PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria

Final report:
Summary booklet

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About the Committee

Functions

The Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's functions are to inquire into and report on any proposal, matter or thing concerned with community services, education, gaming, health, and law and justice.

As a Standing Committee, it may inquire into, hold public hearings, consider and report on any Bills or draft Bills, annual reports, estimates of expenditure or other documents laid before the Legislative Council in accordance with an Act, provided these are relevant to its functions.

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This report is available on the Committee's website.

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Terms of reference

Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria

On 7 June 2019, the Legislative Council agreed to the following motion:

That this House requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report, within 12 months, on the state of homelessness in Victoria, and in particular, the Committee should—

a.   provide an independent analysis of the changing scale and nature of homelessness across Victoria;

b.   investigate the many social, economic and policy factors that impact on homelessness; and

c.   identify policies and practices from all levels of government that have a bearing on delivering services to the homeless.

Chair's foreword

Homelessness is the deepest expression of social exclusion in our society, a growing and seemingly intractable problem.

We can never give up on our attempts at ending homelessness. Many dedicated individuals and organisations working with people experiencing homelessness share my view and are determined to realise this goal. This inquiry received detailed and robust submissions from organisations working in the sector and from individuals in the community who care deeply about this issue and wish to see it addressed. I thank them all wholeheartedly.

Crucially, we also benefitted from receiving submissions and hearing directly from individuals experiencing homelessness or sleeping rough. At all times, we kept their experiences front of mind. These are some of the most vulnerable people in Victoria, and their contributions informed our report and recommendations.

Thank you to everyone who contributed, those who made submissions and those who appeared at public hearings to provide evidence, as well as those that welcomed us into their organisations and homes on site visits. We met amazing, dedicated and inspiring people during this inquiry. The multi-faceted nature of homelessness and the depth of issues relating to its prevention and treatment led the Committee to hold more than the usual number of public hearings. We also benefitted from hearings with overseas jurisdictions that are successfully responding to homelessness.

The Committee began this inquiry before the devastating 2019/2020 bushfires in Victoria and prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Homelessness was already a challenge for so many in Victoria, and these events exacerbated these difficulties for both those experiencing homelessness and those providing homelessness support. Measures put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic saw many people previously sleeping rough placed in emergency accommodation, with plans for this to transition into long-term housing. This event showed that with sufficient will on the part of the Victorian Government, it is possible to end homelessness for many people experiencing it. Whether that will remain the case is yet to be seen.

Insufficient Commonwealth income support (such as JobSeeker or Youth allowance) is clearly one of the leading issues preventing individuals from sustaining long-term housing. My colleagues and I believe it is critical for the Victorian Government to advocate to the Commonwealth Government for a permanent increased rate of JobSeeker as well as other relevant income support payments such as Youth Allowance.

In the Committee's interim report for this Inquiry we acknowledged that the overwhelming number of contributors believe that providing housing for people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness should be the Committee's number one

recommendation and its first priority. We took this message on board and agree with stakeholders that effective housing policies and funding are essential in both the prevention and eradication of homelessness.

I acknowledge the Victorian Government's landmark Big Housing Build, which was announced in November 2020, towards the end of the Inquiry. The Big Housing Build will see 9,300 new social housing dwellings built, which represents an impressive 10% increase in Victoria's social housing stock. However, despite the unprecedented size of the program, this will still not ensure that Victoria will meet the national average of social housing as a percentage of total dwellings, at 4.5%.

In order to increase long-term housing options, in this report we suggest the Government looks at, among other measures, implementing mandatory inclusionary zoning in all new major housing developments across the state.

We also heard from many committed individuals, businesses and organisations about innovative housing models that could significantly change how we deliver housing in this state. We urge the Government to consider supporting their ideas and their work.

I believe that another crucial part of our approach to homelessness should be to intervene early in order to prevent homelessness before it occurs, and the Committee was in firm agreement on this. Whenever I have looked in depth at disadvantage in our society it has been evident that an early intervention approach is essential. This can get to the very cause of disadvantage and turn people's lives around.

Early intervention means identifying those at risk of homelessness and stepping in to provide support before they reach a crisis point. It also means a focus on education. There are many skilled and passionate people in the homelessness sector who have the capacity to do this crucial work and who should be supported to do so. Government should prioritise implementing diverse, forward-thinking early intervention strategies. We identify a number of those in this report.

I was impressed by the work underway in regional and rural areas, where communities are working together to find solutions to homelessness based on local circumstances and the strength of their communities. Some programs are focused on supporting people experiencing particular issues, such as family violence, while others, like the Geelong Project, are multidisciplinary and provide a wide range of services. The Youth Foyer program is another initiative that stood out with its approach towards building young people's capacity to create and lead productive, meaningful lives.

Evidence provided to the Committee by Associate Professor David Mackenzie, cited his study that found national spending on health and justice services for young people experiencing homelessness each year was more than the total cost spent on homelessness accommodation and support for all ages. This emphasises that the financial cost of prevention and targeted support is far less than the cost of supporting those in crisis. For me, it's a no-brainer in terms of where we should be directing our resources.

One of the crucial areas we looked at in the report relates to the often tragic transition from institutional settings into homelessness. This includes health, mental health, care and custodial settings. Too often, people at risk of homelessness are discharged or released into the community without sufficient planning or support to find and keep accommodation. Without a home, these individuals may soon end up back in hospital or in the justice system. For those leaving incarceration, being released into homelessness inhibits their chances at successful re-integration into the community. These types of justice issues are ones which I hope we will have an opportunity to look at more closely during a forthcoming inquiry by this Committee.

Currently in Victoria, we have a homelessness sector that is overwhelmed with the need to respond to people in crisis. I urge the Government to implement the suggestions in this report so that we can develop a more adaptable and flexible system of support and so that the sector can focus more on early intervention rather than crisis responses.

The recommendations in this report reflect over a year of dedicated bipartisan work by the Committee which, if implemented, would go a long way towards solving homelessness. I thank my colleagues on the Committee for their commitment to this report and their dedication to solving this issue. I particularly acknowledge my crossbench colleague, Mr Rod Barton, for initiating this inquiry.

Thank you also to the Committee Secretariat that ably supported the work of the Committee. Like most workplaces we faced a number of challenges in 2020 and many operational changes were required to continue our work. I particularly thank Kieran Crowe, Inquiry Officer; Alice Petrie, Inquiry Officer; Caitlin Connally, Research Assistant; Justine Donohue, Administrative Officer; and Lilian Topic, Senior Committee Manager.

We all want to see an end to homelessness in Victoria. We have work to do, and this report's recommendations are a crucial first step.

 I commend the report to the House.

Fiona Patten
Chair

Homelessness service pathway

Early intervention
- Justice
- Youth
- Employment
- Family violence
- Mental health

Crisis accommodation
- Rooming houses
- Hotels, motels and caravan parks
- Refuges

Transitional accommodation
- Wrap-around services
- Supported accommodation
- Innovative housing

Long-term housing
- Public housing
- Private rental
- Community housing
- Affordable housing

— Ideal pathway
▪▪ Service pathways
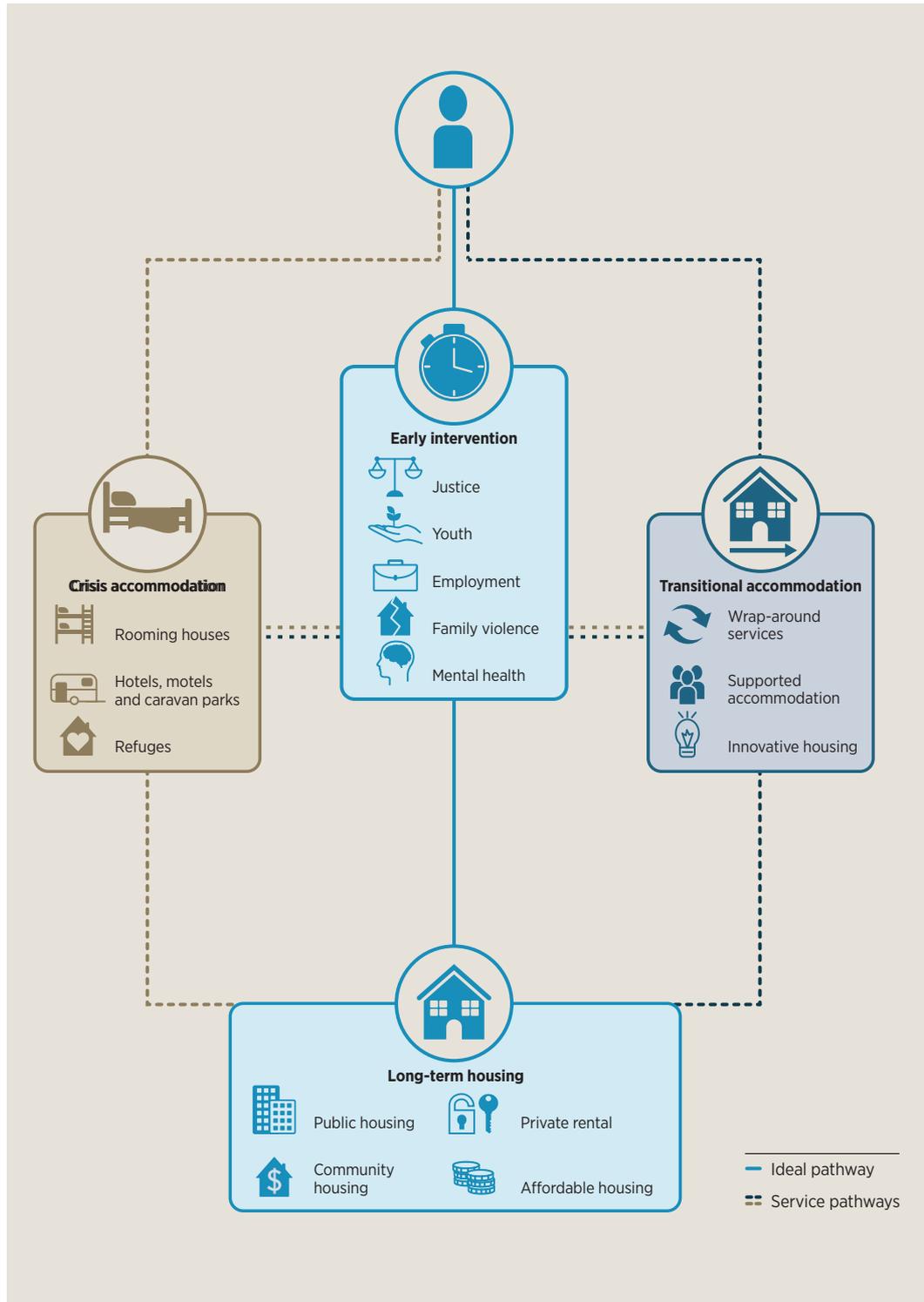
Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee.

Key messages from the Committee

Homelessness is one of the most complex and distressing expressions of disadvantage and social exclusion in our society and requires immediate attention by government.

Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee.

This summary booklet condenses the findings and recommendations from the Committee's final report for the *Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria*. It outlines the key messages which the Committee wishes to deliver to the government, the homelessness service sector and the community about what must be done in this crucial area.

Those from disadvantaged or marginalised groups are more at risk of experiencing homelessness; however, it is often an accumulation of multiple risk factors and adverse economic, social and personal circumstances that cause an individual to become homeless. It is these structural and personal drivers which need to be the focus of an early intervention strategy for homelessness which focuses on prevention rather than cure. Homelessness cannot be remediated with any single measure—it is complex and multidimensional. Instead, it requires a variety of approaches addressing key risk factors, that can help an individual avoid homelessness. The Committee believes that the Victorian Government's homelessness response requires the development of clear guiding principles to support an effective whole-of-government approach to the issue.

In its Final report the Committee recommends a wide-ranging suite of measures aimed at achieving outcomes through an extensive effort towards early intervention to assist in the prevention of homelessness. At the heart of the Committee's final report is the belief that we need a two-pronged approach in order to remediate homelessness in Victoria:

• We need to strengthen early intervention measures to identify individuals at risk and to prevent them from becoming homeless.

• We must provide more long-term housing for the homeless.

These should be the core aims of the Victorian Government.

Notwithstanding these goals, improvements are also needed around the use and management of short- and medium-term accommodation options—specifically, crisis and transitional housing.

The Committee believes that the homelessness crisis in Victoria demands immediate and ongoing attention from the Victorian Government. The complexity of the issue cannot be understated, with a myriad of often overlapping risk factors that make people vulnerable during unexpected crisis points. Without appropriate support people

can find themselves homeless. To address the varying causes and manifestations of homelessness a wide range of solutions are required. The Committee believes that implementation of the broad-ranging and complementary suite of recommendations made in our Final Report will significantly improve the Victorian Government's response to homelessness across the state.

During the course of this inquiry, we saw how emergencies such as bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic can have a devastating effect on the most vulnerable in our community. The Committee urges the government to monitor outcomes for disadvantaged sectors over the next few years as we determine what the long-term effects of these crises will be.

Homelessness is a complex issue

There are just as many causes of homelessness as there are different faces. Homelessness can affect anyone; however, some people are more at risk of experiencing episodic or recurring homelessness due to personal and structural risk factors. Personal risk factors may include, for example, mental health issues or experiencing family violence. Structural risk factors are social factors that can lead to disadvantage and increased vulnerability to homelessness, for example housing affordability or unemployment rates.

In 2018–19, **one in 57 Victorians** accessed a government-funded homelessness service, a high figure but one which is likely to underestimate the extent of the issue. This problem of understanding who and how many people are homeless is compounded further by the transitory nature of homelessness, where the total number of people experiencing homelessness can change on any given day. The Committee believes that more work needs to be done to improve reporting strategies for recording Victoria's homeless population.

The median duration of an experience of homelessness in Australia is 4.5 months, with approximately 20% of experiences lasting longer than 12 months. For many people recurring homelessness can be addressed and prevented through access to immediate, appropriate and ongoing support which addresses personal and structural risk factors.

Homelessness is a much larger and more complex issue than the very visible and confronting issue of individuals living and sleeping in public places (rough sleeping). In the Committee's view, a person is homeless when they are sleeping rough or reside in a dwelling that is inadequate, has no tenure or does not provide agency for a person to control the space for their own social relations. A person is homeless if they are living in short-term or emergency accommodation due to a lack of other options; this includes refuges, crisis accommodation, couch surfing, living temporarily with friends and relatives, insecure accommodation on a short-term basis, or emergency accommodation arranged by a specialist homelessness agency (for example, in hotels, motels and so forth).

However, the Committee notes there is no universal definition of homelessness.

The homelessness sector in Victoria is overwhelmed

Victoria's homelessness system is overwhelmed with those in need, making it increasingly difficult for service providers to adequately respond to the complex and varying problems a person faces. There is significant risk in treating immediate problems in isolation. This increases the likelihood of fragmented systems of delivery of services. Fragmented service delivery can undermine efforts to prevent episodes of homelessness, increasing the risk that a person may experience homelessness for longer and longer periods.

People at risk of homelessness or who find themselves homeless rarely end up there because of one factor. There are many factors which render an individual vulnerable to crisis. Therefore, it is important that the sector seek to provide wrap-around support services tailored to individual need.

Homelessness can have a lasting and traumatic effect

Homelessness is not just a statistic. It is an event in a person's life, often recurring, that can have a lasting and traumatic effect. Homelessness can result in a variety of physical deprivations relating to a lack of or inadequate shelter, physical safety or access to suitable hygiene and health services. Pre-existing health issues can be exacerbated in situations of homelessness, where individuals are unable to access or afford essential services.

Furthermore, homelessness is more than just a lack of housing. Not having a space to call one's own can have significant impacts on a person's agency, resilience and sense of security. This can have acute and lasting effects on a person's mental health and their connection to community and public life; becoming exacerbated where the conditions of a person's homelessness are ongoing.

Demand for services exceeds the availability of support

The Committee was concerned to find that demand for homelessness services significantly exceeds the availability of support. In 2018–19, 112,919 Victorians sought assistance from homelessness services, a 22% increase since 2012–13.[1] The majority of people presenting to homelessness services are seeking short-, medium- or long-term accommodation. Unfortunately, many people could not be supported or referred to accommodation:

- 76% could not be provided long-term housing

- 62% could not be provided transitional accommodation

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1   Department of Health and Human Services, *Victoria's homelessness service system: Presentation to the Legal and Social Issues Committee*, p. 4.

- 32% could not be provided crisis accommodation.[2]

Others presenting to homelessness agencies are seeking financial support, to retain housing or other related support.

As a consequence of the overwhelming demand for homelessness and related services, agencies are struggling to keep up and assist everyone in need of support. The housing resources to accommodate every person in need simply do not exist. The lack of accommodation options for Victorians has been exacerbated by the growing bottleneck from short- and medium-term accommodation into long-term housing. The inability of people to move into long-term housing means added strain on crisis and transitional accommodation providers. This can have a further flow on-effect to other support services, especially ones where accommodation might be a condition or requirement of receiving support (e.g. a condition of leaving institutional care).

Gaps in the sector are of considerable concern to the Committee.

Another consequence of unmet demand for homelessness services is client 'spill over' from metropolitan areas into rural and regional Victoria. In order to access much needed homelessness services, particularly accommodation, some people are moving into less populated areas in the hope that they can get the support they desperately need. This puts increased pressure on the already limited resources of regional organisations. Many Victorians across the state are not receiving critical support.

The Committee heard that because of the way that homelessness services work some people have been forced to 're-present' to a service once a previous engagement with the service has come to an end, because their needs remain unmet. Unmet demand for services is compounded by gaps across the sector, which can mean that a person is unable to access the right services for their individual circumstances, whether they require support or accommodation.

The Committee believes that the Victorian Government needs to promote and develop more robust mechanisms for coordination, facilitation and accountability between service providers to ensure that an individual is receiving support for all existing risk factors, increasing their chances for a stronger and longer-lasting outcome. This could be achieved through the provision of more long-term and supported accommodation, which would ease pressure on crisis and transitional accommodation providers. This would allow the sector to reorient away from a crisis response towards a greater focus on early intervention programs.

The sector is crisis-oriented

The lack of long-term accommodation and early intervention programs in Victoria has led to an increasingly crisis-oriented sector. Due to demand exceeding the services available, particularly for accommodation, the sector is forced to focus more on the

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2 Ibid.

short-term and immediate needs of people who are homeless. In particular, attention is increasingly focused toward procuring sufficient accommodation, mostly in crisis or transitional housing. This can come at the expense of homelessness prevention through the provision of long-term housing and support.

The Victorian Government has developed fixed service lengths to guide service providers. This is what the Committee believes is part of a crisis-oriented response. Fixed service lengths have resulted in people having to re-present to a homelessness service at the end of a previous service cycle because their needs were still unmet.

Every individual's experience of homelessness is unique and is influenced by personal or structural risk factors. Some individuals require longer support periods than can be provided by an agency. Being required to re-present to a service provider numerous times can stall an individual's progress and may further entrench them in a cycle of homelessness.

A more adaptable and flexible system is needed

The Committee believes that the Victorian Government needs to embed more flexibility into its approach to the funding of homelessness programs. This flexibility should extend to the amount of time an individual receives services and the services they are eligible to receive.

To reorient away from a crisis response system, the homelessness sector should be supported to focus on the continuous improvement of cooperation between providers. In particular, the Victorian Government should endeavour to foster cooperation between early intervention service providers. Information should be shared to assist individuals and an approach taken that means that individuals can receive support in relation to the varying risks they face.

A focus on continuously improving cooperation amongst services can ensure better outcomes for people experiencing homelessness and cut down on service duplication.

The Committee believes that multi-disciplinary services can ensure better outcomes and provide services for people with complex needs. This is particularly the case in regional areas where there are less services in some areas and more agility is needed to address the needs of clients.

The Committee believes that Victoria's current approach, which emphasises crisis response, should be evaluated. This evaluation should be the beginning of a process to move the sector toward outcomes-based services. A gradual approach will allow the sector sufficient time to adapt and re-orient their services towards a more flexible and integrated approach that supports clients to live independently.

Early intervention is crucial to ending homelessness

Early intervention involves the homelessness sector and other related sectors intervening as early as possible to prevent people becoming homeless. This is achieved through addressing risk factors which may cause a person to become homeless and to give a person the opportunity to build personal, social and economic resilience.

Early intervention services address issues such as financial instability, mental health, trauma, employment difficulty and alcohol and drug misuse. Early intervention is considered highly cost-effective and can prevent ongoing interactions with the justice, health and care systems. By reorienting Victoria's homelessness strategy towards early intervention, this would ease pressure on other parts of the service system, such as crisis response.

Early intervention is particularly critical for those who first experienced homelessness at a young age. Prevention of homelessness amongst young people or intervening early is important to ensure that experiences of homelessness and disadvantage at a young age do not affect the life chances of an individual and increase the likelihood of ongoing homelessness into adulthood.

Victorian Housing Access Points are based at designated service providers across Victoria and operate as an initial entrance point for people who need to access homelessness services. Most people access homelessness services through an access point in their area. It is vital that homelessness access points are adequately resourced to provide critical assessment and support. The Committee believes that homelessness entry points are a key resource for a future state-wide homelessness strategy which focuses on early intervention. Entry points should provide early intervention services as well as crisis services. Greater provision of early intervention services would ease pressure on other elements of the homelessness system. Homelessness access points are targeted at those actively seeking services for homelessness.

Alongside entry points, other services and institutions which often interact with people before they reach a crisis point—such as real estate agencies, schools, and healthcare facilities—could play a greater role in early intervention and prevention of homelessness. These institutions should be equipped to refer individuals they have assessed as at risk of homelessness to appropriate services before they reach a crisis point. The Committee believes that the Victorian Government should fund programs that provide information to institutions who often have contact with people at risk of homelessness that assists them to meaningfully engage with and refer people to other services.

Ending homelessness in Victoria requires a whole of government approach

A focus on early intervention as a primary strategy for addressing homelessness will need to explore opportunities and programs which assist people in need to find stable and ongoing employment. Whilst having a job is not a catch-all solution to preventing

homelessness, it is an incredibly important factor, particularly for developing the personal agency and resilience needed to avoid homelessness.

The Committee believes the Victorian Government should explore opportunities to give more support to programs and social enterprises that work with people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness to assist them to find employment. These programs should include a work readiness component to help ensure that participants are able to maintain employment and have the best chance to find and keep a home.

Family violence is a leading cause of homelessness in Victoria, particularly for women and young people.

There are complex factors which mean that safety is often the greatest priority and means that too often, those experiencing family violence are displaced from their home and possessions. This can be a disempowering and traumatising experience and can have significant impacts on the agency and resilience of a victim as they try to rebuild their lives. The Committee believes where possible and appropriate, victims and their children should be supported to stay in their home.

Flexible support packages are an important part of the Victorian Government's response to family violence. They play a key role in assisting people who experience violence to safely remain in their own home or rapidly find other accommodation. The Committee supports funding for programs that ensure that persons experiencing family violence receive the help they need to avoid homelessness.

Research and trials into the provision of alternative accommodation for perpetrators of family violence which is linked to behavioural change programs may be an answer to the complexities of this issue. The Committee believes that more work should be done to assess the success of such programs.

Mental health issues are also linked to episodic and chronic homelessness and can be exacerbated by that experience. The Committee identified two keys areas of early intervention support that could assist people with mental health issues avoid homelessness or protect them from chronic housing precariousness:

- Improvement of cooperation between mental health and homelessness services so that the system is easier to navigate and individuals at risk of homelessness are identified earlier.

- Tenancy support programs for people experiencing mental health issues who are at risk of homelessness.

Justice system issues are a structural risk factor that can lead to homelessness. The inquiry received evidence from stakeholders about the experiences of people who come into contact with justice, health, mental health and care settings who are discharged into homelessness. The Committee heard that this is common across different institutional settings and can contribute to recurrent contact with institutional care. The Committee believes that this is not only detrimental to the individuals discharged

with nowhere to go but is also a missed opportunity to provide crucial services to help them avoid further experiences of homelessness. As soon as someone comes into contact with the criminal justice system they should be targeted for assistance.

As outlined above dealing with homelessness means dealing with many intersecting issues, whilst recognising that at the core of any response to homelessness is the need to ensure that there are adequate accommodation options for people in need. Provision of long-term housing, such as public and community housing, is a protective factor against homelessness that we know works. In social housing, there is more security of tenure for low-income residents compared to the private market because a person's rent is tied to their income rather than being based on market prices. By securing more long-term and affordable housing options across Victoria, there would be less pressure on crisis and transitional services to fill this gap and more people would be prevented from becoming homeless.

To reflect the importance of housing in addressing homelessness and recognising that homelessness impacts on the enjoyment of other fundamental rights and freedoms, the Committee believes that the right to housing should be included in the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic). This would assist in ensuring the Victorian Government takes the right to housing into consideration in future policy and legislative decision-making.

Furthermore, the Committee considers that community housing providers should be recognised as public authorities for the purpose of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic). This will assist community housing tenants to have their rights under the Charter taken into consideration in tenancy matters. In addition, the Committee believes that VCAT should also have the jurisdiction to take into consideration whether eviction decisions for tenants in social housing comply with the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic). This would ensure that social housing providers give due consideration to the human rights compatibility of eviction decisions.

There are a lack of exit points from crisis and transitional accommodation

Crisis accommodation is a type of short-term accommodation which seeks to house people who are at high risk of homelessness. The aim of crisis accommodation is to remove people from a harmful environment or crisis situation by providing temporary accommodation. Some crisis accommodation services in Victoria seek to alleviate situations which commonly force people into a cycle of homelessness, such as family violence.

Transitional accommodation is medium-term, subsidised accommodation for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness which also provides support programs and assistance appropriate to their circumstances. Typically, a person will spend up to two

years in transitional accommodation before moving into long-term housing. A person in transitional housing can move into public or community housing after their stay or move into the private rental market, depending on their situation.

Transitional accommodation providers play an important role in helping residents to prepare for independent living. However, this work can be undermined if residents have no choice but to exit into unsuitable accommodation or homelessness.

A lack of long-term housing has led to increased demand for crisis and transitional accommodation. In the case of crisis accommodation, this has led to a reliance on unsustainable, unsuitable, and in some cases dangerous, motels and rooming houses. In the case of transitional housing, it has similarly led to a chronic shortage of available places across Victoria. There are alternative forms of privately-run accommodation but these rarely meet the needs of the client and can in many circumstances exacerbate the problems they may be experiencing.

A key theme presented to the Committee throughout this inquiry is that a lack of long-term housing has created a blockage in the service pathway of Victoria's homelessness system with individuals unable to move into long-term housing. The result is that people spend many more weeks, months and sometimes years in accommodation which is designed to be short term and those who are newly homeless are unable to secure places in crisis and transitional accommodation when they are in immediate need.

The growing bottleneck, or blockage, out of crisis and transitional accommodation is putting increased pressure on short- and medium-term accommodation support providers, who are forced to procure alternative types of accommodation to service all the people in need. This has diverted resources and attention away from early intervention strategies which seek to avoid homelessness. The Committee believes that this is one of the reasons why the homelessness service sector is increasingly crisis-oriented.

More funding is needed for the provision of purpose-built crisis accommodation, and where possible, with appropriate onsite support so that wrap-around services are available for people who need them. This is needed across Victoria, but particularly in Melbourne growth areas and regional and rural Victoria. Such an investment in crisis accommodation is not intended to increase the emphasis on the provision of these options in Victoria's homelessness system. The aim is instead to ensure that such accommodation is located where it is needed, and to provide more purpose-built crisis accommodation to alleviate the need for individuals to reside in hotels, motels, caravan parks and rooming houses because there is no other option.

The Committee had the opportunity to speak to many stakeholders about potential solutions to shrinking Victoria's crisis and transitional housing bottleneck through the provision of more long-term housing options. The 'Housing First' approach was consistently brought up by various stakeholders as a potential solution.

The 'Housing First' approach emphasises that the priority in assisting persons experiencing homelessness is stable, ongoing housing. Once a person has permanent accommodation, support services may then be engaged to help address the root causes of homelessness. The Committee is concerned that a lack of long-term housing options makes Housing First strategies difficult to implement.

Provision of more long-term housing is key to reducing homelessness

The provision of affordable, stable, long-term housing is key to reducing the number of people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness in Victoria. The delivery of additional social housing is key to addressing homelessness by ensuring an adequate supply of affordable housing across the state. This includes measures in the private rental market, inclusionary zoning and government financing initiatives.

Accommodation is not a catch-all solution for all the complex factors which put a person at risk of housing precariousness or homelessness, but it is a crucial part of any solution. It is also a preventative measure; it becomes increasingly difficult to address risk factors and other support needs when a person is cycling through crisis and short-term accommodation. For example, it is difficult to look for and sustain employment, deal with legal issues or recover from complex traumatic episodes without stable, ongoing housing.

Both public and community housing play important roles in housing Victorians in need who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Community housing is an important resource for disadvantaged Victorians who are not able to participate in the private housing market. It is able to assist people with a diverse range of complex needs and often includes wrap-around support alongside accommodation. Continued supply of sustainable public housing is necessary to complement the diverse types of community housing available to those on the Victorian Housing Register.

As at 30 June 2019, there were 42,723 new applicants on the Victorian Housing Register. This includes 22,624 on the priority access stream and 20,099 applicants on the general register. In addition, there were 7,307 applicants on the waiting list to transfer from a social housing dwelling to another property. These applications are made up of approximately 80,000 individuals.[3]

In Victoria, there seems to be an increasing reliance on community housing as a source of long-term housing for persons at risk of or experiencing homelessness while slowly decreasing the reliance on public housing. There has been limited construction or acquisition of new public housing in recent years. There have also been commitments to increase transfers of public housing to community housing providers.

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3   Department of Health and Human Services, *Response to Questionnaire*, supplementary evidence received 27 January 2021.

The Committee heard from stakeholders about innovative housing models or mechanisms that could help to increase the supply of both short- and long-term housing, many of which have been led by the private sector. These include, for example, pop-up housing in underutilised buildings, transportable housing, and the use of surplus government land (through leases or sale) to create social housing. These models should be further explored by government to support a diverse range of housing options.

Commonwealth income support is not adequate

Insufficient Commonwealth income support (such as JobSeeker or Youth allowance) was regularly cited as one of the leading issues preventing individuals from sustaining long-term housing. There is a strong correlation between those experiencing unemployment and those accessing homelessness services; therefore, there need to be appropriate rates of income support for people to stay in housing whilst they look for employment. The Committee agrees that the rate of JobSeeker and other crucial income support payments are too low. There are very few properties available to rent in Victoria that are affordable to a single person whose main source of income is JobSeeker. This low rate of payment could push households that rely upon them towards a crisis point. The Committee believes it is critical for the Victorian Government to advocate to the Commonwealth Government for a permanent increased rate of Jobseeker as well as other relevant income support payments such as the Youth Allowance.

People accessing Commonwealth income support, homelessness services or other kinds of support service often experience stigma from real estate agencies when applying for properties. This stigma can be exacerbated by other factors such as a lack of rental history (a particular problem for young people trying to enter the rental market) or individuals exiting institutional settings. Certain groups, such as Aboriginal Victorians or culturally and linguistically diverse communities, also face stigma and discrimination which can impede their chances of finding a home. The Committee believes that there should be education and training for real estate agency staff in order to address the need to ensure equal access to the private rental market for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Victoria's social housing stock is insufficient

Victoria's social housing stock has been steadily declining for several years and is well below the national average. The proportion of Victorian social housing stock versus total dwellings has dropped from 3.85% in 2010–11 to 3.42% in 2019–20. Victoria has the lowest social housing stock in Australia and is significantly below the national average of 4.5% of total housing stock. The lack of available social housing has meant that too many Victorians are having significant trouble accessing much needed housing and support.

In November 2020, the Victorian Government announced that it would undertake what it has described as 'the largest social housing building program in the state's history'. The building program, the *Big Housing Build*, allocates more than $5.3 billion to build over 12,000 new dwellings across Victoria. Over 9,300 of these new homes will be social housing properties and 2,900 will be affordable and market-priced homes for first home buyers and renters. The 9,300 new social housing dwellings represents a 10% increase in Victoria's social housing stock. However, despite the unprecedented size of the program, this will still not ensure that Victoria will meet the national average of social housing as a percentage of total dwellings, at 4.5%. In addition, it remains to be seen what proportion of the over 80,000 individuals on the Victorian Housing Register will be housed in the new dwellings.[4]

Another potential solution to increase long-term housing options for those at risk of or experiencing homelessness is the introduction of mandatory inclusionary zoning. A mandatory model of inclusionary zoning would ensure that the private market takes partial responsibility, alongside government, for the provision of housing that meets the needs of all Victorians.

There are concerns regarding the specific structure of a mandatory scheme, such as the potential for it to constrain financial returns of property developers. These could be considered in the model's development and incentives could be built in to ameliorate the effects of any requirement. Such incentives could be provided in return for a guarantee that the cost of other dwellings in a development will not be driven up due to the inclusion of affordable housing.

The Committee heard from many committed individuals, businesses and organisations about innovative ways that we might achieve better outcomes for the homeless and we urge the government to consider supporting their ideas and their work.

The government must develop clear guiding principles for addressing homelessness in Victoria

Homelessness and related support services assist with issues far wider than simply finding someone suitable accommodation. Accommodation is one component of a much larger puzzle. The unique social and structural risk factors which put an individual in danger of becoming homeless need to be addressed with a holistic and coordinated approach. The Committee's final report covers a range of factors that contribute to Victoria's homelessness response and growing crisis.

Developing a clear approach to addressing and preventing homelessness is a daunting task. The development of guiding principles that can be used to foster a whole-of-government approach to homelessness is needed.

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4   Victorian Government, *Victoria's big housing build*, Online, November 2020.

There could be significant benefit in developing a national policy framework which looks at the structural drivers of homelessness. However, it is important to acknowledge that the experience and response to homelessness is driven by local contexts. Victoria should retain its primary responsibility in responding to homelessness and in developing outcome measures based on the experiences of Victoria's homeless.

In the Committee's view, Victoria's homelessness strategy must be reoriented away from crisis management to focus on a dual approach:

1. The promotion of early intervention programs.

2. The procurement of sufficient long-term housing.

Findings and recommendations

1   Introduction

> **FINDING 1:** The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the vulnerabilities and difficulties people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness face and has created increased demand on the homelessness sector to provide adequate housing, health and other support services.
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> 14

> **FINDING 2:** Victoria's homelessness system is crisis-oriented, a factor which is compounded by the lack of long-term housing options for people in need.
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> 26

2   Homelessness in Victoria

> **FINDING 3:** It is difficult to provide an accurate figure for the number of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria and it is likely the figures captured in the Census and other sources are an underestimate.
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> **RECOMMENDATION 1:** That the Victorian Government, in collaboration with the housing and homelessness sector, explore ways to improve the accurate recording of the number of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria, particularly in relation to transitory or recurring cases of homelessness.
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> **FINDING 4:** Severe overcrowding is a serious and increasing manifestation of homelessness in Victoria. However, there are complexities around the reasons for overcrowding and the level of need for homelessness services in some cases.
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> **FINDING 5:** People under 35 are the largest age group of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria.
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> 54

> **FINDING 6:** Experiencing prolonged youth homelessness is a strong predictor of experiencing homelessness later in life.
>
> 54

> **FINDING 7:** Older women are a fast-growing cohort of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria.
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> 56

3   The homelessness sector

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Victorian Government support more coordination, collaboration and integration between homelessness services.   **109**

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Victorian Government build on its policy of considering outcome-based service goals when commissioning, or re-commissioning, homelessness services. These service goals should include the provision of additional subsidies for individuals with more complex needs.   **113**

4   Early intervention

FINDING 15: Investment in homelessness early intervention services clearly benefits individuals and can produce financial savings for the Victorian Government by preventing homelessness or treating it at an early stage before individuals require more intensive support.   **120**

FINDING 16: Early intervention services currently in place in Victoria are successful at keeping people housed, where individuals are able to access them.   **122**

FINDING 17: There are insufficient Initial Assessment and Planning workers at homelessness entry points to meet demand.   **125**

FINDING 18: Provision of homelessness services at homelessness access points is necessarily weighted toward those with the greatest need.   **125**

FINDING 19: Because homelessness services at homelessness entry points are oriented to assist people in the greatest need, individuals requiring early intervention services do not have their needs fully met.   **125**

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Victorian Government prioritise early intervention activities at the first point of contact with the homelessness system in recognition of the need to shift away from a crisis-oriented response, and assist at-risk persons to avoid entering homelessness, including by:

• providing further resources to entry points for additional Initial Assessment and Planning workers

• ensuring that early intervention programs receive further resourcing to meet demand from people attending entry points.   **125**

RECOMMENDATION 8: That the Victorian Government implement measures to prioritise outreach to other institutions outside the homelessness sector for the purposes of early intervention, including by:

- engaging with bodies and institutions that are the first to know when individuals are at risk of homelessness to assist them to identify and respond to risk factors for homelessness, including through education and training

- supporting homelessness services to build strong relationships and referral pathways with institutions that are the first to know when individuals are at risk of homelessness. 129

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Victorian Government provide ongoing funding for the family violence Flexible Support Packages program. 133

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Victorian Government:

- fund research into the incidence of homelessness amongst perpetrators of family violence in Victoria

- increase funding for family violence programs that focus on perpetrator interventions

- trial and evaluate the effectiveness of programs that provide supported accommodation for perpetrators of family violence, linked to compulsory behavioural change programs, including in regional areas. 135

RECOMMENDATION 11: That the Victorian Government ensure ongoing funding for the Private Rental Assistance Program in recognition of its key role in preventing entry into homelessness and that the funding grows to meet demand. 139

RECOMMENDATION 12: That the Victorian Government consider the barriers faced by young people, persons experiencing family violence and other groups in relation to difficulties entering or remaining in the private rental market in continued development of the Private Rental Assistance Program, with a view to making the service more accessible for these cohorts. 139

RECOMMENDATION 13: That the Victorian Government provide additional and ongoing funding for the Private Rental Assistance Program Plus to ensure the program can continue to grow to meet demand. 139

FINDING 20: Poor mental health is a risk factor for homelessness and homelessness can cause a deterioration in an individual's mental health. 141

RECOMMENDATION 14: That the Victorian Government promote collaborative practice arrangements between mental health and homelessness services, in order to:

- make the homelessness and mental health systems easier for individuals to navigate

- ensure early identification of individuals experiencing mental illness who need support. **144**

RECOMMENDATION 15: That the Victorian Government investigate methods to tailor the Private Rental Assistance Program Plus to provide appropriate and effective services to people experiencing diverse mental health issues. **146**

FINDING 21: Misuse of alcohol and drugs are more likely to occur after an individual becomes homeless because of the traumatising nature of homelessness. **148**

RECOMMENDATION 16: That the Victorian Government investigate and provide additional funding for homelessness early intervention services for young people that seek to address family conflict issues. **150**

FINDING 22: Education First Youth Foyers may not be suitable for all cohorts of young people experiencing homelessness, particularly those with complex needs. However, they are beneficial for many disadvantaged young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. **156**

RECOMMENDATION 17: That the Victorian Government conduct an assessment of suitability for additional Education First Youth Foyer sites in metropolitan and regional areas, with a view to providing funding for additional facilities. **156**

RECOMMENDATION 18: That the Victorian Government provide additional funding to organisations that provide innovative accommodation for young people at their family home, such as Kids Under Cover. **158**

RECOMMENDATION 19: That the Victorian Government provide funding and support for the expansion of initiatives linked to the Community of Schools and Services model, with a minimum expansion to seven pilot sites that will include four metropolitan sites and three regional sites. **166**

FINDING 23: The provision of adequate social housing is a protective factor against homelessness, particularly for people with complex needs. **169**

RECOMMENDATION 20: That the Victorian Government commit funding for programs that assist young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness to receive job readiness training and connect them with employment opportunities.   **172**

RECOMMENDATION 21: That the Victorian Government explore opportunities to include more social enterprises that work with people who are at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness in their social procurement policy. Such social enterprises should include a work readiness component in their employment programs.   **174**

RECOMMENDATION 22: That the Victorian Government provide additional transitional housing for people leaving custodial settings. In addition, that the Victorian Government ensure access to housing support workers and integrated legal support both before and after release to assist persons to access and maintain stable, long-term housing.   **180**

RECOMMENDATION 23: That the Victorian Government investigate whether greater access to supported accommodation is required for people seeking bail and whether this would lead to a reduction of individuals on remand.   **181**

RECOMMENDATION 24: That the Victorian Government pursue a 'no exits into homelessness' policy to improve discharge practices at mental health, hospital, rehabilitation, aged care and other institutional settings. To improve discharge planning, the following measures should be put in place:

- development of partnerships and pathways with housing and homelessness services, including early referrals prior to discharge

- collection of discharge data and reporting against targets aiming for a reduction of discharges into homelessness

- training for staff in institutional settings, particularly in areas with high homeless populations, to better identify and respond to the unique needs of people experiencing homelessness, including—

  – training staff to record housing status as part of admission to prevent or identify risks of discharging individuals into homelessness.   **184**

RECOMMENDATION 25: That the Victorian Government introduce legislative provisions for Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal compliance orders in respect of residential tenancies to be time limited where appropriate.   **186**

RECOMMENDATION 26: That the Victorian Government amend the content of the Notice to Vacate form for tenants of rented premises to provide information about legal rights and details of legal assistance services within the notice. **187**

RECOMMENDATION 27: That the Victorian Government provide additional funding with a view to expanding the provision of tenancy-focused legal supports for tenants involved in residential tenancy proceedings at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal. **187**

RECOMMENDATION 28: That the Victorian Government review the merits of an internal appeals process at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal for residential tenancy matters. Such a review should have regard for whether an internal appeals process would result in cost savings for the Government and parties by reducing the need to appeal to the Supreme Court. **189**

RECOMMENDATION 29: That the Victorian Government develop and implement a Protocol for Victoria Police and other enforcement agencies to use in responding to people experiencing homelessness, which would:

- avoid unnecessary, enforcement-based interactions with people experiencing homelessness

- ensure that where interactions do occur, they are appropriate and respectful

- support enforcement officers to use their discretion and consider alternative options to fines and charges when interacting with people experiencing homelessness

- train and equip enforcement officers to make referrals to appropriate services as an alternative to fines and charges. **191**

RECOMMENDATION 30: That in repealing the offence of public drunkenness from the *Summary Offences Act 1966* (Vic), the Victorian Government create an appropriate public health response model in consultation with relevant stakeholders in the homelessness sector. **192**

RECOMMENDATION 31: That the Magistrates Court consider investigating the need for retention of the Special Circumstances list or establishment of a Homelessness list. **194**

RECOMMENDATION 32: That the Victorian Government ensure community housing providers are recognised as public authorities for the purposes of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic). **199**

RECOMMENDATION 33: That the Victorian Government amend the *Civil and Administrative Tribunal Act 1998* (Vic) to provide the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal with jurisdiction to consider whether eviction decisions for tenants in social housing comply with the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic). **200**

RECOMMENDATION 34: That the Victorian Government include the right to housing in the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic). **200**

5 Crisis and transitional accommodation

RECOMMENDATION 35: That the Victorian Government improve access to specialist family violence crisis accommodation facilities, including by:

- conducting demand modelling for family violence crisis accommodation across the state in order to ascertain need

- providing additional funding for accommodation facilities, including for core and cluster models of accommodation

- ensuring regional areas have access to family violence crisis accommodation to allow persons experiencing violence to remain in or close to their communities. **216**

RECOMMENDATION 36: That the Victorian Government investigate mechanisms to address the use by homelessness services of Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) funding to place persons in inappropriate forms of private accommodation such as unsafe hotels, motels and caravan parks due to the lack of any alternative housing options. **221**

RECOMMENDATION 37: That the Victorian Government support homelessness service agencies to broaden the availability of emergency crisis accommodation, therefore limiting the number of people in need of crisis accommodation being put into unsuitable hotels, motels and caravan parks. **221**

RECOMMENDATION 38: That the Victorian Government improve monitoring and compliance actions in relation to rooming houses, and in particular:

- ensure Consumer Affairs Victoria is adequately resourced to monitor and inspect registered rooming houses to ensure the prescribed standards are met and to investigate and respond to reports of unregistered rooming houses

- promote information-sharing and collaborative responses between Consumer Affairs Victoria and local councils in order to target unregistered rooming houses

- investigate the potential for development of a standardised accommodation ratings system for private rooming houses

- review planning scheme provisions in relation to rooming houses to prevent a concentration in particular areas and to ensure they have connectivity to services. **228**

RECOMMENDATION 39: That the Victorian Government provide funding for an increase in both general and specialised forms of crisis accommodation, with a focus on provision of appropriate forms of onsite support, including in Melbourne's growth areas and parts of regional Victoria where crisis accommodation is currently lacking. **229**

RECOMMENDATION 40: That the Victorian Government ensure that those who transition from emergency accommodation under the *From Homelessness to a Home* program are transferred to stable, secure, long-term housing, rather than crisis accommodation. **235**

RECOMMENDATION 41: That the Victorian Government provide funding to homelessness services operating within the *From Homelessness to a Home* program so that they can continue to support clients for an extended period after they have been placed in long-term housing, with a view to assisting participants to maintain their housing. **235**

FINDING 24: A lack of affordable long-term housing has led to difficulty for residents to move out of transitional housing. This has resulted in a decrease in the availability of transitional housing across Victoria. **238**

RECOMMENDATION 42: That the Victorian Government investigate options for the prioritisation of the housing portfolio in processes for the sale of surplus government land. **246**

RECOMMENDATION 43: That the Victorian Government engage with relevant stakeholder groups to assess how pop-up housing proposals could contribute to transitional housing options in Victoria. In conducting such an assessment, the Victorian Government should consider whether these proposals meet appropriate governance standards and the appropriateness of offering support in the form of temporary land tax concessions for organisations participating in the scheme.   **250**

FINDING 25: Victoria's Housing First programs are significantly handicapped by a lack of affordable long-term accommodation to house participants.   **260**

RECOMMENDATION 44: That the Victorian Government ensure there is long-term housing stock available from Victoria's Big Housing Build for participants of Housing First programs operating in metropolitan, regional and rural Victoria.   **260**

RECOMMENDATION 45: That the Victorian Government expand Housing First programs throughout metropolitan, regional and rural areas to include further cohorts of people experiencing homelessness, in addition to rough sleepers.   **260**

6   Long-term accommodation

FINDING 26: For Victoria to reach the national social housing average (4.5% of total housing stock), it would need to build up to 3,400 new social housing dwellings per year until 2036. This is double the amount noted to be needed just to keep pace with overall housing growth in the Bilateral Agreement between the Commonwealth and Victoria under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement.   **283**

RECOMMENDATION 46: That the Victorian Government, in alignment with its own findings, ensure that social housing dwellings are reflective of the current and projected needs of applicants on the Victorian Housing Register, including by ensuring an adequate proportion of dwellings are 1- and 2-bedroom properties.   **287**

RECOMMENDATION 47: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government to permanently increase the rate of JobSeeker payments. The Victorian Government should further advocate for reconsideration of the indexation of this payment to CPI and to also urgently consider the many barriers to income support accessibility.   **302**

RECOMMENDATION 48: That the Victorian Government provide additional funding to homelessness services to commission and expand head leasing programs to ensure people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness, in appropriate circumstances, can be assisted into private residential tenancies and be given the support to maintain them.　**307**

RECOMMENDATION 49: That the Victorian Government work with the Real Estate Institute of Victoria and the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission to develop and roll out mandatory education to real estate agents regarding their obligations to ensure that people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness are afforded equal opportunity to access private rental tenancies. This should address intersectional discrimination towards persons on the basis of various attributes including race, age, prior criminal convictions or lack of rental history.　**310**

RECOMMENDATION 50: That the Victorian Government investigate implementing a mandatory inclusionary zoning mechanism that would require a portion of any new major housing development be allocated to social or affordable housing. In designing such a model, the Government should consider making specific incentives available to developers to ameliorate the costs involved and ensure that the cost of other dwellings in the development are not increased as a result of the requirement.　**319**

RECOMMENDATION 51: That the Victorian Government further investigate the use of the Permanent Rental Affordability Development Solution to ascertain whether it is a practical and appropriate mechanism for increasing provision of affordable housing in Victoria.　**321**

What happens next?

There are several stages to a parliamentary inquiry.

The Committee conducts the Inquiry

This report on the Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria is the result of extensive research and community consultation by the Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues at the Parliament of Victoria.

We received written submissions, spoke with people at public hearings, reviewed research evidence and deliberated over a number of meetings. Experts, organisations and other stakeholders expressed their views directly to us as Members of Parliament.

A parliamentary committee is not part of the Government. Our Committee is a group of members of different political parties. Parliament has asked us to look closely at an issue and report back. This process helps Parliament do its work by encouraging public debate and involvement on issues. We also examine government policies and the actions of the public service.

This report is presented to Parliament

This report was presented to Parliament and can be found on the Committee's website at: https://parliament.vic.gov.au/lsic-lc/inquiry/976.

A response from the Government

The Government has six months to respond in writing to any recommendations we have made. The response is public and put on the inquiry page of Parliament's website when it is received at: https://parliament.vic.gov.au/lsic-lc/article/4288.

In its response, the Government indicates whether it supports the Committee's recommendations. It can also outline actions it may take.