

Public Exhibition - Draft Homelessness Action Plan and Research on Mobile Voluntary Services

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Summary

Draft Homelessness Action Plan

The City has been working with the NSW Government and non-government organisations to assist people sleeping rough in the inner city for over 30 years. The City of Sydney was the first council in Australia with a dedicated Homelessness Unit. The City currently invests \$2.2 million per year towards assisting those experiencing homelessness, which includes the City's own operational expenditure and \$3.5 million over three years to fund specialist homelessness services via the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (formerly Family and Community Services).

The City's draft Homelessness Action Plan sets out the City's ongoing commitment to respond to homelessness and its impact in Sydney. The plan details the City of Sydney's role in responding to homelessness, and identifies the following strategic priorities:

- Strategic priority 1: Monitor trends in inner city homelessness and increase access to safe and sustainable housing and support;
- Strategic priority 2: Supporting people sleeping rough and managing the public domain; and
- Strategic priority 3: Work smarter together to have a greater impact.

Strategic priority 3 recognises that no one organisation can solve homelessness. A coordinated and systemic approach is needed. A key new collaborative initiative that has already commenced includes the 'Act to End Street Sleeping' program in Sydney. This program commits the City and the NSW Government, along with other partners, to participate in innovative approaches that aim to reduce street sleeping and work towards ending street homelessness in Sydney by 2030. The City has contributed \$100,000 to help establish the program in Sydney.

Subject to approval by Council, the draft Homelessness Action Plan will be placed on public exhibition for a minimum of 28 days to allow an opportunity for the community to provide feedback.

Mobile Voluntary Services Research

In support of strategic priority 3, the City has commissioned research on mobile voluntary services (volunteer-operated vans providing food or services, including showers and other hygiene facilities), in order to understand the needs and circumstances of service users, as well as the motivations of volunteers. The research is shown at Attachment B.

Research conducted in April and May 2019 has shown that mobile voluntary services serve an important role, providing at least 4,400 meals a week to people in need. The research identified that almost half of those accessing mobile voluntary services are currently experiencing homelessness, while 46 per cent of service users are living in social housing.

The research provides an evidence base which will inform the drafting of forthcoming Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines. The research findings will also inform a program of education, engagement, redirection and advocacy to achieve the following outcomes:

- better coordination and services targeted more closely to need;
- better linking to housing support services and referral, and improved safety for volunteers;
- improved food safety; and
- improved public domain amenity and management.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) Council approve the draft Homelessness Action Plan, as shown at Attachment A to the subject report, for public exhibition for a minimum of 28 days;
- (B) Council note the Mobile Voluntary Services Study 2019, as shown at Attachment B to the subject report;
- (C) Council note that a Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines are being developed, and when drafted, will be reported to Council for approval to be placed on public exhibition; and
- (D) authority be delegated to the Chief Executive Officer to undertake minor editorial amendments prior to the exhibition of the draft Homelessness Action Plan.

Attachments

Attachment A. Draft Homelessness Action Plan

Attachment B. Mobile Voluntary Services Study 2019 Report

Background

1. The City has been working to assist people sleeping rough in the inner city for over 30 years.
2. The City of Sydney was the first council in Australia with a dedicated Homelessness Unit.
3. The City's draft Homelessness Action Plan builds on the considerable progress made through and since the City's Homelessness Strategy 2007–2012.
4. In recent years, the City has invested in:
 - (a) The delivery of specialist homelessness services in the inner city via the Department of Communities and Justice (formerly Family and Community Services), contributing \$5.9 million between January 2015 and June 2019, with an additional forward commitment of \$1.2 million to July 2020. In 2019/20 the City is funding:
 - (i) \$700,000 for assertive outreach and case coordination and post crisis support services, delivered by Neami Way2Home;
 - (ii) \$300,000 for prevention and support to young people at risk of homelessness, delivered by Launchpad; and
 - (iii) \$200,000 for culturally specific outreach services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, delivered by Innari and Aboriginal Corporation for Homelessness and Rehabilitation Community Services.
 - (b) Innovative projects that respond to and prevent homelessness including:
 - (i) \$100,000 Community Services Grant in 2017 to help Bridge Housing establish HomeGround Real Estate - Australia's first not-for-profit real estate agency that aims to increase the supply of affordable housing in Sydney.
 - (ii) \$100,000 Grant in 2019 to Institute of Global Homelessness to establish the Act to End Street Sleeping project in Sydney.
 - (iii) \$100,100 Community Services Grant over three years awarded in 2019 to Newtown Neighbourhood Centre to support the expansion of the Newtopian Outreachers Project to the CBD. The project involves volunteers taking part in outreach, engaging with people experiencing homelessness and offering assistance. This may include how to access temporary crisis accommodation, where to get meals or find other local support services.

5. During this time, the City's role in responding to homelessness has shifted to include a greater focus on collaborative efforts to prevent and respond to homelessness. Homelessness is a complex issue that cannot be solved by any one organisation. The City works with government agencies, local organisations, peak bodies and the community to prevent and respond to homelessness. Key recent collaborative initiatives include:
 - (a) The Homelessness Assertive Response Team (HART), led by the City of Sydney and Department of Communities and Justice with members from NSW Health, St Vincent's Homeless Health, and specialist homelessness services and non-government services, meets regularly to conduct joint outreach with a common goal of assisting people sleeping rough in the inner city to access long-term housing with support. HART members share skills, resources and knowledge, allowing people to access services quickly and progress their access to housing.
 - (b) The Department of Communities and Justice established the Homelessness Outreach Support Team (HOST) in the inner city in March 2017. The team delivers housing and support services on-street through intensive outreach and regular outreach patrols across the inner city, in partnership with the City of Sydney, homelessness services, St Vincent's Homeless Health Service, NSW Health and NSW Police. HOST outreach aims to provide immediate access to housing assessment and a rapid rehousing response into social housing for eligible people. HOST also works with specialist homelessness services and Health to wrap post-crisis support around clients who have been housed and need more sustained support. The HOST model is now being implemented in other locations in NSW.
 - (c) In April 2015, City staff worked with the NSW Department of Communities and Justice to develop the Emergency Response Protocol for Rough Sleepers in Sydney. The protocol is activated during severe storms, flooding, and extreme heat and cold, and other emergencies such as disruptions to power, transport and security emergencies. The protocol enables the two agencies to coordinate more than 10 organisations to provide information, advice and support (about medical or accommodation issues) to people sleeping rough in the City's local area.
6. The draft Homelessness Action Plan outlines the City's role in responding to the complex challenges of addressing homelessness and its impact in the City of Sydney Local Government Area. It details how the City will meet the objectives of:
 - (a) preventing homelessness and reducing rough sleeping as identified in the City's Social Sustainability Policy and Action Plan - A City for All, and
 - (b) facilitating access to safe and sustainable housing and support for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness as identified in Sustainable Sydney 2030.

7. The plan also provides an evidence-based framework to:
 - (a) guide decision-making around investing in activities linked to homelessness;
 - (b) support the coordination and monitoring of the City's activities linked to homelessness; and;
 - (c) help build a greater understanding in the broader community of the City's roles, responsibilities and goals in responding to homelessness and its impact.
8. The draft action plan is in two parts:
 - (a) Part 1 provides an overview of the context of homelessness in Sydney and outlines the City's roles, responsibilities and partnerships; and
 - (b) Part 2 outlines the City's vision and approach to responding to homelessness, identifies strategic priority areas and actions, and outlines the monitoring and evaluation framework.
9. The plan sets out the following three strategic priorities:
 - (a) Strategic priority 1: Monitor trends in inner city homelessness and increase access to safe and sustainable housing and support;
 - (b) Strategic priority 2: Supporting people sleeping rough and managing the public domain; and
 - (c) Strategic priority 3: Work smarter together to have a greater impact.
10. Strategic priority 1 includes a description of the City's role in facilitating the delivery of innovative housing solutions to reduce inner city homelessness. This priority will enable the City to explore projects similar to Platform 70 and Common Ground. These projects supported people who were sleeping rough to access private rental accommodation and delivered purpose built and specially designed apartments with on-site support services for people experiencing chronic homelessness.
11. Strategic priority 1 also notes the City's role in advocating to the Federal and NSW Governments to deliver a sustainable supply of supported, social and affordable rental housing. The draft Homelessness Action Plan does not detail the ways in which the City can increase the supply of affordable housing in the City of Sydney area. That is addressed in the City of Sydney's draft Local Housing Strategy - "Housing for All", which was on public exhibition until 11 October 2019.
12. Strategic priority 2 describes the City's unique and ongoing role in ensuring the public domain is safe and accessible for all by:
 - (a) connecting people with services and support to exit homelessness;
 - (b) working with the City's partners to reduce the impacts of homelessness on amenity in the public domain, and
 - (c) improving the safety and well-being of people sleeping rough and / or begging.

13. Strategic priority 3 recognises no one organisation can solve homelessness. A coordinated and systemic approach is needed. Two new key collaborative initiatives under the draft plan have commenced:
 - (a) The City's financial contribution to and participation in the 'Act to End Street Sleeping' program.
 - (b) The City has commissioned research on mobile voluntary services in order to understand the needs and circumstances of service users, as well as the motivations of volunteers. The research is shown at Attachment B.
14. The actions in the plan will be regularly reviewed to ensure they align with community needs. The first review of this action plan will be conducted in 2021.

Act to End Street Sleeping program

15. In February 2019, the City signed an agreement with the NSW Government, the Institute of Global Homelessness, St Vincent de Paul, St Vincent's Health, Mission Australia, Salvation Army, Wesley Mission, Neami National and Yfoundations to:
 - (i) reduce rough sleeping in the City of Sydney area by 25 per cent by 2020;
 - (ii) reduce rough sleeping in the City of Sydney area and NSW by 50 per cent by 2025; and
 - (iii) work towards zero rough sleeping in the City of Sydney area and NSW.
16. The City helped finance the establishment of an independent local organisation, the End Street Sleeping Collaboration Ltd, to coordinate the collaborative program in Sydney, and bring together organisations (including the City of Sydney) and services to reduce homelessness. This will allow for greater information sharing and enable a more coordinated response to reduce the number of people sleeping rough and to prevent people entering in to homelessness.

Research on mobile voluntary service users and current services

17. The provision of companionship, food, material and other forms of immediate assistance to vulnerable groups, including people experiencing homelessness, by predominantly volunteer and / or faith-based community groups is a long standing tradition within the City's Local Government Area. These services are driven by a compassion that aims to provide these vulnerable and disadvantaged groups with both sustenance and opportunities for human engagement.
18. The services are responding to a perceived need, and the desire to give their volunteers a chance to provide support to vulnerable people. Only some services are linked to formal social services. Overall many of the services are well utilised.
19. These services have historically been delivered through mobile vans and other vehicles. In 2007, Council endorsed the Mobile Free Food Services Policy and Voluntary Accord. The policy was the City's first attempt to create a strategic approach to the coordination of the mobile voluntary services operating in the inner city.

20. Since that time, there has been a significant increase in the number of mobile voluntary services operating within the City's Local Government Area – from nine in 2007 to over 40 in 2019. With this increase, there has also been a rise in reported amenity issues and resident and community complaints. Reported issues include:
 - (a) excessive noise from the operation of services;
 - (b) rubbish, waste and littering, which in turn attracts rats and other vermin;
 - (c) illegal parking;
 - (d) instances of undignified giving, such as waking people up to feed them, leaving food at people's side while they sleep, and requesting photographs from service users; and
 - (e) concerns about the provision of unsafe food to vulnerable service users who may experience compromised health or immune systems.
21. Presently, there are no clear regulatory or legislative instruments that uniformly apply to the activities of mobile voluntary services. For example, the NSW Food Act 2003 does not apply to mobile voluntary services as they don't sell food, but provide it as a charitable act.
22. To successfully develop a collaborative approach to mobile voluntary services, the City identified that research was needed to provide an evidence base and shared understanding of the needs and circumstances of people accessing mobile voluntary services.
23. During the 2018/19 financial year, the City conducted a study of mobile voluntary services and service users across the City's Local Government Area. The research:
 - (a) identified the services, including times, frequency and location, the type of support offered, as well as the reasons charities are motivated to provide the services; and
 - (b) provided an overview of the circumstances of people who access the services, and how they would like to receive support in future.
24. All known services were approached to take part. During April and May 2019, researchers interviewed 21 services (out of approximately 40-50 services in operation in the area) and 112 people who access mobile voluntary services. The research identified:

- (a) Mobile voluntary services serve an important role:
 - (i) 21 services interviewed deliver approximately 4,400 confirmed occasions of service per week, e.g a meal, a blanket, a shower.
 - (ii) Most organisations are providing food, along with other free items such as blankets, clothing, toiletries and books.
 - (iii) 86 per cent of service users highly rated the services provided by mobile voluntary services.
 - (iv) 83 per cent of service users are happy accessing food on the street.
 - (v) 68 per cent use the service on most days.
- (b) Nearly half of service users interviewed (46 per cent) live in social housing. A similar amount (47 per cent) of service users were experiencing homelessness (32 per cent sleeping rough, 15 per cent staying in crisis accommodation, emergency temporary accommodation, or staying with family and / or friends).
- (c) People use services for different and multiple reasons:
 - (i) 64 per cent don't have enough money to purchase food.
 - (ii) 23 per cent so they can spend money on other things.
 - (iii) 56 per cent attend to connect with friends / community, 18 per cent for entertainment, 29 per cent to fill the time.
 - (iv) 39 per cent are without access to kitchen facilities, and 13 per cent did not have sufficient cooking skills.
- (d) Service users are vulnerable and financially disadvantaged:
 - (i) 90 per cent of service users were not in paid employment.
 - (ii) 87 per cent of service users were receiving a government benefit - NewStart Allowance (40 per cent) and the Disability Support Pension (35 per cent).
 - (iii) 78 per cent of service users reported at least one vulnerability factor, including mental health (46 per cent), disability (36 per cent), and drug and alcohol use (35 per cent).
- (e) Identified issues for service providers included:
 - (i) working with vulnerable people and managing anti-social behaviour;
 - (ii) low levels of first aid training and food safety; and
 - (iii) lack of coordination – times and locations in clusters; overcrowding.

- (f) Identified issues for users included:
 - (i) poor food quality and lack of diverse of food options;
 - (ii) long wait times;
 - (iii) poor food hygiene; and
 - (iv) a lack of security.
- 25. The research provides an evidence base which will inform a forthcoming Draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines. The research will also inform a program of education, engagement, redirection, and advocacy to achieve the following outcomes:
 - (a) better coordination and services targeted more closely to need;
 - (b) better linking to housing support services and referral, and improved safety for volunteers;
 - (c) improved food safety; and
 - (d) improved public domain amenity and management.
- 26. The research will inform engagement of a range of stakeholders from government and other organisations to work in collaboration with the City to address identified issues.

Key Implications

Strategic Alignment - Sustainable Sydney 2030 Vision

- 27. Sustainable Sydney 2030 is a vision for the sustainable development of the City to 2030 and beyond. It includes 10 strategic directions to guide the future of the City, as well as 10 targets against which to measure progress. The draft Homelessness Action Plan articulates how the city will meet the following strategic directions and objectives:
 - (a) Direction 8 - Housing for a Diverse Population:
 - (i) Objective 8.3: The supply of safe and sustainable social housing in the inner city is available for those who need it. The draft Homelessness Action Plan articulates the City's role in advocating for an increased supply of social housing.
 - (ii) Objective 8.4: People who are homeless or at risk of homelessness have access to safe and sustainable housing and support.
 - (b) Direction 10 - Implementation through Effective Governance and Partnerships: The draft Homelessness Action Plan recognises that homelessness cannot be solved alone and commits the City to working collaboratively with many stakeholders, including the community, businesses and all levels of government to assist people who are homeless to access safe and sustainable housing and support people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

Social / Cultural / Community

28. The draft Homelessness Action Plan includes key actions to reduce homelessness and its impacts in Sydney by working closely with community members, services and other agencies.

Economic

29. Maintaining and promoting Sydney's reputation as a welcoming, safe and inclusive place to live, visit and to do business will help to increase economic prosperity, to create a thriving, globally connected community.

Budget Implications

30. The delivery of the draft Homelessness Action Plan is largely deliverable within current business arrangements - sometimes requiring a shift in focus or realignment of resources, but not requiring extensive new resources.
31. Current funding contributions to specialist homelessness services via the Department of Communities and Justice (formerly Family and Community Services) are in place for a three-year period 2017-2020. The current arrangement ends in June 2020.
32. Any opportunities for significant investment in major initiatives would be subject to budget processes and Council approval.

Relevant Legislation

33. Section 24 of the Local Government Act 1993 states that a council may provide goods, services and facilities, and carry out activities, appropriate to the current and future needs within its local community and of the wider public.

Public Consultation

34. The draft Homelessness Action Plan builds on the City's current strategies, plans and policies, and draws on day-to-day experience, working with partner agencies, networks and community members to address homelessness and its impact in Sydney.
35. To identify immediate and longer term priorities and desired outcomes for the action plan, the City:
 - (a) consulted with people who have lived experience of homelessness or are currently experiencing homelessness;
 - (b) analysed the existing homelessness data and trends;
 - (c) reviewed best-practice approaches to homelessness, locally and internationally; and
 - (d) engaged with individuals, including residents and City staff members, and organisations, including specialist homelessness services to identify priorities and key actions.
36. The action plan is also built on extensive community engagement undertaken to develop the City's A City for All Social Sustainability Policy and Action Plan 2018-2028.
37. If approved by Council, the draft plan will be placed on public exhibition for a minimum of 28 days to allow an opportunity for the community and other stakeholders to provide feedback.

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