

# **T R A N S C R I P T**

## **SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE 2026 COMMONWEALTH GAMES BID**

### **Inquiry into the 2026 Commonwealth Games Bid**

Ballarat – Wednesday 14 February 2024

#### **MEMBERS**

David Limbrick – Chair

Joe McCracken – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

David Davis

Jacinta Ermacora

Michael Galea

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

**WITNESSES**

Michelle Twigger, Network Coordinator, and

Jerry Ham, Chair, Central Highlands Homelessness Alliance; and

Adam Liversage, Member, Central Highlands Homelessness Alliance, and Chair, Wimmera Homelessness Alliance.

**The CHAIR:** We will now resume the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2026 Commonwealth Games Bid. Welcome.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, can you please state your name and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** My name is Michelle Twigger, and I am here appearing on behalf of the Central Highlands Homelessness Alliance.

**Jerry HAM:** My name is Jerry Ham, and I am here representing the Central Highlands Homelessness Alliance and Uniting.

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** Hi. I am Adam Liversage, also representing the Central Highlands Homelessness Alliance as well as the Wimmera Homelessness Alliance, and I am from Uniting Ballarat.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Very good to meet you. I will just briefly introduce the committee members that are present. I am David Limbrick, the Chair.

**Michael GALEA:** G'day. I am Michael Galea, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Tom McIntosh, Eastern Victoria.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria.

**Joe McCRACKEN:** Joe McCracken, Western Victoria.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** And Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** We would welcome you to make your opening comments and ask that they be kept to around about 10 minutes. Thank you. Please go ahead.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** Okay. I am going to make the comments, and obviously Jerry and Adam are very knowledgeable in this space, so they will be available to respond to questions as you direct them.

**The CHAIR:** Great.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** I am here to address item (e):

the timeline, progress and budget of the Victorian Government's regional infrastructure and housing build as well as the level of need for social and affordable housing in the area, the areas most in need and the appropriate mix of housing and support services.

The CHHA represents 11 agencies funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing to support those people experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness and family violence. It facilitates cross-agency collaboration and advocacy to end homelessness across the Central Highlands region. We collectively adopt the Housing First principles – that experiences of homelessness should only ever be brief, once-off and non-recurring, and that every person is equally entitled to a home. The agencies of the CHHA are Uniting, the Salvation Army, CatholicCare, Berry Street, CAFS, Wintringham, McAuley, Grampians Community Health, Ballarat Community Health, WRISC Family Violence Support and Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-op. And four of these agencies also form the WHA, the Wimmera Homelessness Alliance.

When people present to our agencies experiencing homelessness, our role is to provide safe, appropriate support to prevent or address homelessness. This may include accessing crisis accommodation in the short term while we work with clients to find and sustain their home. Services collaborate closely to ensure we provide the best pathway for the client within the funding regimes. Across the board CHHA and WHA agencies are reporting unprecedented increases in demand for support, with fewer and fewer options for crisis, short-term and long-term housing, with little or no increase in funding to cover the costs of providing support, resources and emergency funding and to meet basic needs – human needs – for shelter and safety.

The 2021 ABS census identified 638 people who were homeless in the Ballarat LGA, at a rate of 5.8 per 1000 people compared with 4.7 for the state. We know this number has increased in the past two years. In the rankings of most disadvantaged suburbs and localities in the state in the 2021 census, the socio-economic index listed two Ballarat suburbs, Wendouree and Sebastopol, in the 20 most disadvantaged suburbs, while none made the 20 most advantaged. Ballarat East scored the lowest indicator, of one out of 10, in the index of relative socio-economic disadvantage. That measures low income, education and skills, employment and home ownership. In Ballarat there is around a 1 per cent private rental vacancy rate, and the affordability rate is just as dire. With the lowest rental areas of Sebastopol and Redan costing \$394 a week, homeless people and those on Centrelink payments or low incomes generally do not pass the oversubscribed application process and cannot afford the rent for the few rentals available. The data reflects the situation across the region, where all our crisis and transitional accommodation designed for stays of one night to three months is now full, with people who have been there for up to two, three or four years because there are no accommodation options and we do not exit people into homelessness.

In the Wimmera, recognising there is no outreach support for people sleeping rough, Uniting repurposed funds to employ a Street to Home assertive outreach worker until June 2024. That worker now supports over 106 people around Horsham and the region sleeping rough. Yet a special request for ongoing funding for this program and to also expand the small Central Highlands program that is based in Ballarat was unsuccessful, so we will reapply for funds in the next budget round. These workers are overstretched and now assist families with young children living in tents, despite the funding criteria excluding families. This illustrates that the responsibility falls on agencies to triage need and reallocate resources and funds from already stretched programs to plug service gaps. Uniting is also piloting an assertive outreach worker to work with young people sleeping rough, because this is a demographic that all agencies are now seeing alarming increases in.

Without these accommodation options, agencies in both regions regularly resort to handing out tents, swags, blow-up mattresses and sleeping bags, including to teenagers and families with young children. We place some people, including children, in unsuitable hotels, motels and lodging house accommodation, but this exacerbates the trauma and depletes the limited emergency relief funding. These are not solutions, nor are they safe or acceptable forms of accommodation, and they constitute a violation of our values, purpose and obligations as a community. This takes a toll on vulnerable populations, and workers are overworked and overwhelmed, with a sense of frustration and distress at the inability to help clients and achieve positive outcomes. If we could intervene early and house people before they become homeless, their trauma and need for our services and multiple other health and financial supports would be minimised, as would the cost to the community.

As the inquiry is aware, Ballarat was one of the regional hubs where housing was originally planned to be built, and therefore the region would benefit from the games legacy infrastructure programs. To quote the original games pledge, the package is made up of a \$1 billion regional housing fund that the government says will deliver 1300 new social and affordable homes. In the October select committee inquiry the Homes Victoria CEO stated that:

... in the Central Highlands ... Homes Victoria has 3285 dwellings. There are 1459 on the priority waitlist... with the big build we have got 211 that are in progress and will come on line in the next couple of years ... the 1300 homes will also be on top of that.

However, we are concerned about the time line, progress and budget of the Victorian government's regional infrastructure and housing build. 1300 homes statewide are simply not enough. At the end of September 2023 the Homes Victoria website showed that the VHR priority waiting list had over 3500 people in the Central Highlands, with 385 priority-listed in the Wimmera. The stated 211 planned builds are insufficient for the existing waitlist, and 1300 homes would barely meet the shortfall in the Central Highlands and Wimmera regions, let alone the state. We need the rapid provision of adequate and appropriate new homes now, not in a couple of years. Not only do we need a short-term housing plan but we also need a longer term housing plan to meet future housing needs of the region, especially over the next 10 years. Housing alone does not address the problem. To resolve homelessness requires that housing is sustained with wraparound long-term flexible support. This requires flexible eligibility criteria, brokerage funds and enough support workers with the resources to meet the complexity of the needs of people who have experienced the trauma of homelessness and family violence to enable them to overcome challenges, remain housed and participate in the community. So we urgently request that those responsible for delivering housing from the Commonwealth Games legacy take account of the unmet demand for social housing and support services across the Central Highlands and Wimmera and that housing outcomes are delivered rapidly, that housing built through the legacy is high quality and amenable to individual and family wellbeing, that there is funding for sufficient trauma-trained workers across the homelessness and family violence support needs spectrum, that services are resourced to deliver support and that there are brokerage funds to assist people to establish their homes.

Our experience and the VHR application list tells us we need two- and three-bedroom safe furnished houses for families in crisis or escaping violence; we need two-, three- and four-bedroom quality long-term homes with yards for families that are close to community and schools; we need purpose-built single-bedroom housing for young people close to youth-appropriate supports and transport links; we need purpose-built accessible single-room housing for older people close to supports and transport; and we need the housing to be allocated according to demand across the regional centres, suburbs and towns so people can remain in and be part of their local community.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Ms Twigger, you mentioned during your evidence just now the increasing demand that is happening. What are the factors driving that increase in demand?

**Michelle TWIGGER:** There are a number of factors, and probably Adam, because he runs the crisis services, is better placed to answer this. But one of the big increasing factors is the fact that the availability of housing has dried up as people have been pushed further to the regions from the city, and this is anecdotal of course. The housing builds have not been happening. I think Victoria has the least number of public housing builds per capita of any state, and I think it is probably because of long-term decisions that were made 15 years ago to rely on the private sector perhaps more than should be. But just the fact that that demand has increased has forced up the price of renting a house, so there is not the availability of homes. We have seen a big population surge in the region and into the regions. As I mentioned, in Horsham they once said they did not have a homelessness problem. We have now located 106 people in six months who were sleeping rough.

**The CHAIR:** We have heard evidence already that a lot of that was driven by, now it would seem, permanent workplace changes during the pandemic, where people discovered they could work from home and questioned why they were living in the city and many people moved to regional areas. You were saying part of that population shift to the regional areas has caused that, along with other factors around crisis, which I imagine is a totally different factor.

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** Yes. It has certainly impacted. When you look at Ballarat at the moment, you are sitting on a 1 per cent vacancy rate and affordability rates are just as dire. If you are in Ballarat right now and you are on JobSeeker or youth allowance, you cannot afford one single private rental in this particular region, and it is much worse up in the Wimmera as well. I think that that vacancy rate and affordability rate is also a lot less than it is in Ballarat.

We are also seeing an increase in presentations. Obviously it was quite high pre-COVID, but it has certainly increased over COVID as well. Those presenting as victims of family violence are really significant. For people exiting the prison system as well there are just no options. Those with significant mental health issues or

alcohol and drug-taking behaviour are also impacted. The lack of housing is huge. Michelle touched on the amount of rough sleepers. Currently we have about 30 rough sleepers in the Ballarat CBD, around 100 around the Central Highlands and 106 in the Wimmera region. Their mental health really does deteriorate quite significantly, almost to a point where, once they are housed, they have no ability to even maintain housing because it has deteriorated so much.

There are lots of reasons as to why people are presenting as homeless, and they are the main reasons. Probably family violence still sits at your number one reason, but that sits obviously alongside the affordability rates in the rental market and the vacancy rates et cetera. There are lots of reasons why they are presenting.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I have spoken with councils in my electorate of South-Eastern Metro, and some of them have reported that they actually find it difficult to collect homelessness figures because many of the people that they would consider homeless – in fact one council I spoke to said that actually the largest group of homeless people was not the people visible on the street; it was actually women with children, and they were couch surfing with friends. They were not sleeping on the streets, they were in this invisible place where they might be staying with friends or family or whatever, but they are still homeless. Do you think you have good visibility on how that is working and how many of those people there are in that sort of situation?

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** Yes, absolutely. Our entry point is quite aware of that. And you are right, there is the hidden homelessness aspect of homelessness as well, especially amongst women and children and in particular young people as well. They are in really vulnerable positions, and they are doing all kinds of things to be able to sleep on someone's sofa that are just unimaginable for any of us with children and wives and families. We do not like to think about that. But, like you said, there are people sleeping in caravans at the back of properties, there are people sleeping in tents at the back of properties, and at friends' houses; they are doing whatever they can. All across our hotels and motels at the moment in Ballarat – we are down to four hotels at the moment that we can place people in, and we are placing people who are in really vulnerable positions as well. There are people who are working who have been squeezed out of the rental market who are paying for themselves in hotels and motels and caravan parks as well. They cannot access the rental market and other housing options.

**Jerry HAM:** Yes. All those experiences that you mentioned are part of the definition of homelessness. It is not just that obvious rough sleeping, although that is obviously at the very extreme end of it, but it is couch surfing, it is staying with friends, it is continuing to stay in an inappropriate family environment where there may be domestic violence occurring as well. Our entry point or access point is part of the statewide funded approach to receiving people who are either in immediate crisis because they are absolutely homeless on that night or they are experiencing the vulnerability of their housing situation. So we collect data through that service and, along with a couple of other agencies, cover really all the data across the Central Highlands, so really through that data we are able to record what people's circumstances are at the point they access our services. That information is available to us, and that does then get below the surface of what is visible either to the general public, the community or the local council.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will pass to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for joining us today. It is a most interesting presentation. Ms Twigger, in your opening remarks you mentioned the \$1 billion housing package as part of the regional legacy benefits. It was really good to hear your perspective on what sort of housing is needed to be built for different particular types of people, especially different types of vulnerable people. I am curious about the experience that your organisation has. As a committee we will be making various findings and recommendations to government. From the perspective of how the government can best deliver new homes that will actually make a difference, particularly in regional areas – I know you have spoken about the experience of the Wimmera and Horsham going from almost nothing to a huge increase – what specifically for regional communities, but also more in a region like Central Highlands, should the government keep in mind, and what should it be doing specifically to make sure that that building is actually done as effectively as possible?

**Michelle TWIGGER:** Thanks for your question. Definitely there are shires, particularly out towards Wimmera, but even in Ballarat, where there is a will and the councils have been very supportive and they have reached out to try and access housing in those areas, for example, the Yarriambiack shire. What they have done to meet this need immediately is they have actually put in transportable homes in some of those outer towns. Again, they were unsuccessful in getting the funding they needed, but I think it is about engaging with the

councils and being flexible around the types of properties that are being built, so looking and turning towards homes of quality that can be erected quickly, but I do think engaging with and listening to the local councils and finding out what those needs are. You know, we have land in Ballarat that is earmarked for building on, but the buildings are slow to evolve. So it is about how you can work with councils to speed up approval processes.

I would like to hand over, because I do think Jerry and Adam probably have a lot to contribute.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you.

**Jerry HAM:** Thank you, Michelle. I might add: all of the agencies that we represent and we as Uniting have departments or parts of the businesses which are registered housing providers or housing associations, so there are a lot of community housing organisations out there that really know the answer on the bricks and mortar side around the design, the quality, the standards of that housing, the best configuration, the volumes, the density in different locations. All of our agencies would be able to provide plenty of information around that.

Our representation is primarily around the needs of the people that are coming in in crisis and seeing us, so the comments that Michelle referred to – we are seeing that there are, for example, single people; there is not a lot of access to accommodation that suits single people. That does not typically hit the development box, because it does not necessarily generate the right return and volume. So that is part of the picture. But we also mentioned really two- and three-bedroom safe houses; single people with young families as well are very much in that mix of those that are presenting to us. So outside of what is known, those housing associations, I would focus on those. They need to be in community locations as well so that they are part of the community once they are established – they are close to transport, they are near to shopping centres and they can engage well and integrate into those community settings and not be isolated. We are certainly not here wanting to present or create new ghettos or silos of people who are in social or affordable housing types. I think there needs to be a mix.

Our overall message is the demand is huge, so anything is welcome, and there is quite a diverse mix of designs and types that are suited, but particularly those single-bedroom or two-bedroom properties.

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** Yes, and I think on the other side – and Jerry touched on that really well and thoroughly – is the support component as well that the government has got to consider. You are working with some really complex people out there who are heavily traumatised, with lots of social issues as well, so it is not just about moving people into a house or their long-term home, it is the support that they actually need to sustain those tenancies and make those correct referral pathways so they can sustain tenancies, so they can engage in local community. We have got a supportive housing team, Street to Home, at the moment that work with rough sleepers when they get their long-term homes, and they are working with people today. They have been there probably six to seven years, and we know if we step away that those tenancies are going to break down. So the support side is just equally as important as the infrastructure side as well.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. I guess, as you say, listening to different experiences as well – if we are not building one big games village in a whole region of Victoria, hopefully that does provide those opportunities to talk to Yarriambiack, Pyrenees, every council in the region, to see what we can actually do most effectively.

**Jerry HAM:** Yes, absolutely.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** And there are properties that are sitting empty; there are properties on the market in these regions. The new tenancy requirements have made a lot of the older homes in the regions not meet the requirements, which is reasonable, but people cannot afford to improve them. For example, in St Arnaud, you might have one rental property but there are 10 properties on the market, and they are on the market because of the maintenance and then the risk of leasing to the lower end of the market. Realistically we cannot ask the private market to carry that. The government could invest in those properties, restore these properties, and they could be added to the housing stock. I think it is about utilising what is sitting empty as well.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you, Chair. We have heard throughout this committee that many legacy items promised are not coming to fruition within acceptable time frames. Do you have any legacy projects which the government has outlined where a commitment has been made or planning has been undertaken and funding has been provided and procurement is taking place or finished?

**Jerry HAM:** No.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** No?

**Michelle TWIGGER:** Not to our knowledge.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** That was a very direct answer.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** Not to our knowledge.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** That is okay. So do you have a forecast on how much additional homelessness may have to be supported by the region by 2026?

**Michelle TWIGGER:** I had the numbers, and I reduced them because my speech was too long.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** No, that is okay. Fire away.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** There has been research by UNSW that identified by electorate the need – and I apologise, I do not have my notes with me; I may get back to you on this. They were talking about the need for 200 to 400 homes in the Ballarat electorate per year to meet the shortfall if we do not address the problem now. You can see that those numbers are nowhere near being met by the current projected builds.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** No, definitely not.

**Jerry HAM:** As we have spoken about, with the figure of people who are experiencing homelessness, the numbers we have, say, through the census, 638 people in Ballarat at 2021, are really only the tip of the iceberg, because that is the identifiable, the visible homelessness. As we have mentioned around housing supply, the housing market conditions have changed considerably. I think in private rental accommodation because of the increasing unaffordability, the move by a lot of landlords now adopting the Airbnb model rather than renting out on long-term leases has affected that market considerably. I think any numbers into that housing supply that could practically and realistically be delivered would be of benefit, really as rapidly as that could happen.

We understand the original commitment around the legacy was obviously for some housing to remain in the region after the games after the accommodation for the village was disbanded. We have mentioned that was going to potentially be on one or two sites. I understand they were not ideal, because of the soil conditions, so were going to be mobile and then moved to appropriate locations. We thought, 'Well, that's great,' because we do need rapid housing and in a diverse range of the local government areas around the Central Highlands, as mentioned. Now I think, with respect, for us the fact the games is not going ahead, it is just: let us cut to the quick then and get to the legacy side of it. Let us just deliver that housing. Because you do not have to have a village in the first place, we can just target where the need is and get that into those areas as quickly as possible.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. I am just going to rewind for a minute. You were talking about houses that are on the market, say, in a certain area and there is only one rental available. Have you approached the housing minister about that idea?

**Michelle TWIGGER:** Not directly. As a Network Coordinator – there are nine of us in the state – I do know that the minister has been approached by my compatriots, and we are still awaiting a response on other matters. Yes, that is a good question – not directly.

**Jerry HAM:** So not directly with the minister, although we have some audiences at times with the minister. What we have done is through the Central Highlands Homelessness Alliance we advocate with the local members. We have met with local members such as Juliana Addison, Michaela Settle and Martha Haylett, and we have represented our needs around that demand to them. We have had conversations with them that they would pass our recommendations on that advocacy directly to the housing minister.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** So how long ago? What is the time frame we are looking at?

**Jerry HAM:** Since the games was cancelled, leading up to the end of last year. We have not met with anyone since the beginning of the year, but we had a series of meetings with the members I have mentioned in the period of October, November and December last year.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** You are voicing your concerns. Are you getting feedback? Are you getting replies?

**Michelle TWIGGER:** Yes. We understand there is a challenge around land and getting the land on which to construct homes. There is that land that is sitting in Delacombe. It is the old sales yard, and it is not deemed hospitable land. My question is: why not? Why has that not been rehabilitated? It is sitting on prime real estate. That land could be really well utilised. It could be restored for the community, and then you would have the land. The fact that it is left in that state is problematic, I would suggest, from a community's perspective regardless. It is the will to perhaps think outside the box and say, 'Why is that land not being rehabilitated and utilised?' It must be worth more than the cost of rehabilitation.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Yes, I agree. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr McIntosh.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Yes, hi. Thanks all for the work that you do. I just want to ask around your workforce: one thing I have always found difficult is people who in their day job are helping others are often putting themselves in a place of financial difficulty. So how is your workforce going with finding affordable homes in the location where they want to work? I mean, one thing we have got is the \$150 million fund around worker accommodation. We have been hearing about the different sorts of workforces, whether it is the health service or, in your case, workers that might look for that. Could you just give some feedback on your workforce and how they are going?

**Jerry HAM:** I am finding it increasingly difficult.

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** Yes, absolutely. In particular it is hard to recruit up into more regional areas like the Wimmera and that because there is no housing availability up there. You know, we know that workers on really good incomes, really good jobs are also finding it difficult to crack the rental market up in that area. We have got staff across our board as well who are also battling to pay their rent. We know that their cost of living has certainly increased as well, to the point where our own workforce is seeking assistance from some of our programs as well to help out with rent, and most recently a worker reached out to assist with some food. So it is really difficult. You know, you are thinking workers on full-time jobs and on okay salaries are battling, so you can imagine what it is like for our consumers and clients who are also coming through our doors. We are seeing a new presentation as well, an entry point to homelessness. I think it is about 43 per cent of our households that are new this financial year – 43 per cent – so almost half our presentations are new clients coming in through our doors. We have seen over 800 people so far through our homelessness entry point, and of those who are primarily homeless 560 of those 800 are actually homeless.

Our private rental assistance package program at the moment has seen an increase of people coming in experiencing rental arrears as well, so 65 per cent of those presentations are in rental arrears. That program is funded at about \$805,000 a year. They are already projecting to run into a \$60,000 surplus this year because they cannot keep up with the demand. That private rental assistance package program is a really great brief intervention program that is sustaining tenancies, saving dollars and stopping people falling back into the homelessness system.

**Jerry HAM:** Of that 43 per cent there that you mention, Adam, the new demographic we are seeing is working families, though. That is people who are employed but it is a low-income situation, and they are struggling to secure or keep accommodation, and then that is now overlapping with our workforce absolutely. So that is an issue, because we have a very, very committed and dedicated workforce, but you add in the struggle that they are now beginning to experience for themselves and that really does put stress into the system that we are providing.



**Michelle TWIGGER:** And I think what is tangible is the increased stress of the people presenting because they are re-presenting. So the concept that you found yourself at risk of homelessness through a relationship breakdown or a loss of a job and presented to an entry point and they were able to assist you short term while you sorted your life and then you found a rental and then you would have your life sorted within two to four weeks or whatever, that does not exist anymore. The people who are presenting, on the day that they present the chances are the workers are already full for the day, so we cannot assist you on the first day. You may get some assistance in the form that they might be able to find you a hotel room, or they may not be able to find you a hotel room. They might help you with a care package. People are having to return to a service, so that is actually an accelerator on the numbers of people walking through our door because they are returning and having to come back again and again. So not only is the demand increasing, the workload is increasing because we are not able to resolve things. Ideally, as I said, that flow would happen; the flow no longer happens.

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** Yes. I think to reinforce that: in January alone our homelessness entry point turned away 201 people because we did not have the resources and the staffing resources to meet that demand from people on the day. We are probably averaging up to seven tents or swags a week at the moment that we are handing out, and that is the sad reality of it. You know, we have also got 145 children in the Ballarat region sleeping in insecure housing, hotels and motels, so 145 children who are homeless at the moment. And Michelle touched on it – I mean, imagine being in a workforce or a job where you come to work every day knowing there is a possibility that you cannot help the majority of people that come through the doors. So it is a really stressful environment.

**Tom McINTOSH:** To your point on working families coming in through the door, if they do not have a home, they may not be working families for long.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** And there may be mortgage stress too. They might be coming for food assistance because they cannot pay the mortgage and buy food.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr McIntosh. Mr McCracken.

**Joe McCracken:** Thank you, all, for appearing today. Living in Ballarat myself, I see every day the challenge that you deal with. I can only imagine what you see through your eyes on a daily basis, and I commend you for the work that you do because it can be pretty taxing sometimes on a person. To you and your staff, I take my hat off to you because I do not know if I could do it.

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** Thank you.

**Jerry HAM:** Thanks, Joe. Thank you.

**Joe McCracken:** I know, Michelle, you said at the start the waiting list of the Central Highlands region – correct me if I am wrong – was 3500 or thereabouts.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** That is the priority. The waiting list is over 5000. However, I will qualify that. When people register on the VHR, they can nominate more than one area, but we do not have that breakdown. It may not be 5500 unique applications if that makes sense; it may only be 3000. However, 1300 homes are not going to resolve it. Do you see what I am saying? The numbers still are enormous.

**Joe McCracken:** That was going to be my next question. The government have committed to build 1300 buildings, which is just not for Ballarat. It is across the region –

**Jerry HAM:** Sure. It is across five areas.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** Five areas.

**Joe McCracken:** You say it is not going to make a significant amount of difference initially. What is your take on it? Like, it is not going to do much in the short term to help.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** Well, it is better than nothing.

**Joe McCracken:** Anything is better than nothing, I agree.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** You know, in our field, we will take whatever we can.

**Joe McCracken:** But long term it will not solve the issue?

**Michelle TWIGGER:** No.

**Jerry HAM:** No.

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** No.

**Jerry HAM:** But then, as we know, there are a number of approaches to the development strategy. There has been the state's big build and the commitment of the \$5 billion. Obviously there is housing from that that housing associations, community housing associations are delivering, so there is that. And there is the more recently announced federal half funding approach as well. I know community housing associations are also gearing up to lever off that low-cost debt and look at developments as well. So there are other entry points into the pipeline. This 1300 obviously is not going to cover it, but as we have said, anything is better than nothing and we certainly do not want to miss out on a slice of that 1300.

**Joe McCracken:** Absolutely. Perhaps one of the concerns that got raised – I think it was yesterday in Geelong – was the fact that initially the housing was proposed to be, as you know, at the old saleyard site at Delacombe there. Now that it is spread out across the region perhaps the focused impact that it would initially have had might be diminished because it is more spread out. Would that be a fair thing to say?

**Jerry HAM:** Look, for us I am not sure. I would probably beg to differ with that in that we see the need being across the region and actually spread out could help in a number of situations because we are working with people who are living in challenging circumstances at different spots around the region. So actually a dispersed model, I think, is okay. As I mentioned earlier, they have still got to be within local community hubs and near to shops and transport and other amenities.

**Joe McCracken:** I am probably sharing your point of view as well, you just hope you target that program to where the need actually is so you get the best bang for buck.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** Yes.

**Jerry HAM:** Yes. I mean, our service is an entry point so that can take the need and funnel in. Like I mentioned, we record data. We know every postcode of where people have originally or most recently been housed – which area they have most recently lived in – so we can refer back for them if there is housing available in other regions or other parts of the region.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** A big item – I was talking to the CEO of Yarriambiack, and she identified that there are no safe houses. We are not actually saying that a women's refuge is an ideal solution. However, it is an emergency response. There is no women's refuge in Horsham and probably not in the Wimmera. Would that be ideal anyhow, because then the perpetrators would know where the person – they would work it out.

**Joe McCracken:** I was going to ask you about the point before that you raised. You said that there have been discussions amongst your contemporaries about the idea of purchasing houses that probably do not fit the rental standards because they are quite difficult compared to perhaps the government buying those properties and making them to standard. Is there any correspondence or anything that you have had with the minister that says, 'Here's our idea laid out', or could you get a copy of that or something for the committee? I ask that because I have previously served on the housing inquiry as well where we had that sort of feedback and through the evidence heard a similar sort of thing. I am interested to hear if you are able to help us out.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** I can approach the councils. I know that the Northern Grampians are also very proactive in this space, and they have Stawell in their catchment. The Northern Grampians and the Yarriambiack councils are both very active and have applied for big build houses. I lived up in Rupanyup, one of the small towns up that way –

**Joe McCracken:** Yes, I know Rupanyup.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** Yes. They have got the land, but they only got funding for one property, and there are no properties to rent up there. So I guess where we are going with this is – yes, I suggest that we bring the councils into the conversation as well, because they are the ones who can get those sites developed.

**Joe McCracken:** If you have got any copies of any correspondence raising those ideas, we would love to see it.

**Jerry HAM:** Okay.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** We will take that on notice.

**Jerry HAM:** Yes, we will, absolutely.

**Joe McCracken:** Thank you so much for that.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** We have a forum next week in the Wimmera for our alliance, and those people are coming. They are that devoted that they are coming to our forum, which is fabulous. We have got big buy-in and big interest.

**Joe McCracken:** I would love to see any ideas, anything that you have put to the minister or anything like that – 100 per cent. Thank you. My time is up.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you, and thank you for appearing today. I echo the sentiments expressing gratitude for the work that you do. I think what we have heard really puts in perspective a lot of the rest of what we have been discussing throughout these hearings today, and these are the real issues people are facing. I guess I am interested in two parts of this. Firstly, prior to the cancellation of the games, were you consulted at all about housing issues in the region and the impact that the games might have, either positive or negative, on that?

**Jerry HAM:** Can I qualify or ask a further question?

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes.

**Jerry HAM:** Particularly consulted by the games planning committee?

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** By the games planning committee, state government or other entities.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** I did complete the request with Regional Development Victoria, and I did hear back. I think that was just prior to them being cancelled. I have been in this role one year tomorrow, basically, so I had come to the role, and Adam had raised it with me, ‘This is an opportunity to grab some of this housing. We’re desperate. Let’s approach them and put our hat in the ring.’ They did reply and say, ‘We will get back to you should something occur.’ So I believe we would have had that process continued. I was invited – and I should qualify this. Minister Shing did do a regional – I do not know if you were there, Mr McCracken –

**Joe McCracken:** I was not invited.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** Sorry, you were not invited – and I did attend, and that was prior to her becoming Minister for Housing. So she did come to the region and did consult, and we were invited to that, as were other members. I know the Salvation Army were there and other councils came in as well from the Central Highlands. So yes and no, I guess.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. I guess, did you have a sense at that stage – you probably will not have, given that response – of what proportion of that original village housing was earmarked for public or community housing?

**Michelle TWIGGER:** We were aware, and probably concerned, that the Delacombe site was problematic and was not suitable for humans. It is contaminated. So while they were prepared to put athletes and administrators there, they were then not then going to leave any housing there. We heard, via rumour, that that housing was going to Gippsland, so we did step up our advocacy. We did meet with Michaela Settle, who

reassured us that that was not the case and in fact they were hoping that it would roll out further west as well as here, so some would be retained here and head west, however.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** But you were not sure what proportion might be –

**Michelle TWIGGER:** It was still being assessed.

**Jerry HAM:** We were not sure what proportion –

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** No, that is okay.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** It was my understanding it had not been finalised.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** It has already been touched on by some of the other members, but we have got 1300 homes that have been promised as part of the legacy; do you have any sense of what proportion of that will come to Ballarat?

**Michelle TWIGGER:** None.

**Jerry HAM:** No, we do not.

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** No.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** No, okay.

**Jerry HAM:** We have been, as we mentioned, hoping to hear or trying to reach out to find answers to that question, but no, we do not.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** And we do not even know if that is going further west.

**Jerry HAM:** And, look, I am going to say, because Uniting is a statewide organisation, we have Uniting services and teams in Gippsland. We are incredibly aware of the dire housing need in Gippsland as well, so we certainly would not begrudge any housing that goes to that region. But our particular teams are local to Ballarat and the Central Highlands, so we really want to advocate that there is a need here too.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** Yes. And our Wimmera team work from Stawell down to Ararat from Horsham, so we cover up to Rainbow and out to Nhill – so the Horsham team commute to Nhill. And that is the other thing: the large commuting distances take a heavy toll on how many people we can support, but I know prior to Christmas the Horsham entry team – Adam, it is one full-timer, two part-timers, I believe? – actually could not see anyone who walked through the doors. They were booked out for the next, I think, eight working days prior to Christmas.

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** Yes, I think we are booked out for the next four weeks up in Horsham, and I know we have got our team dispersed today amongst Stawell and Ararat, obviously in Horsham, as a result of the bushfires as well. We have had people dispersed from their properties today, which is really unfortunate. They are attending community meetings. So it is not just what has happened through the entry point, it is what has happened with environmental factors as well that is impacting homelessness and our teams across the Central Highlands and Wimmera regions as well. So we are not sure what we are going to do with those current losses of properties and those people who have been made homeless in the last 24 hours.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** We cover Halls Gap.

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** Yes, that is right.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Dr Mansfield. I think Mr McCracken had one small request.

**Joe McCracken:** Yes. With that meeting you had with Michaela Settle, are you able to provide any documents around that? It would be good to know about the assurances that the housing is actually going to be out this way and not in Gippsland.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Sorry, is this in regard to –

**Michelle TWIGGER:** This was the original dispersal of the housing –

**Joe McCracken:** Yes, the housing spend that we were inquiring on.

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** This is around the discussion where they were talking about dispersing the modular units from the Comm Games village across the regions, and then we later heard around Gippsland.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Yes, of course.

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** I think that is when we sought the attention of Michaela Settle to discuss that.

**The CHAIR:** If it would be possible to provide that on notice, that would be wonderful.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** Certainly.

**Joe McCracken:** Yes, thank you so much.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** We did not take formal notes, though, did we?

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** No. We can touch base with Michaela.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** We will talk to her.

**Adam LIVERSAGE:** Yes, we will talk to her.

**Michelle TWIGGER:** We are very well supported by the local MPs.

**Michael GALEA:** Fantastic.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thank you so much, all, for appearing today and giving your evidence. You will receive a copy of the transcript for review in about a week, and if you have problems with it, you can provide feedback on that before it is published on the website. The committee will now adjourn.

**Committee adjourned.**