

Inquiry into Homelessness

Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's public hearing: Whittlesea

Who we are:

WCC is an independent, place based and community-led organisation with long standing connections across the City of Whittlesea.

Our organisation provides a range of free and confidential services and programs. These supports are provided to people most in need, ensuring everyone has equal access to the community's resources and services.

For the period of July 2018 – Dec 2019 14% of WCC's clients identified as being homeless.

(see appendix 1: data)

Homelessness in Whittlesea:

Across the City of Whittlesea, there is a low level of social and affordable housing, and demand far outweighs supply. In 2016 over half (53.8%) of all households in the City of Whittlesea were experiencing moderate or heavy housing related financial stress and with rental households more likely to experience housing related stress. (City of Whittlesea, Household Survey, 2016)

Currently only 1.3% of all dwellings are social, housing compared to a Greater Melbourne's average of 2.6%. In September 2017, there were 2,573 applicants for social housing on the Victorian Housing Register in North East Melbourne (Whittlesea, Nillumbik, Darebin and Banyule), 49% were priority access applicants.

(<https://www.whittlesea.vic.gov.au/media/3991/homes-for-all-fact-sheet.pdf>)

It is estimated that 3,497 households have an unmet need for affordable housing in City of Whittlesea. This represents 5.2% of all households. Rental households were somewhat more likely than mortgagee households to report moderate or heavy housing related financial stress. This is despite median rental payments being lower than median mortgage payments. (City of Whittlesea, Household Survey, 2016)

Although the private rental market in Whittlesea costs less in comparison to other suburbs, it is not adequately meeting the housing needs of a growing and changing population in Whittlesea.

The demand for affordable housing will only continue to increase as population in City of Whittlesea grows. Anecdotal feedback from local services indicate that the face of homelessness is changing with an increase in the number of people sleeping rough in suburbs including young people and women with children.

WCC observations are that the homelessness population is diverse with varied, multiple and complex needs requiring a holistic response that includes health, welfare/financial, and community/social supports.

WCC clients experiencing homelessness and at risk of homelessness includes

- People seeking asylum
- Single women with children
- Young People

- Women experiencing family violence
- Single men with mental health
- Single people over 50 (women and men)
- Newly arrived migrants
- Single men on Newstart Allowance

(See Appendix 2:Case Studies)

Recommendations:

In September 2019 The Whittlesea Housing and Homelessness Action Group (WHAAG) was established, it's membership consists of a broad range of organisations with a collective focus of develop a 10 year shared plan that responds to housing and homelessness in the City of Whittlesea.

The plan is currently in development and will include tangible short, medium and long-term priorities to address local issues along the homelessness risk continuum.

The WHAAG has identified a number of priority needs across the homelessness and housing spectrum. The identified needs are:

- Access to showers and laundry facilities for people experiencing homelessness.
- A locally based access point into homelessness services.
- Local emergency family accommodation (more than 2 bedrooms).
- Additional transitional accommodation properties.
- Increase supply of affordable housing options.

Ending homelessness for good!

The lack of current policy clarity, adequate funding and the increase in poverty and disadvantage for marginalised Australians are the direct causes of homelessness; without structural change and large scale investment in social housing Australia will continue to see staggering increases in homelessness. (Michelle Welsh, Housing and Homelessness in Whittlesea)

Large investment of social housing needs the following considerations:

- Diverse property portfolio to reflect the housing needs of a diverse population; to include psychiatric needs, settlement needs, families, intergenerational households, young people, people with disabilities etc.
- Availability and accessibility of support, community services and meaningful activity for disadvantaged people at risk of homelessness requires investment introducing new prevention and early intervention initiatives.
- European Union researchers identified five factors in developing integrated strategies to reduce and end homelessness:

1. 'The needs and the rights of the individual should be the starting point for any strategy to fight homelessness'
2. 'Housing First', noting that the construction of affordable housing is fundamental to this policy
3. 'Funding the strategy' is key, for without adequate and long-term investment the strategy to end homelessness is destined to fail
4. 'The importance of a continuous and constant strategy.' As an example, for over 20 years, Finland had an integrated strategy and has built new permanent housing, converted emergency housing into supported units and developed new service models—all based on Housing First principles
5. Multi-level governance: 'A convergence of stakeholders in the fight against homelessness is necessary to invest all efforts on moving together towards the same objectives.'

(AHURI, *Supporting older Australians experiencing homelessness*, November 2019)

Within this context, consideration needs to be given to:

The private rental market, which is largely inaccessible, unaffordable and insecure for households on low incomes. Significant reform of the private rental market and much better resourced and comprehensive support for tenants is needed. There is urgent need to develop additional rental housing affordable for households below \$202 per week, as the private rental market does not generate rentals at this level even when there is an overall increase in supply. It is also essential that rents be kept at affordable levels.

Sustainable tenancies require careful allocation and, for some residents (particularly those with complex needs), the provision of ongoing support— whether that was support to manage addictions, assist with finance management, remain connected to school or work, or be able to function alone in a property.

Targeted employment services directed at supporting tenants into sustainable, meaningful work—and therefore incomes that can be maintained over time—are needed to support pathways out of the social housing system and to sustain private rental.

AHURI, *Pathways in, within and out of social housing in Australia—Policy Evidence Summary*, January 2020 & AHURI, *Changes in affordability and availability of rental housing in Australia*, December 2019

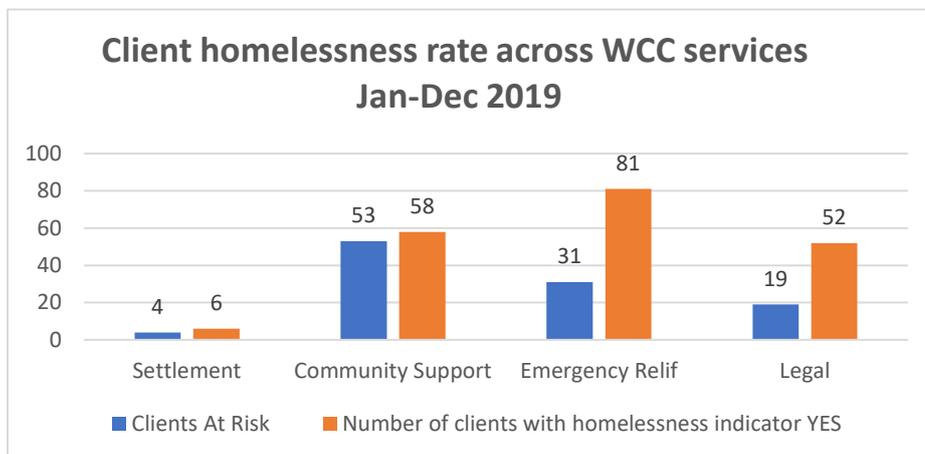
Lastly, effort to combat the stigma associated with social housing along with public perceptions of deserving and non-deserving Australians will ensure we do not find ourselves in the same crisis in years to come.

Appendix 1:

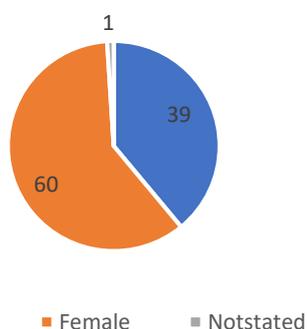
WHITTLESEA COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS CLIENT HOMELESSNESS DATA: 1 JAN 2019 – 31 DEC 2019



314 WCC clients were either experiencing homelessness or were at-risk of homelessness from Jan-Dec 2019



Sex of WCC clients with homelessness indicator Jan-Dec 2019



Age Rang:	Percentage of clients Homelessness
0-18 Years	4%
19-25 Years	7%
26-34 Years	19%
35-64 Years	61%
65+ Years	9%
Total	100%

OTHER STATISTICS

• **Of the 314 WCC clients with a homelessness indicator in 2019:**

- 8 clients identified as Aboriginal or Torres Straight Islander
- 64% clients mainly spoke English at home, 36% clients mainly spoke a language other than English.
- 48% of clients identified as having a disability or mental illness

• **Of the 71 legal clients with a homelessness indicator in 2019:**

- 49 clients had experienced family violence
- 52 clients had dependant children - 58 clients had a low income

• **Of the 112 Emergency Relief clients with a homelessness indicator in 2019:**

- 101 clients identified government payments as being their main source of income
- 65 clients were born in Australia

Appendix 2:

Case study 1:

Brian* 45 years old was born in New Zealand in a small rural town. At the age of six months, he suffered from a stroke, which left him with permanent physical, psychological and sensory disabilities requiring a full time carer support. Not long after his stroke, his parents passed away in an accident and he went to live with his auntie who became his full time carer. Due to lack of services, programs and support for child victims of stroke in the rural town Brian lived in he was unable to receive the support required to help him overcome some of the impacts of his stroke such as learning to read and write.

In 2006, Brian's auntie/carer decided to relocate to Australia leaving Brian no option but to accompany his auntie, as he needed the carer support. A year later due to personal and unforeseen circumstances Brian's auntie was unable to continue providing carer support for Brian and he became homeless. Brian has now been homeless for the last four years occasionally couch surfing and rough sleeping in and around Melbourne city and the metropolitan areas. Due to the impacts of the stroke i.e. unable to read, unable to write, mobility issues and short-term memory loss, Brian has struggled to access services for support, apply for Public/Priority housing and further find secure housing such as share accommodation or his own rental property. Service system barriers such as lack of resources, staffing and specialised disability support have been a large reason why Brian has been unable to access the support needed to secure a home.

In the last six months, Brian has been able to temporarily stay with his sister as she has now moved to Melbourne. Brian currently sleeps on his sister's couch in the living room but the house is overcrowded as his sister has three teenage children and only a two bedroom home. The town that Brian is staying in borders on the rural fringe of Melbourne which means there are even fewer services Brian can access and also lack of transport i.e. train line.

The only reason Brian was able to connect with our service was due to a pilot program "Fix it Friday" that the Department of Justice, local community house and our service WCC ran in the town that Brian is currently staying in. Without this pilot program, Brian would have continued to struggle to access any support from any services. At present, our casework service has been struggling to find Brian the appropriate support needed to assist him to find securing housing as he has complex support needs. Brian is needing a disability support advocate and housing case manager that will be able to work one on one with Brian to take him to the local housing service Haven Home Safe (access point for Priority Housing), assist with understanding documentation required and filling in the required paperwork, assistance looking for share accommodation or a private rental property, submitting applications and support attending inspections. Further once he secures a home he would require ongoing support to manage basic transactions such as signing up for gas and electricity, paying rent and bills and every other day transactions that require someone to able to read and write.

Without access to the appropriate ongoing housing support Brian needs he continues to face homelessness and will continue to be at risk of homelessness in the future, if he does secure housing.

Case study 2:

Mona* 63 year old woman from Syria arrived to Australia with her youngest adult daughter in 2013. Mona arrived to Australia on a Sponsor Visa sponsored by her eldest daughter and her husband. Mona fled Syria in 2013 to Turkey with her daughter and two sons in 2013.

WCC has provided settlement support to Mona since arrival including casework services, linking into material aid, attending a number of our settlement groups. Mona has experienced a number of challenges with settling into her new country and has often talked about her conflicted feelings associated with leaving behind two of her children and grandchildren in Turkey.

Since arrival, Mona and her youngest daughter have lived with her eldest daughter, her husband and their 2 children in a small rental property. This has resulted in dynamic struggles and conflict amongst the adults with the eldest daughter and her husband filing for divorce. Mona has discussed wanting to obtain housing independently but on Newstart Allowance this has been financially impossible. Sharing with unrelated adults is also not a culturally appropriate option. Although Mona is still living with her eldest daughter she believes her daughter holds resentment towards her for the dissolution of her marriage and Mona herself carries enormous guilt. Mona was support by WCC to apply for public housing and is aware that the waitlist is years.

Case Study 3:

Jane* presented to service through a referral from a primary school in the local government area. Jane is 43-year-old single mother to three dependent son's aged 13 years, 15 years and 17 years. Jane has a history of sexual and physical violence with her ex-partner (father of the three son's). Due to impact of trauma from this, Jane developed a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The father is currently in jail and has been in jail for thirteen years as a result from the perpetration of the violence. Over this period Jane and her children were homeless and then placed in refuge. For much time their housing situation was quite unstable and transient. Jane was able to obtain a rental in the City of Whittlesea and the family's situation became stable. Unfortunately, a house fire destroyed the home.

This placed the family in homelessness. A fellow community member offered the family to temporarily move in with him and his child. After living with this person for a few months, he physically and sexually abused Jane and her and her children had to flee the home. At this point, the children were placed into care of family friends and Jane was living in her car with her dog it was during this time Jane engaged with WCC. WCC's caseworker proceeded to assist Jane in applying for private rentals and WCC's Family Violence Housing Brokerage Program. Jane advised that she previously had a public housing application. Worker called Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and was advised the application had expired, DHHS reinstated this application. It was not a priority application. Jane requested if the local Housing Service Provider (Haven Home Safe: HHS) could assist in funding a hotel for the weekend so that her and her children could spend the weekend together. Worker advocated to HHS to obtain this support.

Jane then moved into a family member's home with her youngest son. The other two son's remained in the family friend's home, as there was not enough room at Jane's family member's home. The community member located Jane and was threatening and violent. Jane proceeded to begin the process of engaging Police, Orange Door and Berry Street with support for an Intervention Order. Jane moved out of her family member's home, as she did not want to put her safety at risk. HHS, Orange Door and Berry Street advised Jane they could only assist with temporary emergency housing. A friend in Craigieburn then offered Jane that her

and her youngest son could live with them and Jane moved here. Currently this is where Jane is living with her youngest and her two other son's remain living with the family friends. This location is in the Hawthorn area, the 15-year-old son has changed schools as a result, and the eldest continues his Tafe course. This home situation as described by Jane is safe and stable for her sons.

Jane's housing situation remains unstable and unsafe and further her family unit is split because of limited housing service support, unaffordable and unobtainable housing and gaps in the service system for both housing and family violence.