

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into civics and electoral participation in Victorian state parliamentary elections

Melbourne — 24 October 2017

Members

Ms Louise Asher — Chair

Ms Ros Spence — Deputy Chair

Ms Melina Bath

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn

Mr Martin Dixon

Ms Fiona Patten

Mr Adem Somyurek

Witness

Dr Andrew Hollows, executive general manager, research, policy and service development, Launch Housing.

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR — We have received a very comprehensive submission from Launch Housing. Thank you so much for coming along to speak to us today. It is appreciated. You will have heard already that you are protected by privilege for this, but not outside the room. I am assuming you want a couple of preliminary comments, so could you state your full name and your business address and advise the committee whether you are appearing in a private capacity or whether you are representing Launch Housing.

Dr HOLLOWS — Thank you for that. Good morning, everyone. Yes, I am appearing on behalf of Launch Housing. My name is Andrew Hollows, and our business address is 68 Oxford Street, Collingwood. If I could take the opportunity just to step through some of the key points of the submission, and of course I am happy to take questions.

Launch Housing, as the committee may be aware, is the amalgamation of HomeGround Services and Hanover Welfare Services two years ago, so basically an amalgamation of two longstanding secular-based homelessness agencies in Melbourne. Launch Housing operates across many sites — 14 sites, 19 municipal areas — and has up to 18 000 contacts per annum. That may be multiple contacts but nonetheless there are a lot of contacts through the breadth of services provided. It is anything from larger crisis centres, such as Southbank and over Southbank, through to transitional housing, tenancy advice and everything in between. Increasingly, perhaps unsurprisingly, we have a much stronger focus on women leaving situations of family and domestic violence as well, so a whole spectrum of issues. Also a large number of, I guess, clients or consumers of Launch Housing are also accompanied children as well and families.

The data I present — and this has been attached to the submission — is based on a whole range of research done by particularly Hanover welfare for nearly nine or 10 years. I can speak from experience about that because I have just recently come back to Launch Housing, but I was working for Hanover 10 years ago and remembered that at that stage we were quite concerned about perceptions of low attendance or participation in elections at that time, and that also coincided with the introduction, more or less, of the human rights charter and that important political right of being able to exercise your right to vote as well. So we thought, ‘Rather than just relying on, I guess, stories and people’s perceptions, let’s actually dig a little bit further’, and hence the results ever since of eight surveys for two state elections and two federal elections. Unfortunately a survey was not conducted for the last state election, but we are planning to do one for both the federal and state elections next year.

There is a wealth of data there. I guess there is a trend in there and we are trying to sort of improve the rate there, but it is a low rate. To give some context around homelessness, homelessness has been, I guess certainly this calendar year, pretty much to the fore particularly on the back of issues of rough sleeping and the like in the City of Melbourne. But I remind the committee we are talking about a whole range of experiences of homelessness here, of which rough sleeping is pretty much the more visible pointy end. The majority of people who experience homelessness are those who are living in crisis accommodation, so they do not have a permanent home — you have got that uncertainty in your life — and are proof of those who, more often than not, are sharing with friends and family and slowly but surely outstay their welcome and what that means. The common element there is that there is a whole degree of uncertainty around, ‘Where am I staying? Do I have a fixed address?’, and issues around, ‘Where do I put my child into school? How do I still engage with the community?’. There is a broader story here; the ability to vote or not is sort of one aspect of people’s uncertainty about a broader sort of community and civic participation.

I guess for us the main issue is not people wanting to vote; it is actually getting people onto the electoral roll. Our survey shows that there is a small minority who typically are not aware of an election occurring or do not care. I am assuming that probably reflects the broader community out there, so there are probably no real surprises. But what has been frustratingly a consistent trend for us across the four surveys is that up to about 60 per cent of those who are eligible to enrol — so they have got citizen status — are not on the electoral roll. They have moved or dropped off the roll, or steps have been taken unsuccessfully to achieve that as well. So our strong sense is that it is not that people are not interested on the whole or do not want to exercise their rights to vote on the whole. Of course what they do in that booth — if they vote or do whatever — is up to them. Our concern and frustration is: how do you actually put mechanisms in place to keep on ensuring that enrolment occurs?

The good news for us is that over a period of time and largely on the back of this work 10 years ago, we have actually developed some really good conversations with the Victorian Electoral Commission. I guess one of the things I want to emphasise to the committee is that whilst we have got some way to go, we have had more than a receptive ear from the Victorian Electoral Commission and a preparedness to have a conversation looking at ways of achieving better outcomes here. And there is — and we will be meeting shortly, I hope, leading up to next year's state election — a homelessness advisory group, which of course includes the main service provider agencies in Melbourne and Victoria, peak bodies like the Council to Homeless Persons of Victoria and the like. So there are actually avenues already in place. We are always looking to see if we can do more, but at the very least there is a line of communication there with the Victorian Electoral Commission and a preparedness, I think, within their remit to do what they can as well.

I guess I would raise a point of contrast. I know many years ago we had similar conversations — or endeavoured to have similar conversations — with the Australian Electoral Commission without much success. So I just want to convey to the committee that whilst you may be hearing submissions looking for areas for improvement, perhaps with the VEC this is at least one area of work which we would actually like to underscore so that it continues — obviously perhaps with more resourcing, but there is goodwill and intent there from the VEC to look at ways and means to support those who are experiencing homelessness to enrol and to exercise their rights as well.

Our view is of course that if there are other ways and means by which that can occur, that would be great. To do that work way ahead of time and to plan it appropriately way ahead of time as well just means it allows our services and our support workers actually to get materials out there and remind people, and to support them where required to do that. And again as a point of contrast, we have had that situation where, if you do not give them enough time, people are disenfranchised by not being on the roll.

So in the mad rush to get enrolments for the same-sex plebiscite, whilst the AEC and the bureau of stats are saying that there would be ample opportunity to allow people to fill in their survey — and that is great — the problem was that the quick turnaround time to ensure that people were on the electoral roll actually effectively meant that a high proportion of Launch clients will have been not even at the starting gate. That was a source of concern, and there did not seem to be much consideration around giving sufficient time, energy, resourcing and education in that space. Again the moral of the story for us is that we are close to a year out from the state election; we would prefer to start communication conversations with the VEC essentially now to map out what is a good way forward and other things that we can do as well.

We also are keen for, at the point of voting, anything from the use of mobile booths to electronic voting or any other sorts of mechanisms which perhaps would be allowable for this group as well. Again we are talking about 22 000 Victorians who experience homelessness at any one point in time, based on the 2011 census, and we anticipate, sadly, with the imminent release of the 2016 census results and the strong view is that that figure will go up substantially across the country, particularly in Victoria and in New South Wales. Even if we are thinking 25 000-plus individuals, that is a sizeable chunk of the community. If we can generalise, say, the 60 per cent result — and I know on the research that is a little bit on thin ice, but just as a rule of thumb there — that is a significant part of the Victorian population who have not had the right to exercise their vote.

So for us, we will continue to plug away and work productively with the VEC and other stakeholders in achieving better outcomes here, and I guess the underlining point is: just because someone is experiencing homelessness, it should not just define them as an individual. It is like any other issue in someone's life, be it a mental issue or what have you. It is something which is a factor of their life; it does have a severe impact, yes, but it does not define them as an individual. And regardless of whether you are experiencing homelessness or not, you are still a citizen and should have the right to both enrol and exercise your right to vote when the opportunity arises. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you. I have a question in relation to the letter that your chief executive officer, Tony Keenan, sent to the committee. He raises the issue of family violence on page 2 and page 3 of that letter and makes reference to silent electors. I just want to ask: is the issue that women who have been

victims of family violence are not aware that they can enrol as a silent elector, or is the issue the process, which involves statutory declarations and a fair degree of paperwork? If you could just clarify for the committee what the obstacle is around silent voting, that would be helpful.

Dr HOLLOWS — My sense is that it would be both of those factors, but I think that like most issues it would be materials being readily at hand when clients come into contact with Launch Housing — that that opportunity can be given. I would need to check a little more with our CEO on that, but that would be my sense of how it is playing out. Yes, if there is a cumbersome process, and I am not sure that there is, there will always be a hurdle there.

There is a really fine balancing act here still. When someone comes in to the service the last thing you are thinking about is, ‘Gee whiz, I’d better get my name on the electoral roll’, and none of the workers say, ‘By the way’. How do you bring that into the arrangement? It is just the sheer trauma not just of what has led you to homelessness, and I guess that deep-breath moment of approaching an agency and all that means in terms of your sense of self-worth and self-esteem. You have got so much information, and you are probably dealing with, particularly in the context of family violence, issues around care and custody arrangements for the children and whether you have got arrangements in place with the local school or kinder et cetera, let alone possibly trying to deal with Centrelink and all that entails.

It is a really difficult one, but in the same breath, it is anything that can make that process as easy as possible. I was listening with great interest to the evidence from Vision Australia. The one constant, particularly for those who are experiencing homelessness, particularly in the crisis centre side of things, is that everyone has a smartphone. It is just a fact of life now, and it is the main way of contact. So if over time there were better ways and means of getting information out or using existing technology, which everyone now takes as part of everyday life, that is perhaps something to give some consideration to. Other forms of communication and stuff — for many people it just is not part of their lives, but having a smartphone is great for us as an agency, because it is a good way of staying in touch as well through texting and what have you. So anything along those lines just makes it easier.

That was a very long answer to your short question, but I guess it is having the relevant information at the right time, but realising that support workers picking the time and the opportunity to bring these other issues to the fore as well.

Mr DIXON — Getting the person onto the roll, you say, is a big issue. Given that has occurred, basically your clients then engage in the political process, do they?

Dr HOLLOWS — Yes.

Ms PATTEN — You made a suggestion around mobile booths, which I think is a really interesting idea. We use it for people in aged care and in hospitals and things. What else do you think would encourage people to register and vote? I get it that if we could vote on our smartphones, that would be one thing, but generally have you seen anything in your time with Hanover or Launch that has worked to engage people in that?

Dr HOLLOWS — I would like to say there is a magical solution here —

Ms PATTEN — Yes, that would be good.

Dr HOLLOWS — Yes, I am sure it would be fantastic. There are a range of things. The earlier that we can get materials at, say, the crisis centre at Southbank — we have got congregate living arrangements there, but the sooner we can materials up. Part of it is us in terms of perhaps doing sessions with the VEC — some educational stuff for our frontline workers as well, because, again, they have got big caseloads and a lot of things they need to do with their clients, and there is always that element of stuff going on in someone’s life that they need to attend to as a matter of urgency. But I guess it is just reminding front-line staff that this is an important part of our commitment as an agency. Certainly we are there not just to provide a service but to support someone as an individual and ultimately as a citizen. So

one recommendation to the VEC is to look at ways to, perhaps preferably early in the next calendar year, to look at general information and training sessions for the broader homeless sector.

The reason I say that is that the sector has, certainly in terms of frontline staff, quite a large turnover rate. We are looking at 25 per cent per annum in terms of frontline staff. That occurs because it is not everyone's cup of tea. It is quite confronting work in so many ways, and usually we employ graduates as well, so people are finding their way in terms of where they are going. It is not dissimilar to child protection, I guess, where you have equally large turnover rates.

So what you are doing is losing some of that memory as people move through and out in terms of other organisations. But I think if there is an opportunity through the VEC and perhaps working with the relevant homelessness peak body and other key agencies to have a 'What do I need to do?' session early in the new year, which may involve some workshops, education, 'What materials do you guys need and when do you need it?', would certainly go a long way to assist.

If at some stage there were some more electronic-based approaches and not just smartphones and the like as well, agencies like Launch are well placed to assist with that, because certainly part of our remit is to ensure that in terms of all of our offices and program sites there is access to computers, and hopefully over time — touch wood — wi-fi et cetera. Why? Because we see that basically access to the internet and basic IT services is pretty much similar to access to basic utilities. It is just part of what you do now, and it is such a critical part of your connection with the broader community. So if at some stage there were some sort of IT process, even around voting, we could over time certainly facilitate that through some of our program sites.

Ms BLANDTHORN — Just to follow on from that, do you find that the VEC is proactive in terms of working with you in each cycle exploring those options, or is that something you have to instigate?

Dr HOLLOWS — No. I take my hat off to the VEC. If we were having this conversation eight or nine years ago, my response perhaps would have been slightly different, but the fact is that over that period of time the VEC has been quite prepared to have the conversation and prepared to proactively look at solutions as well. As indicated briefly in the submission, it has certainly undertaken some measures there. I do not want to bag the AEC, but as a point of reference, we try to have similar conversations with the Australian Electoral Commission. I have said that at least from the VEC perspective there was a preparedness and understanding of needing to go the extra mile, so we were quite encouraged by that, and certainly feel that is still the case.

Ms PATTEN — Just one quick question. Looking at the value of voting for people in these situations, is there any knowledge around the value of being able to vote or that sense of being part of —

Dr HOLLOWS — Yes, well and truly. If I can provide an example, Launch Housing has recently instigated what we call Believe, which is our consumer reference group. What it is is a number of either existing or previous clients or consumers of Launch Housing who are quite keen to be a touchpoint in terms of, 'Yes, that's really great, but from a consumer's perspective that's not going to work' or 'Maybe you do it that way'. They provide a very strong reality check, I suppose. As an agency you tend to look at things through slightly bureaucratic processes and things like that. They look at you and think, 'Where are you coming from? You need to simplify it and make it really accessible'.

This group has people from all walks of life and all sorts of situations and backgrounds, but they have a very strong and passionate view that 'Experiencing homelessness shouldn't disenfranchise me from being an active citizen. I am an individual with the same rights, and we have a very strong view about wanting to participate, not just in voting but in society generally as well'. There will always be exceptions, but I think those exceptions probably reflect the broader overview of society as we speak across Victoria. 'Certainly do not make the connection that because I am experiencing homelessness and seems to be disconnected from society that I have no interest in it'. The view would be quite the opposite. People actually are looking at ways and means — 'I just want to be treated as a normal person, because I am'.

The CHAIR — Thank you so much for coming along and for the very, very comprehensive nature of your submission.

Dr HOLLOWS — My pleasure.

The CHAIR — You will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks time. You can make corrections but not change the substance of the evidence you have given.

Dr HOLLOWS — Fair enough. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.