# Response to rough sleeping in Victoria: situational appraisal

Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) is the peak body of the specialist homelessness sector in Victoria. We welcome the opportunity to provide a response to the situational appraisal report on rough sleeping prepared by Tony Nicholson for the Victorian Minister for Housing.

This document provides very valuable information and analysis on rough sleeping that makes an important contribution to the discussion in Victoria. Our comments below aim to a) highlight important issues identified in the report to bring them to the fore, b) to provide some further analysis and additional explanatory information where we draw different conclusions.
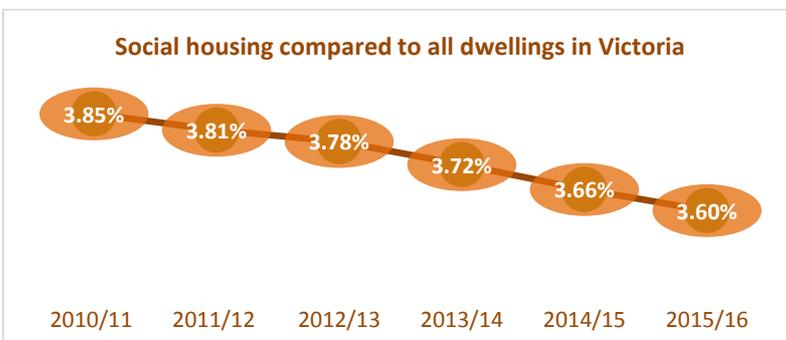
Housing as a driver of homelessness

CHP concurs with the analysis on page 10 that identifies inability to secure housing as the primary cause of homelessness. Over the past decade in Victoria, the proportion of rental properties that are affordable to low income earners has seriously declined.

Affordable rentals as percent of all rentals, Victoria

42%	21%	17%
JAN-06	JAN-11	JAN-16
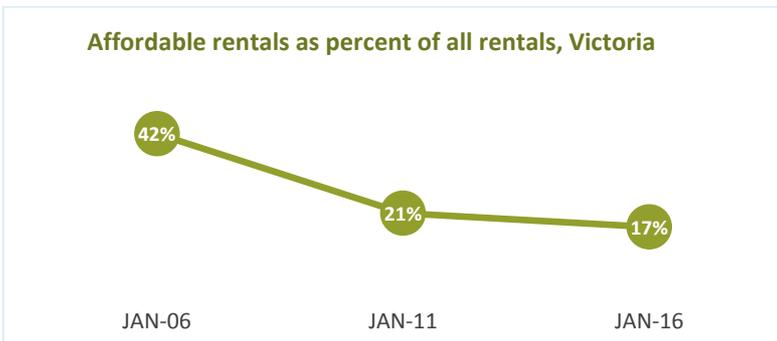
Data source: DHHS Rental report

Over the same period of time, there has also been a reduction in the proportion of Victoria's housing stock that is social housing.

Social housing compared to all dwellings in Victoria

2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
3.85%	3.81%	3.78%	3.72%	3.66%	3.60%

Data source: State Budget Papers, Victoria in Future

1

Together these two factors have made it more difficult for people on low incomes to secure housing that is affordable to them. Consequently, more people are being forced into homelessness, including visible homelessness on our streets. Once homeless, the same lack of access to affordable housing options means it is very difficult for households, even with homelessness assistance, to exit homelessness, which for many people results in longer and deeper periods of homelessness.

Given the critical importance that having access to housing options plays in both preventing homelessness, and exiting homelessness, CHP proposes this dimension be given greater prominence in the guiding principles, specifically by being noted as the primary issue to be addressed.
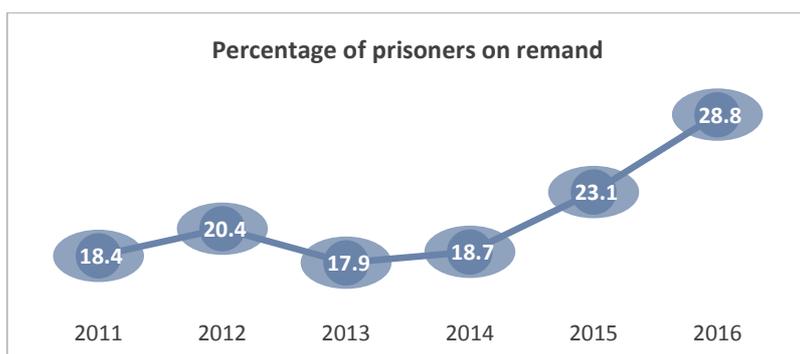
Further, while we acknowledge the very important role that private rental brokerage plays in short to medium term solutions, CHP is concerned that at some point this intervention will reach a point of market saturation, and renters with brokerage will begin to simply crowd out other low-income earners at risk of homelessness. If this point is reached the investment will cease to have a net impact on homelessness. Some service providers are advising anecdotally that this point is being reached with existing private rental brokerage investments. Consequently, CHP proposes that the guiding principles explicitly recognise the need for structural and long-term solutions to the rental affordability crisis, including reversing the downward trend of Victoria's stock that is social housing, and reinvesting in this stock to achieve at least 4% social housing.

Turning off the tap

CHP concurs with the analysis that there is significant untapped potential to reduce homelessness among people exiting prison and other institutional settings. The Victorian Government recently directed additional resources to IAP capacity for people leaving prisons and remand which should achieve some gains in preventing people losing tenancies during short terms of imprisonment, or supporting people to gain new accommodation as they complete their term. However, given the very significant recent increases in the prison population in Victoria, shown below, it is likely this additional demand will overwhelm the capacity of these additional workers.

Prisoners in Victoria on June 30

2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
4,738	4,882	5,340	6,111	6,219	6,522

Increased use of remand for people charged with crimes in Victoria presents particular challenges in relation to homelessness, as remand by its nature, is for an uncertain period of time, and may or may not lead to further imprisonment. Remand is particularly disruptive to people's employment and tenancies and its increased use will inevitably increase homelessness.

Percentage of prisoners on remand

Year	Percentage
2011	18.4
2012	20.4
2013	17.9
2014	18.7
2015	23.1
2016	28.8

Increasing availability of suitable housing options for people exiting prison is critical to any strategy that aims to 'turn off the tap' as this group faces all the same constraints in accessing affordable housing as other low income earners, but also tends to also experience discrimination. A proportion of people exiting prison will require support in addition to housing to develop positive lives in the community and avoid chronic homelessness.

Unplanned exits from social housing

CHP concurs with the analysis that there is also significant untapped potential to reduce unplanned exits from social housing. As identified in the report, this points to the need for more effective supports for highly vulnerable households prioritised into social housing. Currently there is not a service system in Victoria providing flexible and long-term support to people with more complex needs. The available support, including that provided by homelessness services, is time limited. In the case of homelessness supports these support periods have often finished before people are permanently housed, and considerations of whether to renew a support period are made in the context of competing demands from people newly homeless who are on priority lists for case management.

CHP has proposed a structural reform to address this and to build a Housing First/ permanent supportive housing capacity within Victoria in the form of portable, flexible long-term support able to move with people irrespective of housing type – see the paper *Ending chronic homelessness: A permanent supportive housing solution*.

Unplanned exits from social housing have also increased over previous years following cuts to the SHASP program. As this program has very recently been expanded and refined it can be expected to have a positive impact on future levels of unplanned exits. This function can also be built on with further investment.

Housing outcomes for rough sleepers

CHP concurs that there are significant challenges in achieving housing outcomes for people who are rough sleepers, and notes the small number of people exited into public and community housing at the end of support periods. As noted in the research conducted by Johnson et al (2012) into Housing First in Australia, these programs have been severely hamstrung by not having access to suitable housing options, such as public and community housing or affordable private rental.

At times across the report, the text infers that housing outcomes for rough sleepers can be analysed separately to overall responses (i.e. page 16 – the current mainstream support system is failing to resolve rough sleeping for the majority of people seeking help). This creates a real risk that readers misunderstand the context in which the available accommodation and housing options are necessarily prioritised across all those who present to services. This occurs within the context in which demand for housing and accommodation is many times its availability, hence *inevitably* resulting in households not receiving the assistance they need.

In other words, when Jane and John both present to homeless services indicating they have no accommodation options available and only Jane is able to access emergency accommodation, it adds little to our understanding to consider only the outcome not achieved for John. In this situation, a more complete view would reflect that rough sleeping was prevented for 50% of those at risk with the one unit of accommodation that was available.

CHP proposes that the report can better capture this challenge by explicitly noting the flow of people into rough sleeping in the context of the limited housing and accommodation resources available to the sector and the current policy context in relation to prioritisation.

Assertive outreach and Housing First

CHP strongly agrees that assertive outreach is the most effective way to engage people sleeping rough. This is explored more fully in CHP's paper *Ending chronic homelessness: A permanent supportive housing solution* that details a model that would deliver the ongoing support needed by the most complex and vulnerable people experiencing chronic homelessness, within a continuum of support that starts with assertive outreach and provision of housing. This Housing First approach specifically aims to deliver support for as long as is needed, recognizing that some people have disabilities and/or chronic mental and physical health issues, which are persistent and recurring, and which significantly heighten vulnerability to chronic and repeated periods of homelessness. Currently the absence of a service system delivering ongoing support for as long as is needed to this cohort of vulnerable people is a structural gap in our service system that is contributing to unplanned exits from housing.

CHP welcomes the recognition in the paper, that assertive outreach in Melbourne, and Housing First approaches, are being compromised by the limitations of the accommodation

offers able to be made. There is now a considerable body of evidence internationally about permanent supportive housing or Housing First approaches that highlight the importance of assertive outreach being directly linked to access to permanent housing.

Currently there are very limited housing options for people who are chronically homeless in Victoria, a factor that has severely compromised the capacity of existing programs like Melbourne Street to Home's (MS2H) to support people to exit from homelessness. In practice, MS2H is able to secure places in public housing by back-dating priority applications, effectively enabling people to swiftly move to the front of the list. Even in these circumstances people back-dated are waiting months for permanent housing, with those ineligible for this fast tracking waiting for multiple years.

It is worth noting that at a system level, re-prioritizing priority applications achieves little or no *net* impact on homelessness, as other priority applicants simply wait longer to be housed. These applicants either remain rough sleeping or in marginal forms of accommodation, or occupy crisis or temporary accommodation. CHP cautions against responses to rough sleeping that simply extend reprioritizing of the current limited housing options, rather than increasing the pool of housing available.

Given that this has been a feature of recent interventions, it is worth reiterating that a net reduction in rough sleeping will not be achieved unless the numbers of rough sleepers who are housed exceeds the number of people new to rough sleeping. This needs to be recognized as a dynamic process and not a point in time intervention. In other words, while a single injection of a discrete number of housing units targeted to rough sleepers will reduce the numbers temporarily, a flow of new housing stock is needed to reduce them in an ongoing way.

Coordination and collaboration between service providers

CHP welcomes the recognition in the report around the gains achieved through service coordination efforts in inner Melbourne. It would be useful to include a deeper analysis of the inner Melbourne service coordination work, as this has considerably evolved practice over the past year, and could provide valuable learnings to other locations if outreach capacity is to be expanded.

It is unclear what the statement around progress being hindered by the 'lack of a high-level shared view concerning what people sleeping rough can expect' refers to. Services are currently operating in a coordinated manner in the absence of an overarching policy and funding framework. They are also working in a context in which the housing options available to the majority of people sleeping rough are limited to largely unsafe marginal forms of accommodation, with some prospect of public and community housing for only a small minority. It is inevitable there will be a spectrum of views about how to communicate this reality to those sleeping rough.

In identifying how to solve the problem of rough sleeping, it may be more useful to point to the need for the creation of a coherent set of support and housing options, rather than highlighting that the absence of these options is confusing.

CHP also welcomes and acknowledges the challenges identified in harnessing the voluntary efforts of the informal sector

Implications for interventions

CHP strongly concurs with the suggestion that the service systems need to intervene earlier to prevent people becoming chronically homeless. As housing affordability has decreased and demand for homelessness services has grown without commensurate growth in service capacity, the trend has continued towards crisis responses and away from prevention. This is a problem that can't be solved by simply re-prioritising the services currently available, but could be achieved by additional capacity focussed on each of the earlier intervention priorities identified.

CHP concurs with each of the points made on page 45 and notes that building capacity for people to participate in mainstream life to become more resilient to housing loss would require ongoing support for those who are most vulnerable.

Guiding principles

CHP concurs with the guiding principles put forward, but proposes that access to safe and affordable permanent housing options be given more explicit priority as the critical element to both preventing and addressing homelessness.

We concur that assertive outreach practice should recognise the inherent dangers of sleeping rough, but caution against adopting approaches that aim to just harass people into accepting unsafe forms of accommodation. To this end, CHP welcomes the recognition in the Guiding Principles of appropriate response to persons who are sleeping rough being determined by the individual.