



## **SOUTHERN HOMELESSNESS SERVICES NETWORK**

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### **Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) Submission to the Glen Eira Council Rooming House Strategy Consultation**

#### **About the Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN)**

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 Vision of the SHSN is an end to homelessness in Southern Region of Melbourne (comprising Bayside-Peninsula and Southern Melbourne Department of Health and Human Services areas and covering ten local council areas including Glen Eira). The SHSN is funded by DHHS and works with similar networks across Victoria.

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 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

It is important to note that our front door homelessness services often refer people into rooming houses as emergency accommodation due to a lack of suitable alternative housing options using a funding stream called the Housing Establishment Fund (HEF). Member agencies will generally only refer clients to registered rooming houses.

## **SHSN Response to the Draft Rooming House Strategy**

The SHSN commends Glen Eira Council for developing the draft Rooming House Strategy. Responding to the range of complex issues around private rooming houses is not an easy task and the SHSN is pleased to see Glen Eira Council taking a leadership role on these issues. The issues raised in the Strategy are of great concern to our member agencies - the steady increase in the number of rooming houses (registered and unregistered), the complex needs of residents, community concern and the growing need to appropriately house vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community.

The SHSN consulted members regarding the draft Glen Eira Strategy. This member consultation together with our knowledge and experience of private rooming houses informs this submission. In addition, information and links to the Strategy consultation were included in the SHSN February newsletter to promote Glen Eira Council's consultation process.

The issues Glen Eira is facing around rooming houses are not unique to this municipality and are common across inner, middle and outer areas of the Southern Region, and Melbourne more broadly.

As the Strategy states "people living in rooming houses are counted as homeless" by the ABS and this recognition then leads to further discussion about how to support and assist people living in rooming houses to sustain themselves and to find other more appropriate housing to end their homelessness.

In general, the SHSN found that the Strategy provides a useful description of the key problems and issues relating to rooming houses in Glen Eira. The Strategy's description relating to the multiplicity of agencies, legislation and regulations shows the complexity of addressing these issues effectively.

The SHSN sees the following aspects of the Strategy as strengths -

- Understanding that people living in rooming houses are defined by the ABS as homeless – this definition underpins the Strategy.
- Advocacy for streamlining responsibility and legislation and a single body to monitor compliance and respond to issues.
- Advocacy to raise the minimum standards of rooming houses.
- Strong advocacy for more social housing in Glen Eira to provide more appropriate and affordable accommodation for this target group. It is critical to ensure that social and affordable housing is accessible for people on the lowest incomes who cannot sustain other housing options as well as providing housing for other groups in need of affordable housing.
- Measures to increase the security and safety measures in rooming houses
- Exploring incentives to engage with rooming house operators
- Having a specific action plan outlining timeframes is a useful tool for Council to enact the Strategy.

The SHSN sees that the Strategy requires strengthening in the following areas:

- Consultation should include rooming house residents to ensure actions meet their needs as well as the needs of the broader community, this includes participation in the proposed Council Working Group.

- Improved clarity and articulation of Council's goals and the desired outcomes to be achieved by the Strategy.
- Advocacy for more social housing should be a stronger priority with more immediate timelines and targets and Council offering up Council sites and some funding. If there was adequate social and affordable housing, the business model for private rooming houses would not be so profitable.
- Rooming houses need to have an operational procedure and proprietors need mandatory training around substance use, mental health and available support services. This training would be in addition to any training on their legal requirements in managing a rooming house.
- Advocacy for better crisis accommodation options for vulnerable people (including youth, families, the elderly and people with disabilities and mental illness) so that Specialist Homelessness Services do not have to use private rooming houses for emergency accommodation
- Advocating for price control so that rooming house residents are not paying more than 30% of their income in rent and/or facilities and mechanisms to ensure that the quality of the accommodation reflect the pricing. Making it harder to make large profits from rooming houses would limit the numbers of unscrupulous operators.
- Council to consider higher registration fees reflecting the profits being made. These fee increases could fund increased outreach support services for residents
- Assist outreach support services in coordinating services and Council to consider funding rooming house outreach staff on an ongoing basis (as have other Councils).
- Federal advocacy for raising the level of the Newstart allowance and rent assistance, whilst ensuring landlords do not raise rents accordingly
- Advocacy for funding for effective policing of the regulations by CAV and Councils.
- Glen Eira to work with other councils dealing with the same issues relating to rooming houses and include specific actions in the Strategy to enable this to occur.

The SHSN makes the following comment on prioritising actions under each of the four priority areas of the draft Strategy:

#### *Multiplicity of Agencies, Legislation and Regulations*

SHSN priority actions are:

- Advocate for the establishment of one key agency monitors and enforces a single set of standards for rooming houses in the future.
- Advocate to increase the powers of entry of Authorised Officers so that the actual condition of the property can be inspected and conditions reviewed.
- Educate operators on their roles and responsibilities and promote the *Running a Better Rooming House: A Best Practice Handbook for Operators* (RAAV, 2011) to rooming house operators. Mail out to operators – annually
- Establish a Glen Eira Rooming House Working Group

### *Insufficient Minimum Standards*

SHSN priority actions are:

- Advocate to increase the current minimum standards for rooming houses
- Review the Council's annual registration fee
- Council will investigate the introduction of incentives for rooming house operators

### *Safety and Security*

SHSN priority actions are:

- Advocate for minimum safety and security standards in rooming houses,
- Advocate for increased safe access provisions for authorised officers and support workers
- Introduce tighter controls to reduce the exploitation of residents and funding by rooming house operators.

### *Greater Need for Social and Affordable Housing*

SHSN supports both priority actions:

- Continue to advocate to State and Federal Governments to increase the supply and funding for social and affordable housing in our community.
- Develop a Social housing Policy which develops initiatives for more appropriate models of social housing within Glen Eira to support vulnerable members of the community.

## **Relevant work relating to Rooming Houses**

The SHSN would like to highlight related work on the issue of rooming houses, and housing and homelessness more broadly, that are congruent with this Strategy. Council may wish to become more involved with some of these campaigns and projects under the Rooming House and the Affordable Social Housing Strategies.

### **SHSN Rooming House Summit – 2 April 2019**

The SHSN is convening a solution-focussed Rooming House Summit bringing stakeholders together to improve the safety and appropriateness of private rooming house options for vulnerable people in the Southern Region of Melbourne. This Summit is for decision and policy makers, advocates, outreach workers, homelessness agencies, local government, rooming house regulators and anyone interested in making private rooming houses a better place to live. Speakers include the Commissioner for Residential Tenancies, a local government speaker, an effective rooming house operator, a person with lived experienced of rooming houses and outreach staff.

The SHSN welcomes Glen Eira Council's participation in the Summit. The Summit will provide an opportunity for Glen Eira Council to link in with other Councils working to address rooming house issues as well as workshop potential solutions. The link to the Summit booking is <https://www.trybooking.com/BAVFC>

## Crisis in Crisis Accommodation Report

The SHSN counterpart networks in the North and West of Melbourne recently launched their *Crisis in Crisis Accommodation* report. The Northern and Western Homelessness Networks (NWHN) prepared this report in response to consumer feedback that highlights the crisis in crisis accommodation in Melbourne's north and west. 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. The NWHN members have come together and made the following statement -

*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. (Crisis in Crisis Report, 2019:2).*

The report received substantial media coverage and can be read on the NWHN website <http://www.nwhn.net.au/Crisis-in-Crisis.aspx>

The report highlights that Melbourne is experiencing a housing crisis. As a result, the numbers of people who have no home are increasing. When people have nowhere to live, they often look to the homelessness service system for urgent support. Unfortunately, the Homelessness Service System across Victoria only has access to 423 government funded crisis beds. This results in our sector using unsafe, inappropriate and unaffordable emergency accommodation options including motels, hotels and rooming houses. The Crisis in Crisis advocacy continues.

## CHP's Election Strategy

Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) is the peak agency for homelessness in Victoria and plays a critical advocacy role on a range of issues relating to homelessness. CHP recently released its Pre-State Submission to the 2019-2020 State Budget. CHP's Submission identifies six key areas requiring increased funding in the State Budget. Three of these relate directly to the Glen Eira draft Rooming House Strategy.

Firstly CHP identify and quantify the need for vastly increased investment in social housing in Victoria. Secondly CHP are calling for a "more robust crisis response" which addresses some of the issues raised in the *Crisis in Crisis* Report.

Thirdly, CHP calls 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, and more effectively break the cycle of homelessness. CHP call on the State Government for funding of approximately \$3 million per annum to support 2,500 rooming house residents annually. The CHP submission can be read here <http://chp.org.au/statebudgetsubmissions/>

## Everybody's Home

The Everybody's Home Campaign brings together a wide range of concerned organisations and individuals nationally to fix the housing problem in Australia. Everybody's Home has put together a plan for how governments can fix the housing problem, calling on leaders to take that plan and make it a reality. The campaign is organised under five themes some of which

synergise with Council's moves towards more affordable and social housing in Glen Eira. The themes are:

1. Support for first home-buyers, by setting the tax system to make it fairer for ordinary Australians wanting to buy a home.
2. Develop a National Housing strategy to meet Australia's identified shortfall of 500,000 social and affordable rental homes.
3. A better deal for renters, by changing the tenancy laws to protect tenants against evictions, unfair rent rises, discrimination and landlords who refuse to maintain properties.
4. Immediate relief for Australians in chronic rental stress, by increasing Commonwealth Rent Assistance.
5. A plan to end homelessness, to halve homelessness in five years and end it in 10.

Glen Eira Council can join with other Councils in supporting this campaign in the lead up to the Federal Election. For more information about Everybody's Home see <http://everybodyshome.com.au/>

### Raise the Rate

The Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) is calling on the government to raise the single rate of Newstart, Youth Allowance and related payments. This is the Raise the Rate campaign. ACOSS points out that

*Over 800,000 people, including parents, carers, people with disability, other people locked out of paid work and students are struggling daily to afford basic essentials like a roof over their head and food on their table. People are having to make tough choices between eating a meal and paying a bill, buying shoes for their children and maintaining their health. It is nearly impossible to look for paid work if you are homeless and hungry. Newstart has not increased in real terms in 24 years, but the cost of essentials has drastically increased. Already there are 3 million people living in poverty in Australia, including over 730,000 children* (<https://www.acoss.org.au/raisetherate/> )

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) supported a raise to the rate in June 2018 yet only a very small number of councils in Victoria are supporting this campaign. Glen Eira can join this national campaign to call for increased income support for our most disadvantaged citizens in the lead up to the Federal election.

### **Future Involvement in the Glen Eira Council Rooming House Strategy**

SHSN members would like to be involved in further consultation on the Strategy and with future implementation where relevant to the community sector, including participation on the proposed Council Working Group. The SHSN can also work with our member agencies to facilitate consultation and engagement with rooming house residents in the next stage of the Strategy finalisation. In addition, the SHSN can provide advice on homelessness services and policies, including statistics and how the service system operates which may be of use to Council in its future work on addressing the rooming house category of homelessness.

For further information please contact the SHSN Coordinator, Ruth Gordon on 0437 569 609 or email [ruth.gordon@laucnhhousing.org.au](mailto:ruth.gordon@laucnhhousing.org.au)