Advisor. Ensuring that all residents can access the database – ie. through service providers. Use website to blacklist of sub-standard premises.
- More education for service users around their rights as tenants
- Develop accepted policies around homelessness – all levels of government

Regulation and planning

- Establish Internal Accommodation Committees (for all Councils). These committees would serve as a focal point for service collaboration and look at funding, loopholes and adequate resourcing of inspections.

Homelessness Entry Points and coordinating buying power (HEF)

- More effective use of HEF (Housing Establishment Fund) through developing a rating system by the Specialist Homelessness Services and DHHS (funding). This would require a centralised process/approach and use of Opening Doors Framework.
- Rating system –
 - Star rating can mean different things (safety, amenity, etc)
 - Present rating to service users (trip advisor ratings) and make public
 - Look at apps for this purpose
- Look at buying emergency housing stock with (HEF) funds
- Gap in housing with supports or managed housing and need for more crisis centres (no crisis accommodation in some council areas)
- Land released for temporary housing (caravan parks, removable units, tiny homes)
- Note that some clients are refusing rooming house accommodation

Outreach support to rooming house residents

- Building relationships with landlords, clients/residents, services, local community. Encourage positive reciprocal relationships so that private landlords can be more responsive to the needs of our client group. Give landlords one central point of contact with homelessness agencies.
 - client focus
 - Landlords may have lack of awareness about how to engage with difficult tenant behaviour and also about who to go to for help
 - Support letters from workers help landlords understand assistance offered to tenants.
 - Phone calls are effective to let landlord know that there is support available for them
- community gardens at rooming house or close by, gardens, men's sheds, meals programs
- Rooming house residents need the following supports:
 - Health – dental, optometry, podiatry
 - Legal and financial support and living skills development
 - Creating safe place and socialisation
 - Access to information and community development
 - Sustainable tenancies
- To build relationships across the sector to break down preconceptions/negative stereotypes
 - Through education – prisons, hospitals, etc
 - By breaking down stigma
 - Building trust with clients is critical. Being careful with judgement
 - Networking and identifying opportunities for collaboration
 - Barriers – funding restrictions (individual funding packages), relationships with landlords, for profit sector may be harder to reach than community rooming houses
- Understanding the value of rooming houses and what they can offer

Local government collaboration

- What are we aiming for?
 - Information sharing
 - State/Local policy/particular provision re rooming houses
 - Advocacy
 - Increase rooming house outreach
 - Increased registration of rooming houses
 - Increased business support for developers
- How do we achieve it?
 - Creation of a local government special interest group
 - Modification of building standards re disability standards for rooming house conversions in old properties.
 - Find new partners (eg TAFE)
 - State approval – eg. Greater Dandenong moratorium for 8-10 years for registration if only disability standard is not met and funding subsidised and paid back over time.
 - Philanthropy – upgrades of private properties in exchange for period social housing/rooming house use and for new rooming houses

Rooming house alternatives for vulnerable people

- Subsidised affordable housing
- Wrap around services with different options for cohorts
- Shipping containers/tiny houses
 - Better use of utilities available – eg solar, reuse water – grey water, etc
 - Use different groups to build - investor groups, military, students, prisoners on release, community service.
- Property tax on holiday homes could be used to fund services
- Incentives for builders to build subsidised affordable housing
- Empty Nesters - More use of this type of model and look at use of apps to get access to property and to review accommodation