

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria**

Melbourne—Wednesday, 1 July 2020

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**WITNESSES**

Mr Malcolm Roberts-Palmer, Senior Social Policy and Research Officer, Maribyrnong City Council; and  
Mr Brook Quinn, Social Policy Officer, Brimbank City Council (*both via videoconference*).

**The CHAIR:** I declare the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues public hearing for the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria open again. We did a substantial acknowledgement of country at the beginning of this session, but again let us all note that we are meeting, albeit remotely, on various lands of the traditional custodians and pay our respects to any Aboriginal people who are joining us via the broadcast or are providing us with knowledge and information today. Welcome back, everybody who is watching online. Thank you, Malcolm and Brook from Brimbank and Maribyrnong. We know that these are actually some very trying times for both of your local government areas, and certainly our thoughts and hearts go out to you because of that, but thank you for making the time to meet with us remotely.

Just to let you know, all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is through our *Constitution Act* and also through the standing orders of our Legislative Council. Therefore any information that you provide to us during this hearing is protected by law. However, if you were to repeat those statements outside, you may not have the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

Thank you again for coming to join us. I am wondering, would you both like to make some opening comments? If you would both like to make some opening comments, then we will open it up to a committee discussion after that. We have got about 45 minutes. Thank you.

**Mr QUINN:** I am happy to go first. Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee for providing me with the opportunity to talk today. My name is Brook Quinn, and I am appearing on behalf of Brimbank City Council. I would also like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people, the traditional custodians of the land covered by the City of Brimbank, and pay my respects to elders past and present. In this statement I would like to cover three broad topics: provide an initial overview of Brimbank, an update on some of the work in Brimbank since our submission was made and review some of the key points from the submission.

Brimbank is located in Melbourne's west and north-west. It is 11 to 23 kilometres from the CBD, and it is an established middle-ring municipality with a population of just over 209 000, with expected gradual growth over the next 20 years. Brimbank has recently attracted considerable government investment, which has been really encouraging. The Melbourne Airport rail link is set to go through the Sunshine super-hub, and also Sunshine has been designated a priority precinct. At the same time Brimbank has considerable pockets of disadvantage: higher unemployment and housing stress, and lower educational attainment and household income. It is also high in modifiable health risks such as obesity and smoking, and also has the highest losses from poker machines in Victoria.

Brimbank also has the highest incidence of homelessness in Melbourne's west. A total of 1460 people were recognised as experiencing homelessness at the last census, and that was a 30 per cent increase between 2011 and 2016. The majority of this homelessness is experienced as severe overcrowding—more than two-thirds—and a further 1948 people were experiencing marginal housing. That was an increase of 55 per cent, and that was almost entirely for people in overcrowded dwellings as well. So it is an issue in Brimbank, and overcrowding is a big part of that.

The second thing I would like to cover is to provide a bit of an update since our submission. As we all know, probably the biggest change since then has been the COVID-19 crisis, and that has had far-reaching impacts on Brimbank and continues to. In early April council endorsed its coronavirus response and recovery strategy, and that will guide council's activities to support our community through the initial response and now into the recovery stage. Since then council has been monitoring the impact on local communities. Some of the things we have noted have been loss of income and employment, and that has had a particular impact on young people, who have historically experienced high levels of unemployment in Brimbank. There has been an increase in presentations at services for people sleeping rough. Closure of council facilities has had an impact, with people not being able to access libraries, for example, during the day. A number of families in overcrowded dwellings are also at higher risk. I noted the prevalence of overcrowding in Brimbank earlier.

At the same time we welcome the measures that have been taken by the Victorian government, including increases to the Housing Establishment Fund to fund emergency accommodation, the introduction of the tenancy relief scheme to protect tenants and also the recent investment in social housing through the building works stimulus package.

The other thing that council has done since we made our submission has been to conduct a research project. Through that project, council consulted with a range of stakeholders, service providers, people with lived experience of homelessness, DHHS, council staff and councillors, and the report reached the following findings. As I noted, Brimbank has the highest incidence of homelessness in Melbourne's west, but services based in Brimbank also see the highest number of clients of any Victorian municipality, so it is a prevalent issue in Brimbank. Lack of data was another issue that came through, particularly on rough sleeping, and that has the capacity or the potential to limit funding or resources being targeted in Brimbank. Homelessness services are overstretched in the west, as you may have already heard from other speakers, and a lack of crisis accommodation has led to a reliance on often poor hotels and rooming houses. The recommendations from the report have informed an implementation plan that council adopted at its June council meeting, and that is going to focus on a range of activities, including development of resources, development of a council protocol for engaging and supporting people experiencing homelessness, development of a training module for council staff and local business, and also continued advocacy for increased services and investment.

I will move on now to the third part of my opening statement, which is to recap on some elements of the submission that was made to the inquiry back in January. We remain committed to each of the 12 recommendations provided in the submission, but I will just focus on four of those today in the interests of time. Before I do that, though, I will just note some protective factors in Brimbank that we talked about in our submission. Increasing awareness and understanding of homelessness is something that is taking hold. For example, events for Homelessness Week last year played a role in that. Informal support through close-knit communities is another important element of the protective factors in Brimbank and also increasing access to employment and educational opportunities, which provide that broad preventative ability for people.

Returning to the submission, I will go through just four points here. Data and research was something that we talked about. The census provides some useful information, but it lacks qualitative detail and is more than likely an undercount. So, for example, the census recorded nobody to be sleeping rough in Brimbank at the time of the census, but based on observation in the municipality and also our research, which estimated that anywhere between 40 and 80 people may be sleeping rough in Brimbank on any given night, we know that that is almost certainly an undercount. So council is looking forward to the 2021 census and also future street counts as opportunities to improve the local evidence base around rough sleeping and homelessness more generally.

The second thing I would like to mention is stigma and discrimination. We talked about some local research that was done in Brimbank around young people, and it was found that young people tend to keep their problems to themselves to avoid bullying, to not be a burden on their friends and to maintain their privacy. So that is something that has been happening in Brimbank. Families have experienced discrimination when seeking private rental accommodation, and middle-aged to older men often are less likely to seek help and are at increased risk of the negative health outcomes arising from homelessness.

Service provision was another area we talked about in our submission. As I noted, services are largely overwhelmed in the west, and additional investment is needed. Two areas that we are interested in particularly are assertive outreach and case management for complex situations. We know that neither of those were allocated to the west to support the implementation of the *Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan*. More generally we support sector advocates in their calls for a Housing First approach.

Finally, social housing: we know that there is significant unmet demand for social housing in Brimbank. We have more than 3500 people on the waitlist for the Brimbank-Melton region. We welcome the Victorian government investment in social housing over the last few years, but we still think that there is a need for more investment in the west. The COVID-19 crisis does present an opportunity through stimulus packages. We welcome the Victorian government initiatives, and we feel that that is an important start, but we need continued investment, and we would really like to see some move from the commonwealth government to adopt a similar approach to what has happened here in Victoria.

So thank you very much to the committee for this opportunity to participate. I look forward to any questions that you may have.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much, Brook, for those opening remarks. Malcolm, have you got some opening remarks as well?

**Mr ROBERTS-PALMER:** Yes, I do, thank you. Thank you again to the Chair and the committee for the opportunity to present Maribyrnong City Council's submission to this inquiry. The City of Maribyrnong is an inner-urban municipality with a growing population. By 2041 our population will have increased by 63 per cent, from 96 000 to 156 000. As with local governments across Victoria, Maribyrnong has seen a significant increase in demand for support during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to this demand council has developed a municipal relief and recovery action plan for the COVID-19 pandemic. This action plan outlines the relief and recovery activities that council in partnership with key local organisations are undertaking to support the City of Maribyrnong community. This action plan was recently presented to council for information, and I believe it is about to also be endorsed by the municipal emergency management committee.

Some of the things that council and our local agencies have done more recently: we have got a \$4.1 million business and residential support package, which has been provided by council; 1092 meals have been delivered each week to local residents; and over 600 clients who are at risk of homelessness and are seeking assistance for crisis accommodation have been assisted by Unison Housing, which is located at Seddon and Werribee, which is in the municipality of Wyndham.

This relates back to our submission in terms of council's approach to homelessness and is very much based on the principles of social justice and harm minimisation or prevention. Even before COVID-19 our local homelessness services in the City of Maribyrnong and across the western region, as Brook has alluded to, have faced a significant increase in the number of people presenting as homeless or at risk of homelessness. The Unison intake assessment and planning—IAP—service, which is located at Seddon and Werribee, has seen a significant increase in people presenting.

In 2018–19, 3557 households were assisted by Unison IAP. This includes 2011 households presented at Seddon and over 1500 households presented at Werribee. Of this, 486 presented as primary homeless—that includes people sleeping rough; 2063 people presented as secondary homeless—that includes people couch surfing; and 155 people presented as tertiary homeless—that is, sleeping in a single room in a rooming house with no bathroom, kitchen or security of tenure.

This data reflects the complexity of homelessness, but also it reflects the less visible homelessness that we see, including couch surfing, across the municipality. What Unison also found is it reflects is the complexity of why people present to different services, and this includes financial difficulties, housing affordability stress, eviction and family violence.

What it also reflects, as Brook stated in his opening statement, is the demand for social housing. As Brook stated, we have seen a significant increase in demand for social housing, and that has been reflected in people trying to access the housing register, and 4324 people in the inner-west region were trying to access social housing as of March 2019. It is also reflected in the availability of affordable dwellings to rent more broadly. There is only 2.2 per cent of dwellings that are deemed as affordable, according to data from the office of housing, as of March 2019, and that compares to 4.9 per cent for all of metropolitan Melbourne.

Our submission goes on to talk from that about some of the key recommendations, and the key recommendations relate to the opportunities that are available to prevent homelessness from increasing and to help reduce homelessness. I want to talk a little bit about two of the key recommendations. As Brook mentioned in his presentation, we would like to increase funding for outreach services and IAP services, as particularly given now in the relief and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic these services are going to play a crucial role in assisting people across Maribyrnong and across the western region.

The other recommendation I want to focus on relates to providing ongoing support for social housing. Specifically we are talking about the Social Housing Growth Fund, which we think has provided significant assistance in its first two rounds to people across Victoria who are in need of social housing. That recommendation focuses on a commitment from the state government to maintain the funding for the Social

Housing Growth Fund into the long term, because we believe that fund can continue to assist people at really critical times.

We have also called on the state government for the extension of the public housing renewal program to include public housing stock in the City of Maribyrnong. As with many other municipalities we have a significant amount of public housing stock, particularly in Braybrook and across the municipality, and a lot of that public housing stock is significantly ageing. It dates back to the 1950s and 60s, and there is a real opportunity now to renew that stock and to redevelop that stock to provide appropriate social housing for people living in the local area.

These two recommendations relate to the section of the submission that discusses the concept of Housing First. Housing First can be described as providing homeless people with permanent independent housing and community-based mobile services, and the need for these services will be reduced over time for most except for high ongoing support needs or as residents become more secure in their accommodation. The submission refers to some specific examples of Housing First, including At Home/Chez Soi from Canada and the Housing First program in Finland. It also refers to the Melbourne Street to Home project, which is a smaller scale project of Housing First that was developed in central Melbourne.

The other recommendations in the submission reflect the role that the federal government can play in providing social and affordable housing and providing important economic stimulus to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a real opportunity for the federal government now to support the state government, to support all state governments, in the development of social housing and support for homelessness services. Since council provided our submission we have undertaken further actions in relation to homelessness apart from our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As with Brimbank, we are developing a homelessness protocol which we are hoping to take to council in the next few months. We are also participating in the second homelessness street count, which is going to be a street count that is going to be conducted over the five *Inner Melbourne Action Plan* councils plus Darebin and Moreland, and we are hoping to extend that to other councils in 2022. The purpose of that street count is to really highlight the level of sleeping rough across inner metropolitan Melbourne and to be able to advocate effectively for other homelessness services.

I thank the committee again for the time to make a submission today, and I am happy to answer questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you both, and thank you both for your submissions. I guess it would be no surprise if the recommendation that this committee made was ‘build more housing’, and no doubt that will be one of our recommendations. You mentioned certainly increased funding in outreach and also the maintaining of the Social Housing Growth Fund. Is there a role that council can play, because it is not a magic pudding, and certainly during COVID we are going to see a significant downturn in the state’s economy at a time that is probably the worst time ever, because we are going to see more and more people in that crisis place? Are there various things that councils can do? Have your councils agreed to inclusionary zoning, or are there other levers that you think councils can offer to help bring private business in or other ways so that we do not have to endlessly be looking at this magic pudding? Either one can start, Brook or Malcolm.

**Mr QUINN:** I will mention one thing. I guess there are a lot of constraints around this, but one thing that council can look at doing is doing an assessment of the assets that it holds I guess to understand, at least at a very initial stage, what land it has available that it may be able to contribute to the development of affordable housing. But, as I said, there are some constraints around that—the current financial situation and competing needs within the community for land. But I think councils can be prepared to take advantage of opportunities when they arise through other government programs or funding rounds where councils can work with other stakeholders to try to take advantage of some of those opportunities. So doing some initial assessment of council assets I think is one area.

**The CHAIR:** Council assets; thanks, Brook. That’s great.

**Mr ROBERTS-PALMER:** I can just add to that. We have actually been trying to do some of that stuff initially with working, for example, with Unison Housing in seeking out opportunities where there is land available for them to develop social and affordable housing. A case in point is the development at Napier Street, Footscray, which is 54 one-bedroom- and studio units which Unison have developed. They are also looking to develop other areas in Footscray. We have been trying to undertake a bit of an audit, I guess, of not just council

land that may be suitable—and as Brook says, that is difficult because there are competing demands, such as community infrastructure and other housing demands that require council land to be used for that—but also looking at the existing public housing stock and the rooming houses in the municipality and whether there are opportunities to use that land as well and how that can potentially be leveraged. What we did find with that research was that there were significant opportunities there they might be able to do; it is just a case of how we can effectively activate it.

Fiona, I guess it goes to your question that council really does play a facilitation role and, to a degree, a planning role, so we can assist community housing providers when seeking planning approval and seeking through that area. We have done some work on voluntary affordable housing agreements which were put forward by the department of planning, and we are working on those. Really what occurs in future in terms of planning, I guess we have to be directed by the state government as to what will work and what will possibly work in the future in terms of planning. So I guess we work with the tools we are given into the planning space. But what we do try to do, as Brook alluded to in his submission, is really as best we can facilitate the opportunities and work closely with local community housing providers to try to find opportunities.

I mentioned the other one—I mentioned Unison Housing. Launch Housing developed 57 tiny houses on a VicTrack land reservation in Footscray and Maidstone. That has been a success in and of itself. That was funded philanthropically, but council was able to facilitate that. So we are looking for those opportunities of where we can help and what assistance we can provide, and I think that is the same for a majority of municipalities across Melbourne.

**The CHAIR:** And I think, looking at the levels of government, there is a sense that local governments can be slightly more nimble than state and federal governments in responding at that ground level. Thank you very much.

**Dr KIEU:** Thank you to Brook and also to Malcolm for your submissions. You have the [inaudible] from the data, research collection and sharing and also the funding from the state government in the Social Housing Growth Fund of about \$1 million and also the public housing renewal program of about \$185 million. As the Chair just mentioned, with this present situation the economy of the whole state will be very challenging, so let us see what the government at the state level can do. I would like to explore a different angle. Particularly, Brook, you mentioned about the federal funding and help. Is there anything that you would like to see the federal government do to be helpful with this particular problem and particularly, for example, the NDIS? Is there any role for the NDIS to play in prevention or help with the homeless people?

**Mr QUINN:** In terms of the commonwealth government, we know that the HomeBuilder Scheme was announced, and that is targeted at a different part of the market, I guess with that broad economic stimulus objective. But I think there are a lot of stakeholders across the board within the community housing and affordable housing sector that feel like a commonwealth government economic stimulus package that has a significant component of social housing construction within that would be really welcomed and would be something that could really complement what has already been announced by the Victorian government and, I guess, contribute to some really meaningful outcomes through this process. One of the benefits of that is that I think it would allow for a commitment—we know that that money would be spent and we know that that money would have the flow-on effects in terms of economic stimulus, whereas it appears that the current commonwealth scheme has some potential to—well, there is no guarantee that it will all be spent and used. So there is that issue. Ideally you would have both, but it seems that if there was slightly more focus on social housing in the commonwealth stimulus package, that would be welcome.

**Mr ROBERTS-PALMER:** I can only add to that to say that currently the federal government provides the National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation funding through their model associated with the bond aggregator, and that effectively provides cheap loans to community housing providers to develop affordable housing. Beyond that they do not really have a long-term commitment to funding. But, yes, we would welcome federal government involvement in support for funding for social housing. In terms of infrastructure development, it is one that can be quite effectively done in the short-to-medium term. Using that term ‘shovel ready’, it is something that can be done quite effectively. We used to have a national housing and homelessness approach, which was developed by the federal government. We are not actually clear where that is anymore, and they really have left a bit of a policy and funding vacuum in that space for us for a number of years now. So, yes, I can only reiterate what Brook said. This presents the perfect opportunity for them to become involved

more directly and to pick up, I guess, where the previous federal government left off in terms of the National Rental Affordability Scheme.

**Ms VAGHELA:** Thanks, Malcolm, and thanks, Brook, for your time and for your submissions. Both of your councils are based in my electorate of Western Metropolitan Region. My question is to both of you. You both touched base on waiting lists. Malcolm, you mentioned in your submission that as of March 2019 there were 4324 people waiting in the inner western region. Brook, I missed the number that you mentioned, but you also said a number of people were on waiting lists. What I would like to know is: since COVID-19, homeless people were put in some sort of temporary accommodation; how is your waiting list going now? So pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19, for both of you, how many do you have on your waiting lists now?

**Mr ROBERTS-PALMER:** I would have to take that on notice because at this stage we do not actually know what the impact of people going to the hotel accommodation is. We also do not really know how long the people are going to be in the hotel accommodation or whether other accommodation will be provided for them afterwards. One of the things we are actually doing at the moment is we are collecting what we are calling relief and recovery data from all the key agencies locally and then we want the collection data from the state agencies as well. The other thing we are interested to see is the impact of the JobKeeper and JobSeeker allowance, because that is really closely linked to how people are managing. One of the things that we found in our research previously is that the Newstart allowance was a significant factor in contributing to homelessness, as was the Youth allowance. So the new JobSeeker allowance has been anecdotally quite significantly beneficial to people living in the community. And I should add that our council has previously written to the federal minister for social services in regard to supporting the ACOSS Raise the Rate campaign, and I think we would support maintaining or at least increasing the rate from the previous Newstart into the longer term.

So, yes, in short, we do not really know yet what the impact is going to be, but it will be borne out by probably some of those numbers in the housing register but also again the number of people that our services are seeing across the community.

**Mr QUINN:** I will just add to that that the figure that I quoted was a bit over three and a half thousand people, and that is across the Brimbank and Melton regions. So, as Malcolm mentioned, that is the housing register figure, and Brimbank has also been engaging with local service providers to get a sense of the increase in demand. There has been an increase for homelessness services and some family violence services as well, and it is difficult to know. I know it was one of the things that our councillors were quite interested in in terms of the impact of COVID-19 on people experiencing homelessness. So that is something else that we are looking to understand more fully, but I think it is probably still a little bit difficult to understand or to determine the full impact. I guess that will unfold over the next few months.

**Dr CUMMING:** I would firstly like to just thank Brook, and could you please send Lynley Dumble, who put in the submission, my thanks—it is very detailed—as well as Malcolm; Cr Sarah Carter, the mayor; and the council signing off on that submission. It is extremely detailed and I thank both your councils for your care in this area.

With the Maribyrnong submission, I think, Malcolm, you make a great point, even though our Deputy Chair made the points just earlier about the multimillions of dollars that this government have committed, their priority areas have been Ascot Vale, Brighton, Brunswick West, Hawthorn, Heidelberg West, North Melbourne, Northcote, Preston, Prahran and Flemington. And there is a real lack in the western suburbs, where, I would believe and we understand, that is a priority area of need. And Malcolm, you made an error just earlier. It was not VicTrack land; it is actually VicRoads land that the little houses, the Launch Housing, went on.

In saying that, when I was the mayor in 2017 there was a commitment made to me via two of the ministers who still are currently here that Maribyrnong council was going to be given \$1 million to actually do the work around Braybrook and Maidstone, and that has not come forward. Malcolm, you might not be aware of that. We are still waiting. I think your council is still waiting for that cheque to be able to do the work that is needed. Fiona just said earlier, 'What can councils do?'. Well, councils can actually do a lot of the groundwork in the way of planning to make things a lot easier, seeing that you are dealing with state government land in the way of public housing. So it would be great if, with all those millions of dollars that this government has suggested that they are spending, they actually spend it in the west, seeing that they have eight ministers and 15 per cent youth unemployment.

So, Brook, I would like to just touch on some of the things that you have brought up. I know it is the case that, especially with youth unemployment or homelessness in Brimbank, there is a lot of stigma. There is discrimination. People feel ashamed to actually say that they need help. When they actually turn up to council, what do councils do in the way of making sure that they are connected? Because obviously it is not their core business to look after homeless people or to provide youth services—they do a small amount. There are your connections with schools—schools are obviously state. Is there something that this government can actually do to help councils with the connection of all of the services that are in the west to make it easier—maybe a one-stop shop? Is there something else that your councils feel that they need from the state when people actually turn up in your reception homeless and needing youth services and all of the other things that are needed?

**Mr QUINN:** Thank you for the question. Council adopted an implementation plan that was based on the research project, and that did include a range of things. One of the things that we are looking at—and it is probably more advanced at Maribyrnong—is developing some consistent protocols around how council staff engage with people experiencing homelessness. Councils, as the closest level to government, are working with the community all the time and, through council facilities and council programs, talking to and meeting with people who may be experiencing homelessness. It is not always disclosed, and sometimes staff might believe that somebody is experiencing homelessness, but sometimes they are a little bit unsure how to approach the situation. So we are looking to just have some simple guidelines in place so that people—staff—have an idea how to do that.

I guess in terms of what the state might be able to do, one of the things that staff are always asking is, ‘How can we help?’, because councils are not resourced to be that first line of support. But it is having those clear pathways and being able to refer people on to services and, I guess, knowing that when people are referred on to services they are going to, hopefully, be able to get some kind of outcome or at the very least be able to get an appointment, and that is not always the case in some of the intake and assessment points. So I guess additional resources being provided so that those services are able to meet the demand is an area that would help. And then, I guess, beyond that some more proactive services in terms of that assertive outreach. I know in terms of the protocols in Brimbank, if somebody, for example, reports that somebody is sleeping rough in a council oval or park, we have got a system in place where we will refer that on to a service point in Footscray. But that is not located in Brimbank, so having something a little bit more local would be helpful in that way. But then it is just about communicating that out to the staff so that people understand, because everyone wants to try to help but people just sometimes do not know how to.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you, Brook and Malcolm. Malcolm, I lived in one of those government houses 50 years ago in Braybrook. I hope it has been done up and it is in a lot better condition than when we left it. I will blame my brother if there is any damage there!

One of the things I would just like to ask you is about the role of councils in all of this. You are clearly doing an enormous amount of work. At the last public hearing we had one council suggest that councils should possibly become that one point—the coordinating body for all the fantastic services we have got—and we heard it this morning from a young woman who did not know where to go. Now, putting aside who should pay for essentially running a hub for all services to coordinate through and come out of, do you think it is a role for councils? Because I can tell you what: I know of at least one council who does not think it is their role.

**Mr ROBERTS-PALMER:** I guess the best way I can answer that is to say how we have responded in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic and how a lot of councils have responded. We have appointed two community connectors and their role, along with a relief team, is to basically support the local agencies and to field the number of calls that come in to council and to coordinate the response across the municipality. They receive hundreds of calls a week, and obviously at the moment those calls are going to spike again. But there is a role for councils to play, I guess, as I said in my opening statement, in facilitating support on the ground in terms of homelessness services. As Brook stated before, that is what we want to hopefully do with our homelessness protocol.

But as we are going through this recovery phase from the COVID-19 pandemic we actually want to try to keep monitoring how we are responding to the local community and how we are working with those local agencies and how we are working with the state government. For example, there is a representative of DHHS who sits on a municipal emergency management committee, and there is a representative of Cohealth, which is the local health agency that provides homeless outreach support to people in the City of Maribyrnong, and there are

other key agencies as well. So, really, there is the opportunity for us to keep providing support and coordinating as best we can throughout the municipality and of course the western region. As I reiterated before, there is the opportunity—councils are quite good at sharing information with each other. We share information with Brimbank and with the other western region councils. I mentioned the IMAP councils in terms of the homeless street count—that is something else we want to try to keep doing. With some of my colleagues, we have all been advocating through the MAV for affordable housing and we have an Inter-Council Affordable Housing Network as well, which is basically an advocacy body for affordable housing.

**Mr BARTON:** I think it is all fantastic and it is what local government can do with state government. But what I am really suggesting is that when the public need intervention, I do not know what to do. I do not know where to go, I do not know who to speak to. Someone needs to reach out and grab them by the hand and show them the way. Is that a role for council?

**Mr ROBERTS-PALMER:** As I mentioned with the community connectors, it is a role for council in terms of being able to respond to those people directly at the moment. And they can respond to them; they can provide assistance and then direct them to the right service. The community connectors will refer people to local family violence services, they will refer people to Unison and they will do that work. So there is a role for council to play in doing that, and that is why, at the very least, we can act as a referral point and provide where we can if there is a service. We do have a social worker at our council and she can provide support. She is located at Braybrook. We also have what we call an ACH worker, which is affordable community housing, and she attempts to place people who are over 50 in social housing and other affordable accommodation. We also have nomination rights for Gordon Street housing in Footscray, so we are able to place people there. So there are some things we do directly, but we are also at the moment really trying to support those local agencies and refer people on so if people do call us for help, we can say, ‘Okay, here is where you should go. Here are some of the options’, and it is about being able to provide people with enough information so that they can get the help they need.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Unfortunately we have come to the end of our time here. Thank you, Malcolm and Brook. It was really great to hear from you. It is really great to see the real dedication that you and your councils have in this area. I hope that at the end of this we will find some solutions that enable local government, federal government and state government to work more effectively together so we can really meet the needs of both of your growing councils. Thank you to all of the committee members. Thank you to the team.

**Witnesses withdrew.**