

Southern Homelessness Services Network

Submission to the

**Rooming House
Lived Experience
Project -
Commissioner for
Residential
Tenancies**

2022



SHSN

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 areas and covering the local government areas of Bayside, Cardinia, Casey, Frankston, Glen Eira, Greater Dandenong, Kingston, Mornington Peninsula, Port Phillip and Stonnington – see Figure 1).

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.

The SHSN joined the Rooming House Lived Experience Project (RHLEP) as a project partner in recognition of the importance to our members of reviewing and improving rooming house issues.

Figure 1 Map of Melbourne’s Southern Region Local Government Areas



2. Rooming Houses and the Homelessness Service System

2.1 Rooming houses in the Southern Region of Melbourne

There are 386 registered rooming houses in the Southern region of Melbourne as well as numerous un-registered rooming houses. The Southern region has some local government areas with very high numbers of registered rooming houses including:

- Greater Dandenong (108)
- Frankston (79)
- Port Phillip (51)
- Stonnington (51)
- Casey (46)
- Glen Eira (31)

This comprises mainly privately run rooming houses but also several community housing agencies providing community managed rooming houses such as Housing First, St Kilda Community Housing, Launch Housing, Wayss and YWCA. It is difficult to determine how many of these private rooming houses in the Southern region are used by vulnerable people

2.2 Use of rooming houses by Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS)

Several of our member agencies run homelessness entry point services, providing access to the Specialist Homelessness Service system in each local area. The entry point services receive Housing Establishment Funds (HEF) from the Victorian Government to use as brokerage to purchase emergency accommodation for clients in need. HEF funds can be used to pay for a client's first week or two weeks rent in advance in rooming houses which are often used as emergency accommodation by entry point services that have no other accommodation options to refer clients to. Most entry points will only use registered rooming houses (registered with Consumer Affairs Victorian – CAV).

Rooming houses are part of the limited suite of housing options available to many vulnerable and poor people whether referred by the SHS or other services or they find their own way. SHS entry points often refer clients to rooming houses as there are no other suitable housing options in the Southern region of Melbourne. In addition, referrals to rooming houses in the South can come from other regions and other sectors including prisons and hospitals.

HEF is also used for purchasing hotel and motel accommodation for clients. HEF was used extensively during COVID to purchase motel and hotel accommodation particularly for rough sleepers during the COVID pandemic lockdown periods in Victoria. Most entry points did not refer to rooming houses during this period because of the increased health risk of shared facilities during the pandemic. Increased HEF funding during the pandemic also allowed for purchase of better quality motels/hotels, especially as this accommodation was not being used by travellers due to the pandemic. The Victorian Government increased the HEF funds to cover the pandemic use of hotels and motels. HEF funding has since returned to previous rates in 2022 and entry point services have returned to using rooming houses to refer clients experiencing homelessness when no other options are available.

Our colleague networks, the Northern and Western Homelessness Networks, have advocated extensively on these issues in their "Crisis in Crisis" campaign and reports which include a raft of learnings and recommendations of relevance to this inquiry. As the "Crisis in Crisis II"¹ report said -

¹ Northern and Western Homelessness Networks, 2021 "Crisis in Crisis II: A Way Forward Report of the Crisis Accommodation Option Project"

The Sector lacks alternatives to private rooming houses, despite those in use by the Sector perceived as being unsuitable, unaffordable and unsafe by both clients and staff (Northern and Western Homelessness Networks, 2021:ix).

Although rooming houses are widely used and the HEF program enables the use of rooming houses by the homelessness sector, rooming houses are far from ideal housing for our client group. The sector uses rooming houses because there are few other options. Anecdotally, the sector knows that some clients prefer to sleep rough than live in rooming houses given the costs and safety concerns.

It is important to reiterate at the beginning of this submission that rooming houses (boarding houses) are considered as a category of homelessness by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)² with socio-economically disadvantaged people living in rooming houses with shared facilities counted as homeless in the Australian Census Homelessness Estimates. Under the ABS homelessness definition, boarding (rooming) houses are considered as a category of homelessness primarily because they lack privacy, do not have exclusive use of kitchen and bathroom facilities and space for social relations and if residents lack accommodation alternatives due to their income³.

So in placing SHS clients in rooming houses, our services are only moving people from one category of homelessness to another category rather than ending a person's homelessness.

2.3 Support programs for rooming house residents in the Southern Region

There are a number of small programs providing outreach support to rooming house residents in the Southern region of Melbourne. Most of these programs only have one or two staff. These include:

- Community Connection Programs (CCP) with varying outreach to rooming houses -
 - Star Health – inner South – CCP and insecure housing outreach program – Glen Eira, Port Phillip, Stonnington
 - Access Care (Kingston Council) – Kingston and Bayside
 - Peninsula Health – Frankston and Mornington Peninsula
 - ERMHA – Casey, Cardinia and Greater Dandenong
- Bolton Clarke Homeless Persons Program – varying outreach to rooming houses in Greater Dandenong, Rosebud, Frankston, Cheltenham and St Kilda
- Peninsula Community Legal Centre (PCLC) Rooming House Outreach Program – one outreach worker across 17 Southern and Eastern local government areas
- The Salvation Army Rosebud Rooming House Outreach Program.

In addition, Wayss and Casey Council previously funded a rooming house outreach worker in the City of Casey, but this has now ceased.

Launch Housing has a Housing Options worker across the Northern and Southern regions of Melbourne. This role has capacity to follow up complaints about rooming houses and investigate on behalf of Launch Housing. The Housing Options Worker works with rooming house operators in an attempt to bring their properties up to an acceptable standard for Launch Housing clients. The Housing Options Worker shares information about problematic rooming houses from with other entry points in their catchments. This role does not provide support to residents.

The Victorian Government introduced the High Risk Accommodation Response (HRAR) program during the COVID pandemic in recognition of the poor health status of people living in precarious housing including rooming houses. The HRAR program was a state-wide program which covered rooming houses and other forms of high risk accommodation. The core functions included community

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Information Paper – A Statistical Definition of Homelessness", 2012:23)

³ As above, page 13

engagement, prevention and preparedness and support for COVID outbreaks in high risk accommodation. This included vaccination promotion to residents. The HRAR program seems to have tapered off as vaccination increased and the pandemic settled in Victoria.

2.4 What do our consumers tell us about rooming houses?

The SHSN ran a Consumer Survey⁴ in 2019 to gain feedback from service users on a range of issues. The survey did not specifically survey consumers about rooming houses, however the following issues were raised in the Survey by consumers.

Consumers who mention rooming houses found them to be dangerous and frightening –

[While waiting for a service or a program] - This was too long, seven to eight weeks then months for a THM, I was residing in a rooming house with my children, sleeping in one double bed. There were drug addicts, people fighting, it was awful (SHSN Consumer Survey Report, 2019:9).

Regulation of rooming houses - I got assaulted a couple of times. And many were dumps (SHSN Consumer Survey Report, 2019:12)

Private rooming houses were the least preferred type of housing in the SHSN Consumer Survey with only 2% of survey respondents preferring rooming houses (private). The most preferred housing was private rental (40%) and public housing (30%) (SHSN Consumer Survey Report, 2019:11).

Rooming house ranked lowest on this consumer's housing preferences -

I want transitional housing and then private rental shared and then rooming house (SHSN Consumer Survey Report, 2019:11).

2.5 SHSN Rooming House Summit 2019

In response to our members constantly raising problems with rooming houses in the Southern Region, the SHSN held a Rooming House Summit on 2 April 2019. Many of the issues raised in the Summit are still relevant today. Over 100 people from across the South participated in the Summit, including Heather Holst, Commissioner for Residential Tenancies. Summit participants included local councils, support agencies, entry point services and rooming house residents.

⁴ Southern Homelessness Services Network "Consumer Survey Report" 2019
<https://www.shsnetwork.online/consumer-participation>

The Summit made the following recommendations:

SHSN Rooming House Summit 2019 Recommendations

- Recommendation 1:** That the State Government (CAV or DHHS) fund the development of a standardised accommodation ratings system for private rooming house providers.
- 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.
- 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
- 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.
- Recommendation 5:** That local governments be adequately resourced to inspect suspected unregistered rooming houses.
- 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.
- Recommendation 7:** That homelessness agencies continue to work collaboratively to use their Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) bargaining power to lift standards of accommodation.

The Summit Outcomes Report is attached for your information. Unfortunately, advocacy on addressing many of these issues was suspended due to COVID. The SHSN welcomes the opportunity to review issues relating to rooming houses as part of this inquiry by the Commissioner for Residential Tenancies. In addition, the SHSN commends the Commissioner for being inclusive of people with lived experience in rooming houses and seeking their views in this inquiry process.

3. SHSN response to questions for support services

The SHSN ran a consultation session with support agencies working in rooming houses and entry points from the South. 13 people participated in the consultations including rooming house outreach staff from across the Southern Region and entry point staff. Many of these staff have years of experience in the rooming house space – both private and community managed rooming houses. Participants work across all local council areas in the Southern Region from inner, middle and outer South.

Participants in the consultation unanimously agreed that all of the recommendations from the 2019 SHSN Rooming House Summit remain relevant today, three years after the Summit.

The main part of this submission is based on the “questions for resident support services and others” in the Commissioner’s call for submissions (original question numbers in brackets).

3.1 What do residents tell you about their experiences of living in rooming houses? (10)

Support services in the Southern region report the following experiences from rooming house residents who they support:

- lack of safety
- lack of oversight from relevant authorities - properties not always compliant with minimum standards despite being registered
- tenants looking at rooming houses as a short term fix for their housing needs and often become stuck due to lack of alternative housing options and poverty
- experiences differ depending on the type of rooming house
- residents report feeling despair, depression, lack of motivation, fear of reprisals from landlord and other residents.
- cost of rooming houses is highly variable and this can trap residents in a cycle of poverty - high cost, especially compared to Jobseeker allowance
- perception that rooming houses are affordable housing when it is not affordable
- substandard housing - poor temp control - recent heat and heat stress an issue of safety, windows are often inadequate and let in cold in winter and heat in summer
- conflict with other residents some of whom who have mental health (often severe and untreated) conditions and alcohol and other drug use.

You do notice at times it can be quite a strong “community” often with residents looking after vulnerable (but likable) residents. Can be at times a better place to be. Had a client who was palliative care with no family, and other residents managed to support this client when he was in need. Ironically he had an offer for public housing during this period and (I believe rightly) chose to stay there until he passed as he had better supports around him.

Main issues reported by clients of others are around behaviour, alcohol and drug use by other residents. No surprises, just that constant challenge of managing their own difficulties in this environment is extremely hard, especially AOD or mental health.

3.2 Are there common problems that are reported to you? (11)

Support services in the Southern region report the following common problems from rooming house residents they support and from their own observations visiting rooming houses:

- living conditions differ depending on which area of the market the rooming house caters to
- most challenging is that there is no lead tenant or on-site management so only option is the manager/proprietor. After hours, this can be very difficult

- some entry point services report that they can't access rooming houses for clients very often now as rooming houses are full and/or rooming houses are closed down. This leaves fewer options for clients approaching entry points
- problematic alcohol and other drug use in and around the accommodation settings including communal areas such as bathrooms
- lack of support once residents accommodated – very few funded programs to provide support to rooming house residents
- lack of landlord response/responsibilities particularly conditions at start of tenancy
- limited finances for basics - food, clothing, transport after paying high rent costs. Residents rely on emergency relief vouchers and fresh food offers through agencies and have no spare money to for socio-economic participation or activities that provide quality of life
- limited or no outreach services accessible during COVID
- proprietors using CCTV including asking resident to check CCTV for reduced rent. CCTV can be used by manager to exclude outreach services from attending premises
- residents feel they do not have a voice and feel helpless to bring about a change in their housing situation.

At times residents that show some "skills" are inappropriately used for "jobs" with little or no pay eg. cleaning out other residents' rooms of hazardous content such as bottles filled with urine with no protective clothing or training, collecting other residents' rent or evicting other residents without training and poor or no payment.

Extreme lack of basic facilities, hygiene is an issue, poor standard of accommodation, pest control, threats of violence directly experienced or the exposure to acts of violence perpetrated on other residents.

3.3 Has your service ever reported a problem? What happened? (12)

Support services in the Southern region report the following issues around reporting problems in rooming houses:

- rooming house providers are often unresponsive to complaints
- often when a problem is reported services and residents have a lack of confidence in the resolution and transparency
- support staff reported having confidentially linked residents with legal services however very limited support in the past for individuals
- resolutions of problems in rooming houses seems to take long time and residents suffer in the meantime
- residents see no action/progress on the issue so feel raising issues again is futile
- outreach services can be limited until the rooming house meets OH&S standards for services to enter premises. This impacts the clients' wellbeing overall and risks client deterioration during this period of service suspension
- Launch Housing reports any feedback or complaints to the Housing Options Worker who follows up. The Housing Options Worker tries to work with the rooming house operator to address complaints and bring the rooming houses that Launch uses up to the expected standards. If issues are not addressed (particularly if these are life threatening such as lack of working smoke alarms), Launch may cease using these rooming houses and share this information with other agencies/networks for their action.

I have not yet made an official complaint as did not know which was the best way to report and to whom

3.4 Are there any impediments to effective oversight or regulation of rooming houses in Victoria? (13)

Support services in the Southern region identified the following impediments to effective oversight and regulation of rooming houses:

- impact on residents if complaints are made:
 - residents may be afraid of reprisal/punitive repercussions if reporting issues
 - residents need someone to advocate for them but they may not know how to contact these services
 - residents are fearful that complaints will have ramifications from other residents
- support staff worried about the complaints system jeopardizing residents' welfare
- confusion across the system as to who does what? ie bud bug infestation. Who regulates what aspects – CAV or Councils? It is confusing for residents, support workers and agencies
- pandemic caused Councils and CAV to reduce outreach to inspect rooming houses. This was insufficient prior to COVID
- lack of urgency from authorities in addressing issues that have great impact on the health, safety and wellbeing of residents
- poorly resourced authorities to enforce regulations and inspect unregistered rooming houses
- little evidence (follow up) to know if action has been taken or noticeable improvements made
- existing regulations are not strong enough including bathroom to resident ratios which should be higher, particularly after the pandemic with the current health focus on hygiene and problems sharing facilities
- homelessness services are loath to report problems as if a rooming house closes down, the residents will need to be found alternative accommodation in a landscape of dwindling options.

Residents are fearful of reprisals, fearful of being targeted in the rooming house and fearful of being homeless

3.5 Have you noticed any changes in living conditions in rooming houses? (14)

Support services in the Southern region have noticed the following changes in the living conditions in rooming houses:

- positive changes include working with proprietors to improve living conditions and amenities
- deterioration in rooming house monitoring and regulation in private sector and some community houses. COVID impact changed this scenario and staff, owners, outreach workers were unable to visit premises. Many operators were left to their own devices
- Increasingly difficult for SHS entry points to find housing options for people aged 24-40 years, with rooming house options decreasing
- food in common areas/spaces is still problematic- ie theft
- no changes noticed over recent years.

No, I feel that this community are hidden and not enough is done to enforce a basic level of safety, hygiene and affordability. Regulations are needing to be enforced, this is the only way that things will change.

3.6 What would improve living conditions in rooming houses? (15)

Support services in the Southern region identified a range of ideas to improve living conditions in rooming houses, including:

Cleaning and maintenance

- regular cleaning of common areas required
- clearing clutter such as discarded furniture and televisions in communal living areas and outside

- consistent maintenance of the building/facilities and gardens
- process for residents to move out and return for larger scale maintenance
- support from Government to provide improvements to rooming houses
- explore options for improved insurance for operators against damage by residents.

Regulation/Standards

- standard of amenities e.g. minimal standards for number of bathrooms to rooms/residents– increase number of bathrooms
- action needs to be taken against the landlord/operator who do not meet regulations
- provision of internet data for residents as a basic utility
- regulations around cleaning requirements, for example using appropriate service to do this rather than a resident or a proprietor's 80+ year old mother
- regulation requirements around either proprietors or lead tenants having needing specific training/qualifications such as infection control, tenancy regulations, basic training on health, mental health and substance use, etc
- effective heating and cooling, especially given climate change temperature extremes.

Entry points

- entry points should provide HEF for one week's accommodation and then follow up with client to ensure rooming house is appropriate before providing any further HEF. This would provide an opportunity to check that HEF funds are being allocated to rooming houses that provide suitable accommodation and provide entry points with the opportunity to check in with clients.

Information

provide an information booklet for residents that lists supports, services, food, emergency relief etc relevant to local area, similar to the City of Port Phillip Rooming House Survival Guide

- clear tenancy rights and contracts/leases signed when resident moves into rooming house.

Rooming house as housing for vulnerable people

- commitment from Government to provide more community managed rooming houses as an affordable alternative to expensive and unsuitable private rooming hosues
- more properties catering to differing types of individuals and a range of disabilities
- some clients need to live in more supported environments and these are not available. Establish more supportive housing facilities such as Elizabeth Street Common Ground as an effective Housing First model with long term housing and support
- increased outreach programs to rooming house residents from health services, AOD services, NDIS and mental health services
- increased access to cheap or free food and meals.

Not to fear the landlord closing the accommodation resulting in more homelessness. How can things change without action being taken to bring up the standard of rooming houses? These accommodation settings tend to house the most vulnerable group of individuals in the state of Victoria.

3.7 Additional Question: What does a suitable (good) rooming house look like?

Support services in the Southern region identify the following criteria for better quality rooming houses:

- well-maintained and clean - free from clutter and the furnishings are not worn out
- decent building - structure fit for purpose design
- regular cleaning and prompt maintenance
- higher standards of communal areas
- better furniture in the rooms
- a balance of residents - where possible screening of any new residents to ensure that the accommodation is suitable, and the residents feel connected and valued
- caters for vulnerable marginalised clients not only students, travellers
- ideally, have a self-contained room with bathroom/toilet and kitchenette and enough room for a small couch/living space as well as a shared kitchen and communal living area.
 - own self-contained bathroom is essential for privacy (especially with COVID)
 - Minimum facilities of fridge and microwave or full kitchenette preferred
- well run, secure, consistent, secure tenure, sense of ownership
- doesn't look like a rooming house - looks like all the other houses in the street with gardens tended to and broken furniture and rubbish not left in gardens
- adequate common area spaces, secured rooms, kept gardens
- affordable and quality options for people on Jobseeker payments – affordability regulated in a similar way to public and community housing with a percentage of income as payment
- incentives/Government programs that encourage proprietors to work with residents and other organisations, to introduce community programs e.g. community garden on site, communal cooking, health and wellbeing programs, etc
- have your own exit door rather than having to exit through the rooming house main door
- limit of rooms, ie maximum of 10 rooms for private rooming houses as easier to manage
- separate women's and men's rooming houses - can be unsafe for women at times
- some real estate agents are managing rooming houses. The real estate agents have oversight of the properties and manage them well
- need more community rooming house stock and more social housing overall. Some local government areas have very few safe affordable housing options apart from problematic rooming houses such as Glen Eira.

In summary quality rooming houses have the following:

- clean, safe, quiet and secure
- appropriate support services available for those who need it
- maintenance issues addressed promptly
- onsite staff presence – regular visits onsite or staff based onsite
- space - the more space per tenant, the better
- private bathrooms
- ability for provider to act on unsafe/aggressive behaviours
- affordable on Jobseeker allowance

Good quality fitting and gardens - if a high standard property is provided, renters will respect. One woman showed me a picture she had taken of her rooming house and she was so proud because it was a nice building in a nice street⁵.

⁵ Southern Homelessness Services Network "Submission on the Social Housing Regulation Review Interim Report", 2022:13 <https://www.shsnetwork.online/projects-submissions>

4. SHSN Conclusions and Recommendations

The SHSN consultation findings on rooming house issues can be summarised as:

- general inappropriateness of private rooming houses for vulnerable people
- issues around communal living – sharing bathroom and kitchen facilities
- un-affordability, particularly on Jobseeker allowance, leaving residents little money for basics such as food
- poor safety and security
- poor quality accommodation
- confusing regulation and oversight with little perceived follow through
- fear from residents in pursuing their residential rights
- poor behaviour of landlords ranging from not meeting rooming house regulations to exploitation of residents
- need to learn from COVID experience – health implications of sharing bathroom facilities
- lack of suitable alternative accommodation options for people experiencing homelessness for use by homelessness services.

Rooming houses are used by the SHS because there are few other suitable options. The private market has developed private rooming houses as a response to this market gap. A market response is generally focussed on maximising profits to the landlords/operators rather than providing an accommodation service that meets the needs of residents and is affordable for those on income support payments.

A well-planned and well-funded response to accommodation for vulnerable people is required - designed by people with lived experience, the community sector and Government rather than a market response. Tinkering around the edges to improve rooming houses will alleviate some problems. However, the fundamental issue is that rooming house accommodation (particularly private) does not meet the accommodation needs of the majority of people experiencing homelessness. Continued use of rooming houses perpetuates homelessness by placing people in a different homelessness category, rather than ending their homelessness by providing safe, appropriate and affordable housing.

4.1 Recommendations

The SHSN understands that rooming houses will continued to be used by the SHS and our member agencies as there are limited suitable alternative options. Given this context, the SHSN makes the following recommendations to the Commissioner for Residential Tenancies as part of the Lived Experience Rooming House Project:

1. Compliance and oversight of rooming houses

It is the Victorian Government's responsibility to ensure consumers can be confident in the rooming house product residents are renting in a regulated market - confidence that the rooming house will provide safe, secure and appropriate accommodation to a certain standard. And the Victorian Government should have adequate authority and resourcing to follow up where the product does not meet the regulated standards.

Recommendation 1. The Victorian Government should establish a single streamlined authority for monitoring and regulation of rooming houses to monitor and enforce compliance and to adequately respond to complaints.

This would include simplified rooming house regulation responsibilities to avoid the current confusion between CAV and local governments. The new authority should have the resources to monitor regulation effectively, including resources for annual inspection of every registered rooming house and to conduct ad hoc spot inspections to ensure regulations are adhered to. This should include a strengthened complaints process with easier mechanisms for rooming house residents to ensure their tenancy rights are upheld.

Recommendation 2. The Victorian Government should consider higher registration/operator licencing fees for private rooming house operators

These fees could be determined on the number of rooming houses being managed or by other factors such as turnover. These fee increases could fund increased outreach support services for residents. The current rooming house operator's licence sits at \$239.10⁶.

2. Standards/quality of rooming house accommodation

Poor quality rooming house accommodation that does not meet an adequate community standards of housing puts residents' health and safety at risk, especially with consideration of the high price paid for private rooming houses. In addition, the sharing of bathroom facilities in rooming houses is a continued source of conflict and safety concern for residents as well as a health risk highlighted through the COVID pandemic.

Recommendation 3. Raise the minimum standards of rooming houses to ensure security, safety and quality of rooming house accommodation including increasing the ratio of bathrooms to residents.

Recommendation 4. Resourcing to the rooming house sector to convert to self-contained accommodation in recognition of health impact of shared facilities from COVID.

As part of the contract for receipt of Government funding to convert to self-contained accommodation, private operators must make this converted accommodation available to vulnerable people, preferably through the SHS.

3. Rooming House Affordability

Rooming houses rents in the Southern Region are usually priced at between \$220-250 per week per resident. Members report that some rooming house operators only seek clients on Aged or Disability Support Pensions who have a higher income than those on Jobseeker allowance. Advocating for price control so that rooming house residents are not paying more than 30% of their income in rent would make private rooming house accommodation affordable for people on the lowest incomes. In addition, making it harder for private operators to make large profits from rooming houses may limit the numbers of unscrupulous operators. This may require a subsidy for operators offering rooming houses to people on low incomes to make up the difference.

Recommendation 5. Explore options to increase the affordability of rooming house accommodation

Offering these subsidies and incentives such as in recommendations 4, 5 and 9 may encourage/enable more operators to provide quality accommodation for the SHS client group and would also provide for some level of accountability for operators in receipt of these incentives and subsidies.

⁶ <https://www.consumer.vic.gov.au/licensing-and-registration/rooming-house-operators/fees-for-rooming-house-operators>

4. Rooming houses and the Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) Sector

Recommendation 6. The Victorian Government should increase the number of outreach support staff across Melbourne to support the health and wellbeing of rooming houses residents and additional outreach staff to support residents to make complaints and address legal issues.

Recommendation 7. The Victorian Government should increase the number of funded housing options workers across metro Melbourne to investigate complaints from SHS clients and staff (one per metropolitan region, four staff in total).

The rooming house outreach staff and the housing options worker roles should link with an improved complaints process (see Recommendation 1).

Recommendation 8. The Victorian Government should review its HEF guidelines for the SHS to exclude use of unregistered rooming houses and registered rooming houses that do not meet the regulations or endanger residents. This should be linked with the Housing Options Worker role.

5. Support for rooming house operators to improve their housing offer

Recommendation 9. The Victorian Government explore incentives for ethical private rooming house operators who provide a quality rooming house for use by the SHS to improve/maintain their rooming house stock.

Incentives for ethical private rooming house operators could include:

- grants or no interest loans programs
- discounts on Government services or utility running costs
- financial support to move to renewable energy such as installation of solar panels and water tanks (rooming house operators in the South report the increasing cost of energy as an issue for sustainability of their business model).

Incentives could be for improved heating/cooling (to provide for the challenges of climate change), adding additional bathroom facilities or other renovations to lift the quality of rooming houses and improving the safety and appropriateness of private rooming house stock for SHS clients. Receipt of these incentives should include the allocation of improved stock specifically to SHS clients or people on the lowest incomes.

6. Increased social housing for people experiencing homelessness

Recommendation 10. Increase social housing stock for vulnerable people including people at risk of or experiencing homelessness and people in crisis in need of emergency accommodation.

This includes increasing community managed rooming house stock (with self-contained accommodation) and increasing social housing stock for the lowest income cohorts. This recommendation recognises that currently the majority of private rooming houses used by the SHS are not affordable or appropriate and that social housing is best placed to meet the needs of most people experiencing homelessness.

Recommendation 11. The Victorian Government provide better crisis accommodation options for vulnerable people (including youth, families, the elderly and people with disabilities and mental health issues) so that Specialist Homelessness Services do not have to use private rooming houses for emergency accommodation.

4.2 Conclusion

Use of rooming houses by the SHS is complex - the SHS is in a “Catch 22” – where action to address poor conditions in rooming houses may reduce dwindling accommodation options for clients. However, we need to remember that placing people in unsafe and unaffordable rooming houses only perpetuates their disadvantage, and continues, rather than ends their homelessness.

We look forward to the findings of this inquiry and further action to improve rooming houses as an affordable, safe and appropriate housing options for people experiencing homelessness or with no other housing options. We look forward to further consultation with the SHS and further listening to the lived experience of rooming house residents in future work.

People’s lives depend on action to improve rooming house conditions. The SHSN hopes that the Rooming House Lived Experience Project is the first step in an effort to address these critical issues.