

Grants and Sponsorship - Community Services Grant - Women's Community Shelters Limited

File No: X084196

Summary

Women's Community Shelters Limited is a NSW based not-for-profit organisation working with communities to establish new crisis shelters that provide safety and support to women and children who are homeless or have experienced domestic and family violence (DFV). Women's Community Shelters is a specialist homelessness and domestic and family violence service, supporting over 400 women and children in crisis each year.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, Women's Community Shelters has experienced an increase in demand for accommodation and support from women who have been displaced due to domestic and family violence, or have been pushed to the brink of homelessness by financial insecurity, rising unemployment and a lack of affordable rental accommodation.

The City has received an application from Women's Community Shelters which seeks to expand its Pathways Home program to the City of Sydney. Pathways Home is a 'meanwhile use' housing program established by Women's Community Shelters that forms part of a broader strategy to increase available housing stock for women and children leaving Women's Community Shelters crisis accommodation. This model involves partnering with developers and other landholders to identify under-utilised or vacant property for use primarily as transitional housing, on an interim basis.

In partnership with City West Housing (CWH) and Scape Australia (Scape), Women's Community Shelters will pilot an affordable housing project at Scape Abercrombie, student accommodation at Abercrombie Street in Darlington, that will offer subsidised housing and support to single women at risk of homelessness for a 12 month period.

Women's Community Shelters has applied for a grant in support of this project. The application has been assessed under the City's Grants and Sponsorship Policy and the criteria of the Community Services Grant Program. This report recommends a cash sponsorship of up to \$118,540 (excluding GST) to support this project.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) Council approve a grant of up to \$118,540 cash (excluding GST) to Women's Community Shelters Limited for the Abercrombie House project, subject to the applicant providing a suitable Plan of Management demonstrating the project can be implemented as proposed; and
- (B) authority be delegated to the Chief Executive Officer to negotiate, execute and administer a sponsorship agreement with Women's Community Shelters Limited in relation to the sponsorship described in (A) above.

Attachments

Nil.

Background

1. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent closing of borders to international students, there is currently a significant oversupply of vacant student accommodation across the City of Sydney. At the same time, housing affordability and homelessness are growing concerns for the broader community and services supporting vulnerable people.
2. A Notice of Motion supported by Council in July 2021, 'Use of Student Housing for Transitional Housing and Crisis Accommodation' requested that the Chief Executive Officer consider how the City may be able to support meanwhile use of student housing for transitional housing and crisis accommodation, and to assess whether this type of project is appropriate to be supported with seed funding from the City of Sydney's Affordable and Diverse Housing Fund.
3. A Notice of Motion supported by Council in September 2021, 'Establishing a Publicly-Funded Women's Refuge in the City of Sydney' requested that the Chief Executive Officer consult with key sector services operating in our Local Government Area, to determine the most impactful and appropriate way for the City of Sydney to continue to provide support for women experiencing crisis given the increased need as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown.
4. Women's Community Shelters (WCS) is seeking to expand its Pathways Home program to the City of Sydney. Pathways Home is a 'meanwhile use' housing program established by Women's Community Shelters that forms part of a broader strategy to increase available housing stock for women leaving emergency accommodation. This model involves partnering with developers and other landholders to identify under-utilised or vacant property for use primarily as transitional housing, on an interim basis.
5. Women's Community Shelters and City West Housing have been working with student accommodation provider, Scape Australia (Scape), to identify opportunities to temporarily repurpose a portion of its accommodation for affordable housing. City West Housing is an experienced community housing provider that supports more than 1,600 residents across the City of Sydney with access to affordable housing.
6. Women's Community Shelters, working together with City West Housing and others, plans to pilot an affordable housing program at student accommodation in Scape Abercrombie in Darlington, that will offer subsidised housing and support to single women at risk of homelessness for a 12 month period.
7. The project objectives align with the City of Sydney's Social Sustainability Policy and Action Plan 2018-2028, promoting equality, inclusion and opportunity for individuals to thrive. This innovative, shared value project recognises the shared responsibility of governments, businesses and community organisations to respond to community needs.
8. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, Women's Community Shelters has experienced an increase in demand for support and accommodation from women displaced due to domestic and family violence (DFV), or who have been pushed to the brink of homelessness by financial insecurity, rising unemployment and a lack of affordable rental accommodation.
9. Under the program, City West Housing will hold the head lease for up to 20 apartments within the Scape development and will sublet to women referred by Women's Community Shelters or on the City West Housing wait list.

10. City West Housing will be responsible for tenancy management and exit pathways, and has a pipeline of affordable properties in the City of Sydney area that will support exits from the project. Wrap around support will be delivered by Women's Community Shelters to assist residents to overcome challenges and work towards their goals. Before the end of the 12 month lease, women will be supported to access long term housing, therefore reducing vulnerability to future homelessness and disadvantage.
11. Women's Community Shelters will provide onsite casework support to residents and support community engagement and has extensive experience in delivering meanwhile use projects.
12. As the property owner and operator, Scape will continue to manage and maintain the property. Scape is offering a discount of 58% on apartment prices, bringing them within an affordable range for women on low-moderate incomes. This offer is available for a 12-month period, beginning November 2021. The property has the relevant planning approvals in place to operate as a boarding house, allowing for easy activation.
13. City of Sydney funding will contribute to a rental subsidy for very-low and low-income occupants. This subsidy is based on up to 15 of the total 20 apartments being occupied by residents on very-low and low incomes. The remaining five apartments would be occupied by residents on moderate income and funded by Women's Community Shelters.
14. This project offers the opportunity to test an innovative response to homelessness and disadvantage, facilitating access to vacant housing stock that supports the needs and dignity of the target group. By providing affordable housing in a central location, it is hoped that the project will reduce financial disadvantage, improve health and wellbeing, support access to services and amenity, and provide opportunities for education, training and employment.
15. Women's Community Shelters has submitted a proposal for a 12-month grant from the City commencing in November 2021. The application has been assessed against the City's Community Services Grant Program. It was found to strongly align with key outcomes and priorities of the program, including facilitating access to high quality, affordable housing, reducing disadvantage and increasing access to opportunities, ensuring strengthened social cohesion, sense of belonging and connection to place, and enabling increased engagement in healthy, active living (including mental health).
16. The City will require Women's Community Shelters to submit a Plan of Management to ensure best practice affordable rental housing for the types of tenants proposed in the application and to include a strategy for pathways to secure housing. Funding will be released on receipt of this Plan of Management.
17. To assist with evaluating the success of the project, the City will include a performance criteria within the grant agreement requiring Women's Community Shelters to conduct a short survey of all residents at the end of the 12 month funding period and/or before residents transition to more secure housing. As this is a new approach to the provision of meanwhile-use housing, the survey will seek to provide an understanding of residents' experiences living within purpose-built student accommodation.
18. This report recommends a grant of up to \$118,540 cash (excluding GST) and payments will be scheduled in instalments to align with the number of studios occupied over the course of the year.

Key Implications

Strategic Alignment - Sustainable Sydney 2030

19. 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. This grant is aligned with the following strategic directions and objectives:
 - (a) Direction 8 - Housing for a Diverse Population - This project aligns with the City's position on affordable housing, homelessness and social sustainability, as set out in A City For All, the social sustainability strategy, as well as Housing for All, the City's housing strategy.

Risks

20. Risks for the City in association with this project have been addressed by setting proposed conditions for the grant. If the grant is awarded, the applicant will be required to enter into an agreement governing the grant on terms satisfactory to the City, including reporting that will help assess the viability and effectiveness of projects of this nature.

Social / Cultural / Community

21. A City For All is the social sustainability vision for a socially just and resilient Sydney. These grant recommendations are aligned with the following strategic directions and objectives:
 - (a) Inclusive growth and opportunities:
 - (i) Prevent homelessness and reduce rough sleeping through leading and participating in innovative approaches to addressing homelessness.
 - (ii) Increase supply of housing that is universally designed for people of all ages and abilities.
 - (iii) Provide improved access to facilities, programs and services for people on all incomes.
 - (iv) Enable community led solutions to local social issues.
 - (b) Connect City - diverse, cohesive communities:
 - (i) Improve community safety through collaboration with government and non-government organisations to deliver improved services, programs and initiatives.

Financial Implications

22. There are sufficient funds for the recommendation in the 2021/22 Community Services Grant Program budget.
23. Cash and in kind contributions to the project from Women's Community Shelters and third parties are estimated to total \$265,780.

24. Women's Community Shelters is requesting funding of up to \$118,540 to deliver this project that will include:
- (a) Rental subsidy of between \$33 to \$113 per week for up to 15 (of the total 20) apartments, to support very low and low-income earners (\$67,340);
 - (b) Tenancy and property management costs (\$31,200); and
 - (c) A contribution to support costs (\$20,000). At full capacity, Women's Community Shelters costs are estimated to be approximately \$70,000, however Women's Community Shelters will seek alternative philanthropic support or reserves to meet this funding gap.
25. If funding is approved by the City of Sydney, the grant will be issued under a funding structure that pays based on the number of studios occupied at the end of each quarter. The City of Sydney's contribution per studio will decrease as occupancy increases.

Relevant Legislation

26. Section 356(1) of the Local Government Act states that a council may, in accordance with a resolution of the council, contribute money or otherwise grant financial assistance to persons for the purpose of exercising its functions.
27. Women's Community Shelters Limited is a registered as a public benevolent institution, and therefore public exhibition of this proposed grant is not required.

EMMA RIGNEY

Director City Life

Phoebe Arthur, Grants Coordinator