

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 9 September 2020

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

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Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Lee Tarlamis

WITNESSES

Ms Linda Weatherson, General Manager, Community and City Services,

Mr Graham Porteous, Director, Strategic Projects, and

Mr Barney Wilson, Acting Team Leader, City People, Executive Services, City of Melbourne.

The CHAIR: Welcome back, everyone, and thank you for joining us. This is, as I have mentioned previously, the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues public hearing for the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. I am very happy to just quickly introduce the committee to our next witnesses from the City of Melbourne. I am Fiona Patten, the Chair; Tien Kieu, Deputy Chair; Kaushaliya Vaghela; Rod Barton; Lee Tarlamis; and Wendy Lovell. Thank you very much, Graham Porteous, Linda Weatherson and Barney Wilson from the City of Melbourne, for joining us today for what I think is a most important inquiry, and 2020 is really proving that for us.

If I could just let you know that all of the evidence is being recorded today, but also it is protected by parliamentary privilege, and this is under our *Constitution Act* but also under the standing orders of the Legislative Council. Therefore any information that you provide to us is protected by law. However, if you were to repeat those comments outside, you may not receive the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. As I mentioned, this is all being recorded. We have got a cast of thousands in the background transcribing and hanging onto your every word. You will receive a proof version of this transcript after this session, and I would encourage you to check it for any misrepresentation because ultimately it will form part of our report and will make its way onto the committee's website.

We understand you have got a presentation for us, and we would really welcome some opening remarks before we move into some general discussion.

Ms WEATHERSON: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, committee, for providing us—or me, first—the opportunity to speak today. My name is Linda Weatherson, and I am the General Manager of Community and City Services at the City of Melbourne. I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, the Boon Wurrung and the Woiwurrung people of the Eastern Kulin nation, and I pay my respect to their elders past, present and emerging.

Visual presentation.

Ms WEATHERSON: I would like to start by applauding you, the committee, for the very important work of this inquiry, and to thank you for recognising that homelessness is an issue of critical importance that cannot remain unaddressed. I would also like to acknowledge the Victorian government and the homelessness sector, with whom the City of Melbourne have worked to deliver a rapid and coordinated housing response to people sleeping rough or at risk of homelessness during COVID-19. This partnership has demonstrated how swiftly we can put services in place and a roof over people's heads. Our challenge is to ensure people remain in housing and do not return to living on our streets as a default.

Today I want to focus on three areas. I will provide an overview of homelessness in the municipality of Melbourne, I will outline our work to create pathways out of homelessness, and I will also highlight our key recommendations from the submission, noting that since we wrote the submission COVID-19 has necessitated an emergency response to support people experiencing homelessness.

Our municipality covers 38 square kilometres and has 179 000 residents living across 14 suburbs. Homelessness rates in our municipality have soared over the last 10 years. In the 2016 Australian census 1728 people were recorded as homeless. This number doubled in just five years, up from 923 in the 2011 census. There has also been a sharp increase in the number of people sleeping rough in our city. We have been collecting information about these people who are sleeping in parklands, on streets and in other parts of the municipality since 2008 on a biennial basis. Our data shows that people sleeping rough increased by more than 170 per cent between 2011 and 2016. There was a 500 per cent increase in people sleeping in severely overcrowded accommodation.

For us at the City of Melbourne a further hidden and very significant challenge is people living in vacant buildings, commonly known as squats, and also in unregistered rooming houses. These environments present enormous health and safety issues for both the individuals and the organisations who have to manage them.

There is simply not enough housing to safely and securely house those in immediate need. This is demonstrated in the housing spectrum. We know that the supply of temporary housing options in social and affordable housing far outstrips demand. Most recent data—that is, pre COVID—indicates that 82 000 people were on the Victorian public housing waiting list. There is a very real risk that this will considerably increase with the economic impact of COVID. Anecdotal evidence from support services indicates that already some people are returning to the streets, and there are also new faces that we have not seen coming onto the streets.

People who have been sleeping rough for extended periods in our city have very complex needs. They require a diverse range of services. The most common of these are for housing, but others include support for mental health, drug and alcohol, disability, immigration, family violence and legal assistance. This reflects the breadth of barriers that prevent people from accessing and sustaining housing.

We also know that Aboriginal people are vastly over-represented in the homeless population across Melbourne. During COVID, 960 people from across greater Melbourne were housed in our municipality as part of the government's emergency accommodation program. Launch Housing statistics show that 12 per cent of these people were of Aboriginal descent. This is despite Aboriginal people comprising just 0.8 per cent of Victoria's population.

So what are we doing about it? We, the City of Melbourne, support the Housing First approach, which as you know, focuses on safe and permanent housing as a first priority. We partner with health and homelessness services, the Victorian government and corporate and philanthropic sectors to create pathways out of homelessness. We are also exploring service delivery gaps for Aboriginal people sleeping rough in our municipality and are supporting the development of culturally safe approaches and options.

However, despite all the work over the past 10 years, the lack of social supported and affordable housing debilitates our efforts to get people into long-term safe and secure housing. Last year we commissioned SGS Economics and Planning to analyse demand for affordable rental housing in our municipality. This report found that in 2016 there was a demand for almost 9500 affordable housing units and a supply of just under 4000, leaving a shortfall of 5500 social and affordable rental homes. This shortfall is expected to quadruple by 2036, and that is without consideration of the outcomes of the impact of COVID.

The City of Melbourne remains committed to our submission recommendations, but we do recognise that a lot has changed since February. Our number one recommendation is that the Victorian government increases the funding and supply of social and affordable housing. Now Australia is in a recession and unemployment is increasing, an enormous number of people in Melbourne and Victoria are at risk of homelessness, for now and in the months and years to come. There is hope; we recognise that. The Victorian government's response to rough sleepers during the COVID pandemic demonstrates how swiftly we can put services in place and a roof over people's heads. The time and opportunity for reform is here and now, and the state government has a vital role to play. The housing provided to rough sleepers and other vulnerable members of our community during COVID needs to be built upon. We need more than just reinvestment in what we are already doing; we need innovation and improvement.

We encourage the government to look at new and innovative ways to increase the supply of supported housing options. This includes partnering with local government. The City of Melbourne has put in an expression of interest, as part of the government's rapid housing response tender, to refurbish two of our buildings in the city. This could provide transitional accommodation in supported housing, along with services. We strongly support the government's \$150 million From Homelessness to a Home package announced in July. There is a cohort of people currently within hotel accommodation that needs a tailored response. During the transition out of hotels a tailored individual approach must be adopted to ensure that people remain in housing long term.

A second key recommendation is that funding and coordination of supported services be increased. The City of Melbourne's homeless service coordination project is successfully delivering coordinated services to vulnerable sleepers. Meetings occur on a weekly basis between us, DHHS and 13 specialist agencies to help rough sleepers. As a strategy, service coordination has provided a blueprint to build on as we transition people out and

support new and emerging homeless populations. During the COVID pandemic the City of Melbourne have facilitated the development of a by-name list through our service coordination project. A by-name list provides us an understanding of the names and needs of every person sleeping rough in our city. It allows us to better coordinate and triage resources across all services. There are already 500 names on that by-name list in Melbourne. Additional funding for support services and culturally safe and appropriate housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members is also critical. This must be underpinned by a self-determining model and a partnership with Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal-led organisations.

Over the last year we have worked with the commissioner for residential tenancies on her review of the prescribed accommodation regulations, and we very much support her recommendations. We believe these are critical to ensuring the safety and health of people living in vacant buildings and at the lower end of the accommodation market, such as rooming houses and backpackers. We also recommend that any decisions made by this inquiry and the government take into account the expertise of people with lived experience of homelessness. At the City of Melbourne our Homelessness Advisory Committee includes several members with lived experience. Their insights are invaluable in guiding our decisions and policies.

Our third and final recommendation is around advocacy. We call upon the Victorian government to advocate to the Australian government for a long-term national housing and homelessness strategy. This includes social and affordable housing with permanent support services. We also ask for advocacy on welfare system reforms. These include maintaining the increased JobSeeker income support payment long term; increasing and adequately indexing welfare payments, including commonwealth rent assistance, so that individuals and families on the lowest level incomes can access private rental markets; and adequately funding to prepare national disability insurance scheme applications for people with mental illness and people experiencing homelessness.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present today. As we face the unprecedented challenge of COVID we need to harness this powerful opportunity for change and invest in affordable, social and supported housing for Melbourne and Victoria's most vulnerable residents. I am happy to answer any questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for that presentation, Linda. I am just checking whether Graham or Barney wanted to make any additional comments before we move to questions. Fantastic, thank you. I commend so much of the work that the City of Melbourne has been doing, and you really have been a leader not only in this state but also nationally in bringing homelessness and the solutions to it to the forefront.

I wanted to discuss inclusionary zoning because I note that you have put that into your recommendations. What would you like to see? I notice that you also say that there would be a cash option in lieu of inclusionary zoning or some form of affordable housing. So when you talk about inclusionary zoning, are you talking about affordable housing or are you talking about community housing? What do you believe should be in that inclusionary zoning and maybe what sort of percentages do you think we should recommend?

Ms WEATHERSON: Thanks, Chair. Chair, can I refer to my colleagues here, who probably have more detail about it than me. Barney, would you like to answer the question?

Mr WILSON: Yes, certainly. Thank you for the question. I would also note that the positioning around inclusionary zoning that the City of Melbourne has pursued sits within a draft affordable housing strategy which is due for further consideration by councillors post our next council election. I am not within the strategic services team that actually leads that piece of work. It is fair to say that there is a way to go in terms of really unpacking the exact form of housing that that mechanism would attempt to try and increase the supply of. At its heart it is really looking at a nuanced approach that can sit in line with what the Victorian government could roll out more universally across Victoria. The critical part to that—and this is what we have heard through our investigation around mandatory inclusionary zoning—is it needs to create a level playing field across all jurisdictions but also acknowledge that there are variations within certain municipalities where certain forms of housing development are going to be more appropriate than others. But it is certainly something that the city has remained committed to. It sits within the draft affordable housing strategy. We would be happy to come back and take the detailed question on notice and provide a more fulsome response in terms of the actual housing form it is attempting to do.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks, Barney. Thank you, all of you; I would appreciate that. Just quickly on the empty building projects, which I think are really terrific in providing a much quicker response to this when you can use an existing structure and reallocate it, given what we have seen with international students, are you expecting to see a lot of that student accommodation in the City of Melbourne remain vacant for probably at least the next 12 months? And does that provide us with an opportunity?

Mr PORTEOUS: Thanks, Chair; if I might respond. Look, that is a really interesting question. As part of our response to looking at how we might provide accommodation, we have been looking at student accommodation or student accommodation buildings as an option, but there are some challenges in that space. I think Linda referred to in her report that people who are homeless often have quite complex needs and require quite a range of support services. Student accommodation would have to be quite specific. If it is general dormitory-style accommodation, it is probably not going to be exactly what we are looking for. We have been looking very carefully at what that might mean over the next 12 months and whether that is an option. We do know that interstate there have been some examples where it has been used. Brisbane, I think, is probably the one that jumps to mind straightaway. That has been marginally successful, I think, but again it gets down to, ‘How many people are you talking about having on a floor?’, for example. ‘Do they have their own rooms? Do they have their own utilities, bathroom, shower, or is it a communal-type space?’. So we need to be really careful about what it is that we would actually be offering. But it is certainly a possibility, and I think if we could make use of it we would certainly be interested in doing it.

The CHAIR: I recognise that it is certainly not perfect. It was particularly looking at the ones where there is more of a studio apartment setting where, rather than it sitting vacant for the next 18 months, can you put it in the mix? But thank you. Tien?

Dr KIEU: Thank you. Thank you for being here today. We are facing a very challenging time, and the problem will become bigger when we move out of the COVID situation. One of the problems you have been trying to address is affordable housing. I would like to explore further details. The problems with housing in general cannot be solved by one group or one level of government; it has to be the federal, the state and the local. My question is: you have been looking at the vacant buildings and what incentives that local government can do, particularly the City of Melbourne, for the vacant rental properties, not only the student ones but also in the general context. Also, moving forward, I think post COVID some of the office buildings might be underutilised because people may be working from home more or for whatever reason. Is there any thinking of converting them into accommodation that can be used for either short term or longer term?

Mr PORTEOUS: Thank you. I think the answer is we have had some discussions with—

Dr KIEU: Sorry, just to finish my talk: I note that in order to encourage the landlords of some of the vacant rental properties to provide that and supply that need there may be some incentive that the local government could do—for example, a rates reduction may be something; I do not know. But actually it is a very difficult question, because with more people coming in you have to provide more services, and if you reduce the rates as a local government that will become more difficult to internally budget and so on—so just some incentive and also some thinking forward to explore this situation, so to speak.

Mr PORTEOUS: Thank you. I had just started to say that we have had some very general discussions with a couple of different owners of vacant buildings or buildings that are currently being used for accommodation—hotels and the like—as to whether we would have an interest in converting those. They are very preliminary discussions. We have said, ‘Of course we’re interested’. We have not got into the detail of whether they would be wanting council to purchase those buildings. Would they be a lease? Would we offer rate relief? We have not had those levels of discussions, but they are certainly things that we will be exploring, I think, particularly over the next 12 months and I think particularly as we see—and as certainly you would all be aware—that the hotel industry is particularly struggling at the moment, which is just stating the obvious. We are keen to look at what other options there may be out there, but again we need to be creating a level of housing for the right cohort. Lots of large multistorey spaces for rough sleepers to sleep is not for everyone, and so we just need to be careful about how we go at this. There are some interesting ideas in there. The rate relief is certainly an interesting one and worth pursuing I think.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Wendy.

Ms LOVELL: Thanks very much, Fiona. The rough sleeping in the city exploded between 2014 and 2016. We actually saw a 74 per cent increase in rough sleepers in the city, and it has been really pleasing to see the response during COVID to get people off the streets and into accommodation. Particularly it is really distressing in the very cold, bleak winter months to see people sleeping out on the street. But when we were at Parliament last week, I noticed the people who are now popping up again as rough sleepers being more obvious. Is this people who have come out of the hotels back onto the streets, or is it new people coming into the city, do you think?

Ms WEATHERSON: Thank you for the question. It is a bit of both. Our understanding is that some people have had enough of the hotel accommodation. This goes back to the point of needing to find the appropriate sustainable long-term solution for each and every individual, and for some it has worked really, really well, and they are ready to move on into something more permanent. For others, they just want to get back on the streets.

As I mentioned in my speech, there are new faces for us too. So we have our daily support team out on the street. They are contractors through Launch, but those people are on the street and are seeing new faces. I have asked the question of whether they look like recently homeless people or whether they look like long-term homeless people. They do look as though they probably have been rough sleeping elsewhere for some time.

Ms LOVELL: And now coming to the city?

Ms WEATHERSON: Yes.

Ms LOVELL: Where the services are—and what attracts them to the city is all of those services in the city, so that is why there is a concentration of the problem. It is a really vexed issue too, because it is not a crime to sleep out. Some of them actually do have accommodation, but they choose to be on the street because that is their community, and often there are mental health issues or something driving them to sleeping rough as well. So it is a very vexed issue for you to solve in the city, but it is also a vexed issue for the service providers because you cannot force somebody to take help or to take accommodation either.

I know when I was housing minister there was a woman who used to sleep in Little Lonsdale Street, just at the back of DHHS. I passed her coming to work in the morning and going home of an evening, because I walked between 50 Lonsdale and my apartment, and it used to upset me greatly, because she was quite ill at some stage, but there was no way of forcing her to take assistance, no matter how many times, even as a housing minister. I was pointing it out to my department or to the service providers. They would all say, ‘We can’t force her off the street. She has to be a danger to someone else for us to do that’—so a really difficult issue for the City of Melbourne. You do a great job with the services that you provide and working with the other service providers in the city as well, so thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Wendy. Kaushaliya.

Ms VAGHELA: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Linda, Graham and Barney, for your representation today. We spoke about not any particular type of building, whether it is a multistorey building, being suitable for all different types of cohorts, and we need the tailored, individual approach for people who are currently housed in temporary accommodation once COVID-19 is over. I also heard that there is a high per cent from an Aboriginal background of people who are facing homelessness or housing issues. So has the City of Melbourne seen any increases in homelessness from any particular demographic, whether it is people from Aboriginal backgrounds, young men and women of CALD background, elderly people—and international students were mentioned—because until we know where we are seeing the increase we will not know how to target those particular cohorts and build or have the accommodation to suit their needs?

Ms WEATHERSON: Could I ask over what period? Are you talking about the COVID period?

Ms VAGHELA: After COVID-19 is over and then the lessons that we learn from here. Have we seen an increase in any particular demographic, because if we have seen, say, for example, an increase in international students and if we want to cater the needs for them, then the style of accommodation would be different. If we see it in elderly people, then their needs will be different. I just want to know: have we seen any particular trend? Which cohort is presenting higher in terms of facing homelessness?

Ms WEATHERSON: I will answer that, but Graham might like to say something too. At the moment there are not enough people back on the streets to demonstrate to us whether there is a particular cohort that has significantly increased as a result of COVID. But as I was saying in my presentation, over recent years there has been a significant increase in Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, and also in women, the number of women who have become obvious, living rough, sleeping rough on the street, some with children too. Anecdotally and from what the service providers are saying, this is generally the result of domestic violence.

Mr PORTEOUS: The only thing that I would add to Linda's comments is that, as she mentioned in her opening remarks, we are seeing an emergence on the streets of a new homelessness. I think the answer is it is a mixture of all of those, but we do not have enough empirical data yet to know whether there are any particular trends. And to be honest we probably will not know that for quite a while, until we slowly start to move out of the current restrictions.

Mr WILSON: I would—

The CHAIR: Yes, so—sorry.

Mr WILSON: Just to sort of round out in terms of the people who are currently in hotel accommodation and ensuring a tailored response is in place to effectively transition people into longer term housing options, there is a power of work in train through all of the agencies actively supporting those people in hotels and obviously some quite detailed analysis through the Department of Health and Human Services to really understand the particular individual needs that each of those people has, so that they can build effective plans to transition people out.

The CHAIR: Yes, it would be an absolute travesty if we went back to where we were, having been able to provide those services and that housing. Rod?

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Graham, Linda, Barney, I just want to say thank you and congratulate you for the work the City of Melbourne does. The Chair and my fellow committee members have asked all the questions that I was going to ask. So thank you very much, and I certainly look forward to being able to work with you as we move forward. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Rod. Well, we probably would not be here without you, given it was your reference to this committee. I know Lee has got some alarming alarms going on in his background, so I am not sure he is actually able to ask questions. Is that still the case, Lee? Okay. Well, we have actually run out of time anyway. Thank you so much, Linda, Graham and Barney, for today. And again, I really appreciated your submission a lot, because it comes up with those solutions and those suggestions, and I think you also really eloquently echo a lot of the other submissions around the type of advocacy work that this Victorian government should be doing. So thank you. And thank you to everyone who has been joining us online.

Witnesses withdrew.