

Ministerial Homelessness Reform Advisory Group

Communique – Meeting 3

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Welcoming new members

The Ministerial Homelessness Reform Advisory Group (MHRAG) welcomed four new members at the June meeting.

De-Joel Upkett from Ngwala Willumbong Aboriginal Corporation (Ngwala) and Simon Flagg from Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative (Wathaurong) joined the MHRAG as leaders of two Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations delivering the Aboriginal-specific entry points.

Christine (Chris) Thirkell and Moana Ferris were welcomed as members, sharing a lived experience of homelessness. Both Chris and Moana are also members of Homes Victoria's Homelessness Lived Experience Reference Group (Reference Group).

We know there is strength in diversity, and the MHRAG will greatly benefit from receiving valuable advice on creating a culturally safe homelessness system, that is tested with the unique perspective that comes from lived experience. These perspectives will support the MHRAG to advise the Minister for Housing on designing a future system that can respond to the many unique needs of people and families relying on homelessness services.

Steps towards creating a self-determined system

In late 2023, the Victorian Government engaged Ngwala (metropolitan) and Wathaurong (regional) to deliver the Aboriginal-specific entry points. The MHRAG took the opportunity, with De-Joel and Simon's appointment to the group, for them to share their reflections on operating the entry points. De-Joel and Simon reflected that:

- the entry points are filling a system gap and providing a dedicated service for Aboriginal people and families
- continued support from the Blueprint Steering Committee is needed to support the Aboriginal entry points to manage the demands for housing and case management, and
- racism can exacerbate the system-wide difficulties with finding accommodation and housing in hotel/motels and the private rental market for clients coming through the entry points.

In response to the experiences of racism when seeking private rental housing, MHRAG members committed to supporting both Ngwala and Wathaurong by sharing both processes that have worked for their organisations, as well as their knowledge of and connections with the broader system to link both organisations with accommodation options. Specifically, any connections MHRAG members have with the private rental market was highlighted as particularly valuable.

Additional investment to support the sector

The Minister for Housing, the Hon. Harriet Shing MP took members through the 2024/25 State budget outcomes, which was announced in May 2024, as well as a plan to provide immediate relief to the sector facing increasing pressures at homelessness entry points.

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Reflections on the 2024/25 State budget

The Minister highlighted the additional \$197 million the 2024-25 State budget allocated to address homelessness, including:

- \$36.1 million for lapsing programs to continue in 2024-25
- \$40.8 million to address rough sleeping by expanding Journey 2 Social Inclusion
- \$16.1 million to address homelessness for First Peoples (including some dedicated funding from J2SI expansion) through self-determined approaches, with design and use of funding to be determined by the Blueprint SC and Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum
- \$103.9 million from 2025-26 and over four years for evidence-based services that make homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring (grants)

The Minister emphasised that the investment in grants for evidence-based services will be developed with input on principles and approaches from the MHRAG, with a focus on evidence-based responses to the needs that the MHRAG consider to be most important.

The Minister noted the finalisation of the new National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness, and highlighted the opportunity to deliver more houses through the:

- \$1 billion national fund for crisis and transitional housing, for victim survivors and young people, including making sure there is a focus on First Peoples.

Immediate actions

Addressing pressures at homelessness entry points has become a focus of discussion in recent weeks. The June MHRAG focused on seeking members' advice on a plan to immediately respond to the challenges being experienced by people seeking homelessness supports and frontline workers. Members identified that these matters are consistent with findings of a 7-year longitudinal study of six high volume homelessness services in Melbourne. The report – Inside the Front Door – was prepared by RMIT university in partnership with six homelessness organisations operating in metropolitan Melbourne.

The proposed plan that was discussed included:

- focusing on resources and responses that can create more accommodation and housing pathways for people
- ways in which to improve the turnaround times for vacant transitional housing, including exploring nomination rights, maintenance efficiencies, and the upgrade of homes that need them
- looking at how vacant and new social housing can be better planned for to provide more options for entry points.

Two dedicated working groups are being established to work alongside the MHRAG, sharing potential reform ideas and challenges that emerge as the action plan is implemented.

MHRAG members also reflected that the key to resolving these issues is the long-term work of designing a future system. These discussions will resume at the next meeting, which will be held in September.

Since the June meeting, the MHRAG has considered establishing two action groups, focusing on initial assessment and planning (IAPs) and accommodation and support, and agreed a work plan for these action group meetings. The action groups will support the MHRAG deliberations and input to the advice they provide the Minister.