

Item 3.5

Addressing the Homelessness Crisis in Our Cities Through Social Housing

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

Anglicare's tenth annual Rental Affordability Snapshot Report (April 2019) recently revealed that the number of people experiencing homelessness and housing stress is at record levels.

Of the 64,485 properties listed for rent across Australia in April, only two were affordable for the 500,000 single people on the Newstart allowance. Of those homes considered affordable for people on the unemployment benefit, none were in an Australian capital city.

It is a shocking indictment of the failure of governments to address a housing and homelessness crisis in Australia. The report's authors concluded that: "governments in Australia used to strongly invest in social housing to meet need. It was valued as a public asset for reducing poverty and inequality. But in recent years, governments have withdrawn from this responsibility. Social housing stock has simply not kept pace with the growth in population."

In light of these distressing findings, I hosted a crisis meeting of the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors (CCCLM) on Thursday 2 May 2019. The meeting was attended by Hobart Lord Mayor and CCCLM Chair, Anna Reynolds, Melbourne Lord Mayor Sally Capp, representatives of the Lord Mayors of Adelaide and Perth, and the ACT Government. We were joined by experts from the sector, including Kate Colvin from the Everybody's Home campaign, Sophia Maalsen from the University of Sydney, and the CEOs of Homelessness NSW and Shelter NSW, Katherine McKernan and Karen Walsh.

As Lord Mayors of Australia's major cities, we are dealing with the impact of this crisis firsthand. People are sleeping rough in our cities in increasing numbers. Although this is the most severe and visible form of homelessness, it is the symptom of a widespread, systematic failure of our housing system.

According to the 2016 Census of Population and Housing, homelessness has increased in every capital city between 2011 and 2016.

Shamefully, Sydney had the greatest increase, at 48 per cent over those four years, followed by Darwin on 36 per cent, 32 per cent in Brisbane, 21 per cent in Hobart, 14 per cent in Adelaide and Melbourne and 12 per cent in Perth. The latest survey reveals more than 116,000 people were experiencing homelessness in Australia on census night.

There is a direct correlation between the lack of social housing supply and homelessness in Australia because social housing is a pathway out of homelessness.

We heard from Shelter NSW that the amount of social housing as a proportion of all housing in Australia is in steep decline, falling from 6 per cent in 1996 to a mere 4.2 per cent currently.

Because this occurs in the context of decreasing home ownership and increasing rents, people on very low incomes who are eligible for social housing – including older people, older women, families and people with disability – are being forced to rent in the private market, spending up to 80 percent of their income on rent.

This leaves people highly vulnerable – one medical bill away from eviction, or one bumper electricity bill away from destitution.

The CCCLM resolved to call on the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition to commit to urgent action, especially funding, to respond to rough sleeping on city streets and the creation of a national housing plan, working in collaboration with local and state governments.

We resolved to write to the leaders of all major parties, along with the relevant ministers and shadows, seeking a commitment from whoever wins government to:

- commit to funding additional social and affordable housing units with a focus on key strategic sites in inner cities, aimed at alleviating homelessness;
- provide more assistance for crisis accommodation for rough sleepers in major cities – including the inclusion of homelessness services in the City Deal process;
- appoint a dedicated Homelessness and Housing Minister to Cabinet;
- prioritise these issues at the next Council of Australian Governments meeting with an urgent review of the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement and Commonwealth Rent Assistance program;
- adopt a long-term national housing strategy that:
 - provides more social and affordable housing for people from a range of backgrounds to live in and around cities;
 - addresses the drivers of homelessness, including access to affordable housing, as well as family violence, mental health, drug and alcohol use; and
- commission a review of welfare and Centrelink policies, in particular Proof of Identity practices, to ensure the most vulnerable people in our cities can access social security.

In addition, Lord Mayors agreed to work together to identify key strategic sites within our cities that would benefit from national funding for crisis, social and affordable housing, and to form a delegation of CCCLM representatives and homelessness and housing peak bodies to meet with the incoming Housing Minister and Prime Minister following the election.

I commend the combined action of the CCCLM and look forward to working with its Chair, Anna Reynolds and the Chair of the Housing and Homelessness subcommittee, Lord Mayor Sally Capp, to follow up on these actions.

This Council has acted to address homelessness in our city before, most recently by providing funding to establish a Sydney office that will coordinate the project 'A Place to Call Home' – an initiative of the Institute of Global Homelessness. The City of Sydney signed a memorandum of understanding to establish Sydney as a Vanguard City, working with the Institute, the State Government, Non-Government-Organisations and a network of global cities to progress the targets: reduce rough sleeping in the City of Sydney by 25 per cent by 2020; reduce rough sleeping in the City and NSW by 50 per cent by 2025.

We look forward to working with the State Government to develop the strategy to achieve these targets. With less than one per cent of houses and apartments built in Sydney in the past eight years classified as affordable, the efforts of this initiative will not work without urgent action to provide housing for people on low incomes in the inner city.

Despite knowing that social housing is a crucial pathway out of homelessness, the State Government is not providing additional social housing in the inner city, instead choosing to sell off public housing stock and proposing massive private developments on public land.

In 2014 the State Government displaced members of our community by the sale of 293 social housing properties in Millers Point, and the 79 apartments in the Sirius Building – purpose built to house people on low incomes – have sat empty for over a year.

Despite claiming that it is delivering a significant boost in social housing across the State from the proceeds of the sales, the new properties are having little impact on NSW's housing waitlist of 52,932, almost 3,000 of which are waiting for housing in the inner city.

While social housing is also required in other parts of metropolitan Sydney, the situation in the inner city is urgent. The City's last street count revealed a 13 per cent increase in rough sleepers on the city's streets. The State Government cannot simply push rough sleepers out to the fringes.

The proposal to redevelop the Waterloo Estate is a significant opportunity to use scarce public land to provide much-needed social and affordable housing in the inner city, but the State Government's current proposal will replace 2012 social homes with 6,800 dwellings, 65 per cent of which are private market homes, leaving only 30 per cent social and 5 per cent affordable homes.

I believe this is a missed opportunity, and against the wishes of the community.

This Council endorsed the City's alternative proposal for Waterloo, with a more humane and responsible density, built form and housing mix. Of approximately 5,300 homes, the proposal would deliver 70 per cent social and affordable dwellings – that's around 3,700 homes for people on low incomes.

I was happy to host a public meeting attended by over 250 community members, where City planning staff presented the proposal, received with cheers of support and the endorsement of two former government architects. However, to make this proposal a reality the City needs the support and cooperation of state and federal governments.

The sale of public housing and the failure to use scarce public land to deliver social and affordable housing is making the housing and homelessness crisis in our city worse. We risk more people being forced to sleep rough on our streets and our city becoming an enclave for the rich.

Given the severity of the crisis revealed in the Anglicare Report, I believe it is incumbent upon us to redouble our efforts to work with the State and Federal government, together with the homelessness and housing sector to address the escalating crisis nationally and in our city.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) the Lord Mayor be requested to work with the Chair of CCCLM and the housing and homelessness peak bodies, including Shelter Australia and Homelessness Australia, to advocate to the incoming Federal Housing Minister for further funding for social housing in strategic sites in the inner city, including Waterloo Estate;
- (B) Council note that the City's alternative proposal for the redevelopment of the Waterloo Estate was enthusiastically received by the community; and
- (C) the Chief Executive Officer be requested to continue to investigate options and models for the implementation of the City's alternative proposal in Waterloo.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor