

# A Housing Strategy for NSW

Submission to Discussion Paper



August 2020

## About NCOSS

The NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) works with and for people experiencing poverty and disadvantage to see positive change in our communities.

When rates of poverty and inequality are low, everyone in NSW benefits. With 80 years of knowledge and experience informing our vision, NCOSS is uniquely placed to bring together civil society to work with government and business to ensure communities in NSW are strong for everyone.

As the peak body for health and community services in NSW we support the sector to deliver innovative services that grow and develop as needs and circumstances evolve.

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## Introduction

NCOSS is the peak body for the social services sector in NSW. With over 400 members and a wider network of approximately 4,000 non-government organisations, government and other entities and individuals who share our values, we advocate to alleviate poverty and disadvantage in NSW.

NCOSS was founded in 1934 during the Great Depression when unemployment rose to 28% and extreme poverty was rampant. With few government programs available, assistance was provided through a limited number of overstretched charities. A small group was motivated to improve the lot of those suffering from which the NSW Council of Social Service was born, to coordinate relief efforts and maximise benefit for those in need. Our core vision remains unchanged; a NSW free from poverty and inequality.

## The housing crisis in NSW

Access to secure, affordable and safe housing – a place to call ‘home’ – is central to the well-being of individuals, families and communities, and to the alleviation of disadvantage. Not surprisingly, it has long been a core focus of the policy and advocacy work undertaken by NCOSS in collaboration with other peak bodies and our members. Recent examples of this work include:

- Mapping Economic Disadvantage in NSW Report (October 2019)
- Cost of Living in NSW – Austerity Hits Home (April 2020)
- Cost of Living/COVID-19 Supplementary Paper Recommendations to the NSW Government (April 2020)
- Supporting Economic Recovery in NSW: Investment in Social and Affordable Housing is Critical to Supporting Jobs Today and Families into the Future (May 2020)

Together these reports demonstrate the extent of the housing crisis in NSW. They show that, well before COVID-19, our state was experiencing: an unacceptably high rate of homelessness; a severe shortage of affordable rental properties; moderate as well as low-income households experiencing housing stress and struggling to meet the cost of living; housing stress spanning out across metropolitan suburbs and into regional areas; a wait-list of 50,000 people for social housing and more than half of the population in this form of tenure living below the poverty line.

This previous analysis indicates that things are about to get a whole lot worse. The impacts of COVID-19 and rising unemployment will cause more people to enter homelessness and fewer to leave – increasing the overall numbers of people that are homeless by between 22.8% and 46.5%.<sup>1</sup> It highlights that, even in the early stages of the pandemic, there has been growing demand for homelessness services, domestic violence support and tenancy information and advice.<sup>2</sup>

## Our approach

In responding to the Housing Strategy for NSW Discussion Paper our intention has been to build on the findings from our earlier research by bringing the voices of NCOSS members – non government organisations

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<sup>1</sup> Equity Economics (2020): Supporting Economic Recovery in NSW: Investment in social and affordable housing is critical to supporting jobs today and families into the future.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

providing diverse community and social services across metropolitan and regional NSW – into the picture. We also support, but do not wish to duplicate, the advice and perspective of our specialist housing and homelessness peak bodies.

Therefore our approach has been to:

- Consult our broad membership to understand the impact of safe, secure and affordable housing (or lack thereof) on people's lives, including any significant flow-on impacts
- Present a ground-up, 'human' perspective across different communities and locations throughout NSW
- Highlight how housing issues impact the overall service system; and the extent to which structural impediments limit the ability of services to effectively respond.

Our consultation process included conversations - via focus groups, forums and individual interviews - with over 100 community sector staff and managers working at the frontline; along with a survey of 157 non-government organisations in metropolitan and regional locations across the state. Those who participated deliver a range of essential services to NSW communities and include community housing providers, Specialist Homelessness Services (SHSs), local neighbourhood centres, child and family services, aged care services, disability support, providers of family violence programs and allied health services. They have first-hand experience and in-depth understanding of how the shortage of affordable housing is playing out in communities across NSW and the everyday impact this has on the lives of the people they support.

The insights that emerged from these consultations highlight:

- the relationship between homes, people, place, communities and the economy;
- the interconnection between housing struggles, challenges in other facets of a person's life and the drain this places on our service system;
- the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown into sharp relief the value of a safe, secure and affordable home to provide sanctuary and protection; and
- the precarious and desperate circumstances that too many experience due to housing challenges.

These insights have been organised into key themes which are presented in the following section.

## Key themes

### Theme 1

A 20 year Housing Strategy is welcome but needs to acknowledge that the market alone will not deliver the solution, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged people.

The feedback received through our consultation process indicated strong support for the development of a housing strategy by the NSW Government; but that the starting point needs to be a clear acknowledgment and articulation of the extent of the housing crisis in NSW. Participants in metropolitan and regional areas alike spoke of the chronic shortage of social housing and the inability of the private rental market to provide affordable housing for people on low incomes and experiencing other vulnerabilities.

Regardless of service type, the majority of survey responses indicated that upwards of 60% of their clients experienced issues arising from lack of affordable, secure and appropriate housing; and a majority said that this had become more prevalent in recent years.

*'The housing issues - not just in our area, but nationwide are make it impossible to house people. Not enough social housing, community housing, affordable housing and the private rental market is completely unaffordable. I have no idea what people are meant to do to survive. It's getting worse.'* - Family support service, regional NSW

We heard repeatedly that the 'market' is a hostile and adversarial place for many people who need homes – including people in insecure employment, Aboriginal people who face discrimination in gaining and maintaining tenancies and people with disability who require accessible homes. The plight of young people, particularly those who will not inherit wealth, will face crippling debt if they are ever to own a home in a location with proximity to employment, and who struggle to afford private rentals because of low wages, was also frequently mentioned.

There was a strong view that the market model has failed to manage supply and demand and that it cannot be relied on to meet social need. As one participant put it, *'Markets don't care about people, they care about money'*.

Participants expressed concern that the Discussion Paper appears to devolve responsibility to a range of players – be it local government, the private sector or the community housing industry – while missing is a decisive, interventionist and strong leadership role from the NSW Government to tackle the problem head-on. They also saw the need for a stronger role for the NSW Government in influencing the Federal Government to adjust national policy levers that impact supply and affordability issues, such as negative gearing, and first home buyer schemes.

The clear message from the many service providers we received feedback from was: Investing in social and affordable housing is imperative and long overdue, with targets and an aggressive infrastructure program required to meet the chronic shortfall. At a time when economic stimulus is required, a social and affordable housing capital funding program will deliver homes and jobs.

*'It would be a shame for this housing strategy to be seen as a starting point – there is a vast evidence base that already exists around which housing models work and what is needed'*. Mental health service provider, metropolitan NSW

### Theme 2

The concept of a 'housing continuum', from homelessness through to home ownership, is contentious.

The concept of a 'housing continuum' as depicted in the Discussion Paper – that starts with homelessness, culminates in home ownership and between which people move back and forward depending on their

‘circumstances and preferences’ – elicited strong reactions. While the recognition of homelessness in the strategy was appreciated, the inclusion of homelessness on such a continuum was seen as problematic. Participants expressed the view that homelessness should be treated as an aberration, rather than a starting point, and that positioning it on a continuum implied a tacit acceptance of what should rightly be regarded as a social and economic failure.

There was also concern that notions of choice, personal preference and ‘trade-offs’ which underpin the continuum concept are inappropriate when it comes to homelessness and other housing challenges faced by different groups. The point was made that people don’t choose to be homeless, to live in substandard or overcrowded conditions, or to pay over 30% of their income on rent. Rather, these are structural issues that State and Federal Governments must address.

Participants also told us that there needs to be acknowledgment that for many, home ownership is not the end goal or aspiration – it is security and affordability that are most important. It was pointed out that moving along the continuum from social housing to a private rental situation could in fact be detrimental or risky, if factors such as inherent racism or inadequate tenancy protections resulted in eviction.

*‘Not all people will aspire to home ownership as an end goal – people simply want a secure, affordable and appropriate place they can call home.’* Youth service provider, regional NSW

### Theme 3

Affordable, secure, well-located housing is pivotal to individual, family and community well-being. Its absence compounds challenges across many domains.

*‘Can you imagine what kinds of cycles could be broken if there was more social and affordable housing and adequate income support? At the moment, it’s just Band-Aids.’* Neighbourhood centre, regional NSW

The most frequent problems arising from lack of affordable, secure and appropriate housing were identified by survey respondents as:

- Mental health issues (94%)
- Inability to cover the costs of essentials including food, utility bills and health care (90%)
- Relationship/family breakdown (78%)
- Ongoing exposure to domestic violence (70%)
- Difficulties finding and maintaining a job (69%)
- Parenting challenges (69%)

*‘The list is endless, we are talking about all family members. Adolescents in the family, lack of engagement in education. Unable to afford supports for children and self such as counselling, legal support and advice. If Housing that is stable and affordable cannot be attained then all other factors in daily living are impacted.’*

Family and Domestic violence support service, metropolitan NSW

### Mental health and drug and alcohol issues

Participants spoke of the connection between housing stress, mental health and related issues such as drug and alcohol dependency.

*'Affordable safe & secure, stable housing is the basis for a healthy life, as it helps to reduce mental health issues & all number of other life worries.'* Community housing provider, regional NSW

Service providers in both metropolitan Sydney and regional areas spoke of overcrowding as often the only option for families unable to afford the private rental market and for whom the wait for social housing can be up to ten years. They spoke of how multiple families or multiple generations under the one roof impacts all facets of people's lives and has a 'snowball' effect – giving rise to mental health issues, drinking, violence, and disengagement of young people from education.

Participants mentioned that people with complex mental health issues can end up sharing or living in overcrowded housing as it is all they can afford but that this living arrangement can exacerbate their mental health condition. Crisis accommodation and social housing complexes that can be home to a large number of people with mental health issues, can be unhealthy environments that do not aid recovery. The point was made that Housing NSW is not resourced to support people with significant mental health needs and the complexity of the NDIS means that many people who might qualify for it are potentially missing out.

*'Clients with complex mental health/AOD issues are unable to maintain tenancies in shared accommodation but have no other option due to affordability in the rental market.'* – Domestic violence and homelessness service, regional NSW

We heard that a high percentage of clients of drug and alcohol services are homeless, affecting their ability to stay engaged in treatment programs, and that they experience multiple barriers to securing suitable housing. The link between the use of amphetamine-style stimulants like ice and homelessness was highlighted.

*'Housing is primarily one of the predominant issues that reduces a person's ability to maintain their recovery (from addiction).'* Drug and alcohol service provider, metropolitan NSW

### Cost of living pressures

90% of survey respondents identified that lack of affordable housing gives rise to an inability to cover the cost of essentials including food, utility bills and health care. Participants spoke of the inability of families to afford the basics because of housing costs, the detrimental impacts of this and the drastic measures taken to get by.

*'An inability to meet rental payments means money is shifted away from other important items for household children like access to Wi-Fi and good computers for school. If these kids, living in these conditions cannot access good education the poverty cycle continues. In one case I witnessed an older sibling resort to theft to make money to pay for his young brother's childcare so his single mum could work in a job that is insecure*

*work and low pay. I'd like to see our wealthy, white politicians live that truth and survive!* Volunteer religious order, metropolitan NSW

*'The demand for emergency and financial assistance has increased. Cost of rent has made it difficult for families to provide food and essential items including medicine.'* Child and family service, metropolitan NSW

*"Stigma and shame are real and have a bearing. Families often can't send children to camps (though we can help pay). I recently assisted a family that didn't know about the support options for their children. Parents are often unwilling to access supports and feel shame about using welfare, given rhetoric about 'leaners' and don't want 'handouts', even though their family is suffering."* Child, youth and family support service, regional NSW

*'Rents are too high. Regional/rural wages and level of income support for students, single parents and/or anyone on a pension do not come close to reflecting the cost of living.'* Disability and aged care service, regional NSW.

During our consultations service providers reported a growing population of 'working poor' experiencing housing stress and cost of living pressures. Low wages and insecure work in industries like hospitality and tourism were identified as contributing factors. COVID-19 was seen as increasing financial stress for this population.

*'COVID-19 has increased unemployment, under-employment, working poor, and those who are in mortgage stress.'* Religious charity, metropolitan NSW

*'I believe there should be some effort to create strategies to help the working poor, those who are not eligible for Community Housing but cannot afford to privately rent.'* Community centre, regional NSW

*'Clients are referred to us for help. But its low wages and poverty that are the problem, not budgeting skills.'* Financial counsellor, regional NSW

### Domestic violence

The impact of lack of suitable housing options on women and children experiencing domestic violence was also a recurring theme. Domestic violence service providers spoke about women being 'between a rock and a hard place' knowing that if they leave a violent relationship they will struggle to find an affordable place to live, but staying places their safety and wellbeing, and that of their children, at risk.

A service provider in a coastal area experiencing huge demand for Airbnb accommodation, spoke of a recent experience of a woman fleeing a domestic violence situation and unsuccessfully applying to rent a vacant unit, along with 150 other applicants. This type of scenario puts increased pressure on emergency accommodation.



*'With a waiting time of 10 years for social housing, a woman in a DV situation would be dead by then.'*  
Neighborhood centre, regional NSW

*'A problem we see frequently is that if a woman has a problem like rental arrears she can be blacklisted. Often women don't know that they can get their name removed from the lease if they are fleeing DV.'* SHS provider, regional NSW

## Parenting challenges and child protection issues

Participants identified a link between lack of affordable and secure housing, and the ability of families to effectively meet parenting responsibilities.

*'[The] Housing problem is directly related to child protection involvement. It contributes to child removal and is a huge barrier to reunification.'* Family support/family preservation service, regional NSW

*"It is so disheartening to see families kept apart because parents are not able to access stable, affordable housing. It is particularly challenging for the staff to witness the layers of trauma that this adds for children and young people who have to remain in care."* Child and family service, regional NSW

*'It impacts people's ability to be good parents – the cumulative stress of the fire season, months of smoke inhalation, anxiety of children about evacuation means a traumatised community.'* Neighbourhood centre, fire-affected community, regional NSW

## **Theme 4**

There are groups who face particular challenges.

Survey respondents identified the following groups as particularly impacted by the lack of affordable, secure and appropriate housing:

- Single parent households (70%)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (68%)
- People on income security (65%)
- Young people (65%)
- Single person households (55%)
- People with disability (49%)
- CALD groups (38%)

Insights on challenges for particular cohorts included:

### Older women

A number of participants mentioned the emergence of a growing cohort of older women experiencing homelessness for the first time. Unemployment, insecure work, divorce/separation or the death of a spouse and lack of access to savings or assets were identified as contributing factors. In some instances older women

are moving from one insecure situation to the next, staying with friends or family, without recognising that they are homeless.

*'There is a degree of hidden homelessness.....living at friends or relatives' homes, couch surfing, pet sitting, travelling etc. that is not counted in statistics and the clients do not recognise they are in fact homeless'* Community service provider, regional NSW

*'I work with a number of older women who are faced with homelessness if they leave a situation with abusive family members. (Intersectionality of elder abuse usually perpetrated by adult children, history of DV, trauma history, isolation). The hopelessness of ever finding safe, affordable housing for older women means they feel forced to stay. This is unacceptable. They are also forced to enter aged care due to a lack of housing - again this is unacceptable.'* Community legal service, metropolitan NSW

The impact of poor quality housing on the severity and management of chronic health conditions was also identified, with universal design and sustainability of housing seen as critical to provide for a range of mobility and other needs, and provide resilience in the face of climate change.

### Young people

The need for greater recognition of the housing challenges facing young people was a recurring theme. If they cannot live with their families, options in the private rental market are generally out of reach because of high rents and low wages. This was seen as a particular problem for Aboriginal young people who experience high casualisation of work or have suffered job loss due to COVID-19.

The problem of young people couch surfing, and/or living with friends in overcrowded conditions was frequently mentioned as an issue for both metropolitan and regional locations. Lack of secure housing is also a barrier to accessing needed services and support because of transience and moving around. It was identified as also contributing to young people getting trapped in a cycle of incarceration because they have no stable housing to exit to once leaving the justice system.

*'Part of some offender's release conditions is that they have secure housing to go to. We provide a service where it is temporary accommodation but the struggle to afford housing, bonds and rents is very high. The offenders are left with no other options than to take less than ideal accommodation, often with other offenders residing at the properties.'* Youth offender community support program, metropolitan NSW

### People with disability

Service providers highlighted that challenges for people with disability are exacerbated by lack of secure, affordable, accessible housing.

*'Without secure housing people living in poverty are challenged across all areas of life. Living on disability pension is a major issue re cost of rent and services.'* Mental health advocacy organisation, statewide

It was highlighted that very few people with disabilities have the opportunity to own their own home. People with disability are more likely to live in low-income households, and to rent in the private market or to live in social housing. Participants reflected that a high percentage of people with disabilities live in regional NSW where access to services and support can be more difficult. Poor quality housing can exacerbate health issues, with the need for universal design again emphasized.

Service providers supported the recognition and inclusion of this in the discussion paper and considered that people with disability should also have the following.

- Accessibility – housing that is either built to purpose or adapted to be accessible, and that accessibility also extends to the surrounding environment external to the home. Also ensuring all builds incorporate universal design, to better enable choice and adaptability of housing options
- Choice – to be able to choose from homes across a variety of locations, sizes, designs and price ranges. For persons with higher care needs, choice in terms of the services and facilities offered in group homes and aged care homes are also important
- Proximity – close to community facilities and social opportunity, like hospitals, supermarkets, public transport, employment, family and friends
- Adaptability/flexibility – housing that can support needs as they change over time – for example, a second bedroom for a carer
- Security – security of tenure/ownership, including the capacity to ‘age in place’
- Inclusive – housing that facilitates inclusion within the broader community, and is evenly distributed in all builds so that accessible accommodation is not isolated or siloed from other housing communities

The need for accommodation under the NDIS was mentioned, with many disability organisations across different locations commenting that there is a huge demand for affordable SDA housing.

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

68% of survey respondents across NSW identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as particularly impacted by lack of affordable, secure and appropriate housing. During our consultations, this was highlighted as contributing to the widespread, structural social and health inequality that they continue to experience.

The link between overrepresentation of Aboriginal children, young people and adults in the out of home care, juvenile justice and criminal justice systems and lack of appropriate housing options and adequate living conditions for many communities was identified.

Participants felt that there were particular needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that should receive greater acknowledgement such as the health impacts experienced by the Stolen Generation, and the need for housing options across the lifecycle, designed to reflect changing circumstances.

*‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living with disability, are living in inaccessible housing at twice the rate of other people, and are the most disadvantaged people living in our country today. The lack of appropriate housing across all regions and demographics is prolific, all social housing, Aboriginal Land Councils and private rentals do not acknowledge the issues around people needing accessible housing for health and wellbeing outcomes.’* Aboriginal advocacy organisation, statewide

The issue of Aboriginal families being displaced during the recent bushfires and moving in with families and friends was raised in survey responses. It was pointed out that this contributes to overcrowding; but is wrongly seen as safe and secure housing and not as high a priority as those without shelter.

We were told that the issue of overcrowding and related health implications for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have heightened due to COVID-19, with less access to health care due to the need to stay home and away from the broader community.

### Migrant communities

Service providers identified migrant communities as being particularly vulnerable to lack of appropriate housing options. There was heightened concern for people on temporary visas, including being disqualified from or unable to meet the eligibility requirements for the National Rental Affordability scheme.

Participants working with refugee and migrant communities pointed out that these groups are generally only able to settle in areas that are more affordable – which often means areas where there are higher levels of unemployment, less access to skilled employment and limited public transport options. Availability of well-located, affordable housing would ensure career progress especially for skilled migrants. The need for such housing to cater to larger households was also mentioned.

The fact that people who are not citizens or permanent residents have no access to public housing or homelessness services in NSW was seen as particularly concerning in the face of rising unemployment due to COVID-19.

*‘The people that we see from this cohort are experiencing heightened levels of vulnerability due to their temporary visa status that impacts their health, safety and wellbeing across a number of domains. Without access to supports (including housing and mainstream health supports), they are at a very real risk of their basic needs not being met and exacerbating already existing concerns to do with their mental health, family and domestic violence and child protection.... The accommodation that people are able to access is often overcrowded, which also has follow-on impacts on health, mental health, domestic violence and child protection. This is of particular concern during COVID-19 as it poses a potential public health risk, particularly when CALD groups are more likely to not understand the impacts of coronavirus and how to best stop it.’* Emergency relief provider, statewide

This lack of access to housing support, particularly in the context of domestic violence, was raised by numerous participants:

*'No eligibility to housing support for asylum seekers, even if in a DFV situation, which also applies to all temporary residents...NSW needs to take responsibility for all its residents, not just selected groups, e.g. temporary visa holders do contribute tax and support the economy, there needs to be a safety net for them too.'* Migrant support service, metropolitan and regional NSW

*Access to emergency housing for temporary visa holders has to be increased for temporary visa holders in a domestic violence situation. It should be safety before visa status.'* Migrant support service, statewide

### People in regional communities

The specific challenges facing regional communities due to their natural environments were highlighted. Some have experienced flooding, drought and bushfires, and many still have not recovered from these extreme events – all of which affect the availability and affordability of housing. COVID-19 was identified as a further exacerbating factor.

*'The increase in people 'camping'....where they sometimes live out of their cars, and random 'campers' being seen in odd spots around town. They're not camping – they're under duress. The correlation between COVID-19 pandemic and the timing of this increases appears to be self-evident'* Community service provider, regional NSW

*'Many bushfire victims are still house with friends, family or if those are unlucky not to have anyone to take them in are sleeping rough in the areas where they were burnt out.'* - Community centre, regional NSW

*We see people living in non-compliant housing or living with black mold since the floods of 2017, whose only other option is homelessness'* Neighborhood Centre, regional NSW

*"Communities affected by 2017 flood are still recovering. Levels of accommodation available have not returned, particularly accommodation at the lower end market which were destroyed by the flood."* Child, youth, family and homelessness support service, regional NSW

Service providers spoke of coastal communities experiencing challenges of a different sort – the local housing market becoming saturated with holiday properties, making them unavailable for local renters, and people relocating to the coast putting upward pressure on local housing prices.

*'Holiday accommodation (especially airbnb type services) has taken housing stock out of the private rental market in this region. As a regional centre, we also see large infrastructure projects (e.g. roads, jails) place additional pressure on availability and affordability of housing during the time those projects are undertaken.'* Community service and youth housing provider, regional NSW

*'Mining and farming town, rental prices are above average.'* Neighbourhood centre, regional NSW

We were told that people can be faced with having to choose between having a job or having a house, as they are rarely co-located and there are less job opportunities in regional NSW in general.

## Theme 5

The service system is highly strained and structural challenges impede effective responses

During our consultations, a picture emerged of a service system under significant strain and frequently in 'crisis' mode - with lack of long-term, affordable housing leading to people repeatedly cycling back through emergency accommodation services; moving from one temporary arrangement to the next; experiencing or at risk of homelessness; and placing demand on the broader service system because of exacerbated and inter-related challenges.

Many providers across the social services spectrum spoke of having an open-door policy; of attempting to provide some level of engagement and support even if not the right service or unable to do more; and of placing people on waiting lists or doing their best to refer clients on to the right service.

We heard that while social housing is highly sort after it is often substandard, and only available for those with complex or the most urgent needs – but that the system does not cater for or provide the necessary support to meet these needs.

We also heard that many community housing providers throughout the state, including those that are Aboriginal-controlled, are keen to expand their offerings to meet diverse and rising needs for affordable, secure housing options across local communities in NSW. These aspirations however can be thwarted by systemic barriers.

### The repeat cycle of emergency and temporary accommodation options

A common refrain was that the need for emergency and transitional accommodation is far greater than availability as people are not able to move to permanent housing. This results in them cycling back through homelessness, refuges and other unsatisfactory arrangements.

We heard in one region that caseloads for Specialist Homelessness Services (SHSs) are triple that for which they are funded; but that funding levels have been the same for four years, putting more pressure on staff and ramping up caseloads.

*There is always pushback on the funded service to come up with a solution for clients; but until there are more houses available for SHSs to refer people into, it's not possible to address the problem.* SHS provider, regional NSW

*"The time limit for the women's refuge is eight weeks but it's very rare that they are able to move on; so they move between Temporary Accommodation and the refuge. We put women in cabins and caravans, which is*

*sad. Even if you get onto a priority waiting list for community housing, you are waiting 18-24 months.'*  
Women's refuge, regional NSW

*'Another group of clients affected are the women and children put on Start Safely as band aid fix to immediate risk of homelessness. Once this ends, women and children experience financial stress, they have been able to re-establish themselves while on Start Safely, but this ends. They have to initiate contact with Housing NSW and start again. They are then paying private rent and sit on waiting list for housing. Women may not have returned to the workforce within the timeframe and in some instances women put on Start Safely may never return to work.'* Family and domestic violence support service, metropolitan NSW

*"Just yesterday trying to assist a young mum who left DV relationship, could not find or afford a rental anywhere. She went home to stay with her mother and father and her child. Their relationship broke down due to parents' DV, past trauma she has experienced from parents, and parents are now kicking her out and she can't find accommodation – I will be ringing homelessness line link2home today, commencing the cycle of a motel, then possibly a refuge, child moving around schools, etc."* Women's health centre, regional NSW

*'I'm finding that a lot of my clients are in Temporary Accommodation. They are being forced to live in premises that are not affordable to them, and the living conditions in some places are really bad. If they haven't been approved by the time they run out of TA, they then become homeless. I see this repeatedly.'* Neighbourhood centre, regional NSW

We heard of instances of SHS services taking referrals from the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) and expected to be a 'catch-all' and meet the broader needs of individuals and families, but lacking the ability to refer into programs like Brighter Futures or Intensive Family Support – even if that was what was required – due to only DCJ being able to make such referrals.

SHSs spoke of onerous registration, accreditation and compliance regimes which are not possible to meet, creating unnecessary administrative burden and taking staff away from frontline delivery to clients.

We were also informed that the range of rental products designed to help those on low to moderate incomes avoid homelessness can be limited by onerous eligibility checks, strict criteria creating roadblocks and too short a timeframe that doesn't enable the recipient to either find a job or other, affordable accommodation. It was suggested that temporary measures alone cannot solve the problem; and that what is needed are stronger controls in relation to the extent of rent increases, security of tenure and the standard of private rental housing to create more affordable and suitable housing options.

### Public/social housing is not a panacea

Even though much sought after, available social housing is often inadequate. Many survey respondents (61%) reported that their clients live in poor quality social housing, with 56% saying adequate maintenance of existing social housing would help the most with housing challenges.



*'There have been social housing tenants who have had broken showers that weren't fixed for 5 years, a broken toilet that for 18 months was leaking sewage before it was fixed and the list goes on.'* Employment service, regional NSW

*'For most of our clients, social housing is the only realistic pathway to secure housing. The severe shortage of social housing and long wait times tends to exacerbate other problems.'* Community housing provider, regional NSW

*'I have a number of older clients who have been longstanding good public housing tenants who are living in unsafe and poorly maintained settings due to other residents nearby. One lady (30 years resident long standing) finds leaving her housing unit risky every day...'* Community service provider, regional NSW

*'I've been around a long time in the housing sector – 20 to 30 years – and I've never seen properties so badly maintained. It's really sad. It's not just about building houses, it's also about maintaining existing ones.'* Youth and family service, regional NSW

*'Dealing with lengthy wait times for responses from Housing NSW is a frustration for staff. Navigating the system and having different responses from individual Housing Officers means there is no clear process or guidelines in terms of what is upgraded, fixed or repaired.'* Family and domestic violence support service, metropolitan NSW

Many people in social housing also have complex needs. When asked what would assist with housing challenges for social housing tenants most survey respondents (76%) nominated additional support and wrap-around services.

The view was expressed however that access to initiatives such as NDIS and mental health plans is 'hit and miss' with neither Housing NSW nor DCJ having responsibility to support social housing tenants in this way. Local organisations such as SHSs and neighbourhood centres will do what they can but are not funded to play a case management role and can lack the necessary resources to navigate the complexities of systems such as NDIS.

During consultations, service providers also raised concern that poor energy efficiency in social housing results in high energy bills and increased health risks for residents.

### Community housing providers can face barriers to growth

The Community Housing Providers we spoke to highlighted the need for procurement policies that promote small scale development so that there is an equitable spread of community housing across NSW, rather than the large scale developments limited to a few locations that have occurred under the Social and Affordable Housing Fund (SAHF). It was suggested that smaller Community Housing Providers (Tier 2 and 3) are well placed to deliver diverse housing options and housing that is responsive to local need.



The need for greater investment in culturally-appropriate housing, and in Aboriginal housing providers to enable them to grow their capacity, was strongly emphasised. Aboriginal community housing providers spoke of being locked out of the transfer of mainstream properties from Government to community providers, notwithstanding the high number of Aboriginal tenancies involved. This has been a missed opportunity, with longer term consequences, to support the growth and viability of the Aboriginal housing sector and the delivery of culturally-appropriate, community-controlled housing. Particular mention was made of SAHF being a missed opportunity in this regard. Addressing onerous administrative and regulatory requirements in order to create 'a level playing field' was seen as imperative.

The NSW Aboriginal Land Council being a significant landowner in NSW was highlighted as a significant opportunity; as was the need for the NSW Government to collaborate and partner with it and the network of Aboriginal Land Councils throughout NSW to develop much needed housing, address widening inequities and provide economic opportunity in the process.

### Flow-on impacts for the broader service system

Non-housing community organisations spoke of assisting clients to overcome their housing issues; and of needing to provide support for other challenges arising from or exacerbated by lack of safe, secure accommodation.

*'As there is NO affordable housing currently available in our area the only support that staff can provide is basic support and counselling. This is time consuming and may allow people to identify areas causing most anxiety/depression/alcohol etc. but is not a long term sustainable solution. The stress of staff having to tell people that there is nothing they can do takes its toll as well as time wasted trying to provide suitable referrals. Frustrating and demoralising for both clients and staff.'*

Neighbourhood Centre, regional NSW

*'We just don't have the time to be case workers or do the advocacy needed to support these women. It is impossible if they have to fill in forms or ring around, many don't have references, or have been in DV and are blacklisted. They may have disabilities which impairs their ability to either move around or read or it means they need a lot of health supports. They don't have money to travel to see rental places etc. We just can't physically assist them - all we can offer is counselling, doctors, groups and childcare while they visit. Many need so much more.'* Community health service, regional NSW

The difficulties accessing the NDIS and the complexities of the system which meant many were missing out was a common refrain. Services that are not NDIS funded will try to assist people to get a package but often don't have the time because of workloads.

The impacts for the public health/hospital system was also raised such as when a hospital cannot discharge a person with chronic health or mental health issues, where there is no fixed address. This then which clogs up capacity.

## Impacts on staff wellbeing

When asked how housing issues impact staff, 60% of survey respondents said the problem of the lack of housing for their clients added significantly to their workloads, and 44% said the lack of solutions to their clients' housing issues significantly impacted their wellbeing, mental health and stress in the workplace.

*'Staff are resilient but a lack of housing stock gets really depressing. It can be demoralizing for staff – it feels like Groundhog Day because you can't get anyone to exit the system permanently. With limited brokerage and no housing options, you give clients the brokerage but they are in the same situation in a week's time.'* Specialist Homelessness Service, regional NSW

*'It can lead to vicarious trauma and has in the past. It affects workers significantly when there is so much complex need and they can't even scratch the surface of women's and children's issues.'* Women's health centre, regional NSW

*'We have to make magic happen out of nothing.'* Child and family service, regional NSW

*'Staff are good at coping and its part of the job. But at the end of the day, they should be able to leave and feel they have done their best and delivered.'* Specialist Homelessness Service, regional NSW

Participants spoke of their anxiety about COVID-19 economic stimulus measures coming to an end and the anticipated rise in demand, with more people who haven't needed support previously emerging. In a number of instances this was referred to as 'the calm before the storm'.

*'COVID-19 has increased unemployment, under-employment, working poor, and those who are in mortgage stress.'* Religious charity, metropolitan NSW

## Conclusion and recommendations

A 20 year housing strategy is welcomed. It needs to acknowledge the extent of the housing crisis in NSW; and that safe, secure and affordable housing is central to the well-being of individuals, families and communities.

The economic downturn resulting from COVID-19 will be long-lasting. As unemployment grows, more people will experience, or be at risk of, homelessness; more households will struggle to make ends meet; and housing affordability will be a major pressure point impacting well-being and quality of life.

Our consultations with member organisations add to our understanding of how the chronic shortfall of social and affordable housing impacts outcomes across multiple domains for already vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in the community. We heard how it places the entire social services system under increasing strain and in 'crisis' mode, limiting the effectiveness of supports available. Yet a clear picture emerged that, despite these structural issues over which they have little control, community service providers at the frontline continue to battle the odds and do what they can to provide support to people in need.

Since the conclusion of our consultations on the Housing Strategy for NSW Discussion Paper, we have seen the release of a new historic National Agreement on Closing the Gap, developed by more than 50 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations coming together as a 'Coalition of Peaks' to negotiate with all Australian Governments, including the NSW Government.

The Agreement commits to a fundamentally new way of developing and implementing policies and programs that impact the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It recognises that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a genuine say in the design and delivery of services that affect them, better life outcomes are achieved and that structural change and shared decision-making are needed to close the gap. The Agreement sets targets across key outcome domains, including that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need. It provides a framework and impetus for the NSW Government to partner with key Aboriginal-controlled organisations to deliver on this and other related outcomes.

Previous economic analysis commissioned by NCOSS and NSW housing and homelessness peak bodies has demonstrated the economic benefits from investing in social and affordable housing. This includes short term stimulus to the residential construction sector, with an additional 5,000 social housing units estimated to support 18,000 construction jobs across NSW, and provide flow-on benefits for 97,000 small to medium enterprises.

The analysis also highlights the broader, long term benefits due to improved housing security, health and economic participation. Further, the investment can be spread out across NSW, generating employment in regional economies.

Within this context, whole-of-system reform is required to:

- Elevate, not diminish, the role of social housing, with targets set and a construction program implemented to rectify the chronic shortfall
- Implement measures to improve the quality, affordability and security of the private rental market
- Mandate the provision of affordable housing in residential developments
- Support an expanded role for community housing providers – including those that are Aboriginal-controlled – in the development of culturally-sensitive and diverse housing options across the lifecycle
- Reduce administrative burden and unnecessary regulatory red-tape
- Value and support essential community services, including investment to support viability and respond to rising demand in the SHS sector and for locations that have experienced multiple adverse events
- Invest in localised service system redesign, in collaboration with community service providers, to facilitate easy and timely access to support, more joined up service delivery and stronger referral pathways.

Our recommendations for action by the NSW Government largely draw on those made in previous reports and include:

1. Advocate through the National Cabinet for the Federal Government to:
  - Permanently raise the rate of income support payments so that everyone can have a roof over their head and cover the costs of essentials;
  - Develop, in partnership with states and territories, a National Housing Strategy that articulates roles and responsibilities, including significant contribution and leadership from the Federal Government to construction and delivery of social and affordable housing across Australia.
2. Establish a NSW Social and Affordable Housing Capital Fund to grow the supply of social housing by 5,000 per annum, and similar for affordable housing. This should include:
  - a. The identification and purchase of vacant, or soon-to-be completed, developments for conversion to social or affordable housing
  - b. Identification of government owned properties for conversion to social housing
  - c. Ensuring that social and affordable housing is accessible and meets universal design principles
  - d. Enabling the diverse range of Community Housing Providers to participate in the program.
3. In keeping with the new Closing the Gap Agreement, partner with the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, the network of Local Aboriginal Land Councils and Aboriginal community controlled housing providers to improve housing outcomes for Aboriginal people in NSW; increase the housing available; expand the delivery of culturally-sensitive services; and create opportunities for Aboriginal people to participate in the service delivery, management and governance of social and affordable housing in our state.
4. Expand the Community Housing Leasing Program to increase the number of properties available through community housing providers and respond to the growing demand for permanent housing options for people in temporary accommodation.
5. Build on the \$60 million already allocated to the maintenance of ageing social housing stock, by allocating additional funds to support a comprehensive maintenance program across the entire NSW social housing portfolio - ensuring fit-for-purpose homes that meet accessibility and other standards, and creating jobs and stimulating economic activity in the process.
6. Make renting a viable, long term option and provide enhanced protection for the more than 2 million people in NSW who rent by:
  - a. Ensuring renters have legislative protection against unfair evictions by amending the Residential Tenancies Act 2010 to include a list of reasonable grounds and protections against the false use of eviction grounds
  - b. Setting minimum standards in rental housing for health, safety and energy efficiency to protect against heat, cold and pollution and reduce energy bills
7. Mandate targets for social and affordable housing in new residential developments of up to 15% on private land and 30% on government land.

8. Increase funding for the Specialist Homelessness Services Program by 20% to support services to meet current demand and provide contract certainty of at least 5 years.
9. Prioritise and fund a Housing First approach that provides tailored support, alongside social housing, to help maintain the tenancies of at least 400 vulnerable people with high and complex needs, incorporating NDIS packages as appropriate.
10. Continue to invest in a Housing First approach for 200 people with high and complex needs experiencing long term homelessness.
11. Address immediate risks to the viability of community services in NSW:
  - a. Set adequate indexation for community services to meet minimum wage increases and other costs
  - b. Incorporate Equal Remuneration Order supplementation payments into baseline funding contracts from 2021 to facilitate pay equity
  - c. Extend standard contracts for community service delivery by non-government organisations to 7 years for most contracts and 10 years for service delivery in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
12. Invest in placed-based whole of service system reform, starting in two locations with high rates of homelessness and housing stress, with the aim to:
  - a. Bring together community service organisations, government entities, service users and other relevant community representatives to collaborate for better outcomes;
  - b. Understand community need, unmet demand and stress points across the local social services system;
  - c. Identify and analysing linkages between housing stress and impacts on other issues and challenges facing those in need of support;
  - d. Redesign the services system to provide ready access, the right support at the right time, strong referral pathways and community connections, and joined up service delivery;
  - e. Deliver results and practical solutions.
13. Establish a *Resilient Communities – Support and Connect* Fund to supplement existing grant programs and enable small to medium-sized non-government organisations embedded in their local communities to:
  - Expand existing offerings to meet spikes in demand
  - Undertake targeted outreach to connect with people who are most vulnerable and at risk of slipping through the cracks
  - Develop new tailored offerings – in partnership with the community – that build connections, facilitate recovery and promote resilience.