

VCOSS analysis – Final Report of the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

March 2021

On 4 March 2021, the Legal and Social Issues Committee tabled the [final report](#) of the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria in Parliament.

Over the 21 months of the inquiry, the Committee accepted 452 submissions and conducted 18 hearings, including targeted engagement with people with lived experience of homelessness.

VCOSS [made a submission](#) and [appeared at a hearing](#) in the Inquiry, informed by consultation with our members. Our advocacy focused on reorienting policies, funding and practice from crisis to prevention, across four key priorities:

- A big build of public and community housing.
- Action to end poverty, disadvantage and insecurity.
- A strong services system which can prevent homelessness.
- The right supports delivered at the right time.

It is clear that our sector's voice has been heard loud and clear by the Committee. In its high-level summary of findings, the Committee noted:

- Commonwealth income support is not adequate
- Victoria's social housing stock is insufficient
- There are a lack of exit points from crisis and transitional accommodation
- The homelessness sector in Victoria is overwhelmed
- Demand for services exceeds the availability of support
- The sector is crisis-oriented
- Provision of more long-term housing is key to reducing homelessness
- Early intervention is crucial to ending homelessness
- Ending homelessness in Victoria requires a whole of government approach
- The government must develop clear guiding principles for addressing homelessness in Victoria
- A more adaptable and flexible system is needed.

VCOSS welcomes the report's recommendations which comprise:

- Practical measures to improve the effectiveness of **current** policy and program responses.
- Bold structural and systemic reforms that can help **prevent** homelessness.

Snapshot analysis – key recommendations and opportunities

One of the key structural causes of homelessness is the shortage of secure, affordable housing. In our advocacy, VCOSS placed a strong emphasis on the importance of increasing the supply of public and community housing to meet the needs of the most vulnerable Victorians.

The Committee notes that the Big Housing Build package, announced in November 2020, will contribute to public and community housing growth. The package – worth \$5.3 billion – is a record investment. However, a long-term pipeline will be needed, to sustain growth beyond the current four-year commitment and meet current and future demand. (Currently, social housing only comprises 3.2 per cent of all housing in the state. The Victorian Housing Peaks Alliance has

identified the need to build 60,000 new social housing units over 10 years, **just** to bring Victoria up to the national average of 4.5 per cent.)

The Committee also makes a number of recommendations to diversify models of social housing, [increase the supply of affordable housing](#), improve access to social housing for people who need it, and to make better use of the resources we already have (public and community housing and public land). The Big Housing Build provides a vehicle to progress this work. There are multiple opportunities for community sector organisations to engage with Homes Victoria, including providing input to the 10-Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy.

There are also recommendations to increase access to the private rental market by addressing [discrimination in the real estate sector](#) and by expanding [head-leasing](#) models. Head-leasing programs – where homelessness services, housing providers or government agencies take out leases in the private rental market on behalf of clients – have significant value for people who experience barriers to accessing the private rental market but could maintain a tenancy over time with transitional period of subsidy and support. The Committee notes that the Victorian Government included head-leasing as part of the COVID-19 response ([Homelessness to a Home](#) initiative), and that funding could be provided for homelessness services to expand on these initiatives.

The report [declares current levels of federal income support \(JobSeeker\) to be inadequate](#) for people to cover their housing costs and highlighted this as an example of where the Commonwealth Government must play its part alongside the State to respond to “the current scale of homelessness”. The Committee also acknowledged [the role of work](#) as a protective factor in preventing homelessness, making recommendations to increase access to job readiness training and employment opportunities and Foyer models for young people experiencing homelessness.

The Committee makes a bold recommendation to [include the right to housing](#) under the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities to enable a human rights and whole-of-government approach to preventing homelessness.

The Committee acknowledges the critical role of homelessness services and the broader social services sector in early intervention to support people to stay housed. However, the Committee also noted the constraints on the sector to provide early intervention, which result in crisis-oriented service delivery. The Committee makes considered recommendations to [effect the much-needed reorientation of service delivery to early intervention](#), including funding flexibility, collaborative practice and better referral pathways between homelessness services and intersecting systems.

The Committee acknowledged the [crisis in Victoria’s crisis and transitional accommodation systems](#), and the significant constraints the homelessness sector faces in supporting people to transition from crisis accommodation to long-term housing. The Committee makes [recommendations](#) to address issues with the use of Housing Establishment Funds, and to broaden crisis accommodation to better respond to needs. The Committee notes that constraints in crisis and transitional responses could also be addressed through complementary [Housing First](#) approaches. Housing First emphasises that persons experiencing homelessness should be providing with stable, ongoing housing, before engaging social services to address the drivers of homelessness. However, the Committee notes that a lack of long-term housing options make Victoria’s Housing First strategies difficult to implement, and that [long-term stock should be made available from Victoria’s Big Housing Build](#) so that people can access Housing First programs across Victoria.

The Committee recognises effective early intervention practice already being delivered in the system, including [Private Rental Assistance Program](#) (PRAP) in the homelessness sector and [Flexible](#)

[Support Packages](#) in the family violence sector. We welcome recommendations to expand these programs, noting in particular the Committee’s recommendation that the Victorian Government [continue to develop PRAP delivery to address barriers to access](#) for people with mental health issues, young people and people experiencing family violence.

A key focus of the report is the role of legal and justice system responses in preventing homelessness. This includes [strengthening protections to prevent evictions](#) in both private and community housing, reducing the criminalisation of people experiencing homelessness by introducing a [new Victoria Police protocol](#), and introducing a [Homelessness List](#) at the Magistrates Court. The Committee also recognises the role of housing in preventing imprisonment and in returning to community following a period in prison, with recommendations to increase access to [supported bail accommodation](#), and importantly, establishing a [“no exits into homelessness”](#) policy to guide discharge planning and support, which would also apply to other institutional settings including hospital, rehabilitation and aged care. VCOSS is particularly pleased to see that the Committee has specifically recommended a “no exits” policy to the Victorian Government, as this was absent from the final report recently handed down by the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System.

To read the full report, including the full list of findings and recommendations, go to the [Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria website](#).

Next steps

We congratulate the Committee for their comprehensive Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria and welcome the final report as a first step towards major structural and systemic reform. The Victorian Government is now required to respond within six months of the Committee’s report being tabled.

The proposed changes recommended in this report – as well as system reform planned as part of implementing the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System and the Ten-Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy for Victoria – would significantly contribute to ending homelessness in Victoria if adopted by the Victorian Government.

VCOSS notes that many of our members, who contributed to our advocacy and made their own submissions to the Inquiry, are referenced throughout the report. The Victorian Government can leverage the insights and expertise from across the community sector to explore all options for ending homelessness in Victoria.