

## Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Ms Carmen Faelis

**Organisation Name:**City of Whittlesea - on behalf of Whittlesea Housing and Homelessness Action Group  
**Your position or role:** Team Leader Social Policy and Planning

### SURVEY QUESTIONS

**Drag the statements below to reorder them. In order of priority, please rank the themes you believe are most important for this inquiry into homelessness to consider::**

Housing affordability,Public housing,Services,Family violence,Rough sleeping,Indigenous people,Mental health,Employment

**What best describes your interest in our Inquiry? (select all that apply) :**

Other (please describe)

Public sector body and group of organisations working in the community and homelessness services

**Are there any additional themes we should consider?**

### YOUR SUBMISSION

**Submission:**

Inquiry into homelessness Whittlesea Housing and Homelessness Action Group

**Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:**

### FILE ATTACHMENTS

**File1:** [5e6c6b98799d5-Inquiry into homelessness Whittlesea Housing and Homelessness Action Group submission.docx](#)

**File2:**

**File3:**

**Signature:**

Carmen Faelis

# Inquiry into homelessness Whittlesea Housing and Homelessness Action Group (WHAAG) submission

## Introduction

The Whittlesea Housing and Homelessness Action Group (WHAAG) would like to thank the Parliamentary Legal and Social Issues Committee for initiating a Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness and for this opportunity to lodge a submission to inform the Inquiry.

Members of WHAAG are from a range of community organisations that operate across Whittlesea, including:

- City of Whittlesea (CoW)
- DPV Health
- Haven Home Safe
- Home Ground Real Estate Launch Housing
- Hope Street
- Housing Choices
- Merri Outreach Support Service
- Whittlesea Community Connections
- Women's Property Initiative
- Yarra Plenty Regional Library

The group was established in response to the increasing demand experienced by agencies, concern about affordable housing options and increased evidence of homelessness in the municipality. The group is developing a 10-year shared plan that responds to housing and homelessness in CoW. The WHAAG has identified several local needs across the homelessness and housing spectrum.

WHAAG believes that the key to addressing homelessness in the CoW is to:

- Increase the supply of long-term affordable housing, and
- Work to prevent homelessness from occurring.

## Scale and Nature

Between 2011 and 2016, homelessness rose 38.5% in CoW<sup>1</sup>. Across CoW, there is currently a low level of social and affordable housing, and demand far outweighs supply. In 2016 over half (53.8%) of all households in CoW were experiencing moderate or heavy housing related financial stress and with rental households more likely to experience housing related stress.

Currently only 1.3% of all dwellings are social housing compared to a Greater Melbourne's average of 2.6%. It is estimated that 3,497 households have an unmet need for affordable housing in City of Whittlesea. This represents an affordable housing supply gap of 5.2% households, with only a 0.4%

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016, (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019)

increase in new affordable housing dwellings delivered between 2011 and 2016 (58 dwellings out of 14,813).<sup>2</sup>

The greatest tool available to alleviate these pressures is long term, permanently funded investment in affordable housing, from crisis and transitional housing through to medium- and long-term tenancies. Underinvestment across all levels of government has resulted in a lack of crisis and transitional housing for people entering the homelessness service system. Short term housing is being used long term by people who cannot access long term affordable housing due to lack of provision, creating a housing bottleneck which prevents people experiencing homelessness from securing appropriate housing.

CoW has a diverse population, with a high proportion of residents being from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, a mix of large and small households, high rates of residents who need daily disability support and the largest population of people of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) descent by local government area in Greater Melbourne (0.8% of the population compared with 0.5% for Greater Melbourne). CoW's diversity means that a variety of housing stock is required to meet the needs of the community, including housing suitable for:

- Culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
- Women and children escaping family violence
- Young people
- People with a disability
- LGBTI people
- The elderly

Family Violence is the most common cause of homelessness. The family violence incident rate per 100,000 population for July 2018 to June 2019 in CoW was 1,371.5 and the rate for incidents with children present was 454.3, which are higher than the Victorian average. Whilst it is the incident of family violence that causes homelessness, it is the housing crisis that extends the period of homelessness for women and children. Once women feel able to leave a family violence situation, they often find they are unable to find affordable or suitable housing. Women (and their children) are often housed in motels or overcrowded accommodation such as rooming houses. The homelessness rates would be reduced significantly, if we could end violence against women.

A large portion of the homeless cohort in CoW is "invisible" or provisionally accommodated. These people reside in inadequate housing such as overcrowded environments or in temporary arrangements with others. Such housing options are unstable, temporary and do not provide security of tenure, creating increased uncertainty and transition for those who are already experiencing vulnerability. People experiencing homelessness also include high numbers of people who are couch surfing, living in rooming houses or those living in cars, tents, caravan parks and improvised dwellings.

## **Social, Economic and Policy Context**

The rapidly growing population of people experiencing homelessness in CoW are unable to effectively access appropriate housing and support through homelessness services due to the lack of provision within the municipality. For people in CoW, the nearest access point is in Preston (more

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<sup>2</sup> <https://housing.id.com.au/whittlesea/affordability-and-availability>

than 40km south of some suburbs in CoW) which requires private transport or a lengthy trip on public transport. For young people, this is even worse with the access point being in the CBD.

There is an acute need for an increase in outreach services and for more service providers to be in, and based from, CoW in order to minimise significant barriers by improving accessibility. The long travel to and from services is a critical issue that needs to be addressed. The impact of not having a local access point inhibits outreach capabilities and stretches the “hub and spoke” model to breaking point and can discourage people from accessing services entirely, thus preventing early intervention.

Underinvestment and limited resourcing across the continuum of affordable housing means there is an inadequate supply of housing solutions to people experiencing homelessness in CoW. There is no operational crisis housing at all in the municipality, which means people are exposed to unsafe and inappropriate housing in times of crisis, including budget motels, caravan parks and rooming houses.

## **Local and State Government Policies and Practices**

CoW has a long-standing commitment to affordable housing, having adopted the Social and Affordable Housing Policy and Strategy 2012 – 2016 and amended the Whittlesea Planning Scheme in 2017 stating that “Council aims to achieve the inclusion of 5% social housing and 10% affordable housing in the structure planning of any established or greenfield housing development.” CoW has agreed to peppercorn lease council owned land to youth crisis accommodation in the municipality. Council has agreed to partner with Hope Street to deliver a First Response Youth Service in South Morang, however the project needs \$4.8M in capital and \$2.3M p/a for ongoing operational funding.

Council recently concluded a DHHS funded Social Housing Investment Planning (SHIP) Project in partnership with Hume City Council and Mitchell Shire Council. A key output of the project outlined that Council is unable to effectively facilitate affordable housing given the restrictions of the Victorian Planning Provisions, despite having a commitment to affordable housing. Currently the way that Council can negotiate affordable housing outcomes on private land is by using a Section 173 Agreement which is voluntarily entered with a developer. However, despite a whole of council commitment to facilitating affordable housing, opportunities are limited which results in an insignificant amount of affordable housing dwellings being delivered.

Furthermore, the lack of affordable housing being mandatory in Precinct Structure Plans (PSPs) is a missed opportunity for the community to gain affordable housing contributions from developers. PSPs and development contributions guidelines do not permit the mandating and levying for affordable housing. It is extremely difficult to capture value at any stage other than the time when it is created.

Just as the PSP process can extract developer contributions for development infrastructure, such as roads and intersections, and community infrastructure, such as halls and sporting facilities, the PSP process should also be able to extract contributions for affordable housing. This is an important asset for the accommodation, health and wellbeing of a cohesive, inclusive and well-functioning community. At present, the developer contribution guidelines explicitly do not extend to housing, and the PSP planning guidelines are silent on the issue. For any growth area council with PSPs under consideration or listed for future exploration, affordable housing needs to be part of this conversation, as once the value is created and the PSP is approved, it is extremely difficult for government to extract any further value from private landowners.

## Recommendations

WHAAG makes the following recommendations to reduce homelessness in CoW:

- Bi-partisan support of large-scale investment in affordable housing that is permanently funded to secure housing for vulnerable people now and in the future.

The primary way to help the rapidly growing numbers of CoW residents who are experiencing homelessness is to provide greater affordable housing. 'Housing first' models (with wrap around services) have been shown to be the most effective safety net for people who are at risk of or are experiencing homelessness. Any other measures that respond to homelessness are strengthened by effective supply of affordable housing.

Adequate housing first models with "wraparound support services" are needed to support people with complex and traumatic lives. Some people require supported long term accommodation for life.

- A homelessness service access point in CoW

Navigating the service system is complex, these issues are further compounded when services aren't available locally.

- Work across family violence and homelessness jurisdictions to enable more women and children to remain or return home safely.

Whilst the Royal Commission into Family Violence highlighted the impact of family violence in Victoria, there are many instances in which the system further jeopardises the well being of women and their children.

- Funding for the provision of youth crisis accommodation and youth housing services, including the Hope Street First Response Youth Service in South Morang (\$4.8M capital) and provide ongoing operational funding from the Specialist Homelessness Services Fund (\$2.3M p/a).
- Changes to the Victorian Planning Provisions to allow Councils to mandate affordable housing in new developments.

As a collective, the WHAAG strongly believe that the PSP process could be strengthened if landowners/developers, who are gaining considerable land value uplift as a direct result of the PSP and rezoning process, were required to contribute toward affordable housing in built form, works-in-kind or financial cash-in-lieu contributions.

- Investment across housing continuum, from crisis, transitional through to medium- and long-term tenancies, and case management support that is developed on an evidenced based model.

- Better informed and accessible points of support for Real Estate Agents and at-risk tenants.

Greater education and incentives are required for landlords and real estate agents to encourage greater access to the private rental market for people currently in the homelessness system and women and families escaping family violence that may have less attractive rental applications.

- Diversity in property stock to reflect diverse needs of a population, including:
  - young people
  - women and children escaping family violence
  - LGBTI people
  - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
  - the elderly
  - people with a disability
  - culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- Funding for prevention and early intervention including referral pathways, social participation initiatives and community education programs for those who are at risk of homelessness in CoW.
- Top up case management support to supplement long term tenancies to prevent re-entering the cycle of homelessness

The second most common reason people access homelessness services in Victoria is eviction. Increasing the number of trained case managers, supported by a local access point, will help sustain tenancies and support people transition out of homelessness and into the private rental market.

Programs also, need to be funded with brokerage funds targeted to intervene early, especially when tenancies are at risk.