



Inquiry into homelessness in Australia

Submission

June 2020

© **Copyright Municipal Association of Victoria, 2020.**

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is the owner of the copyright in the publication MAV Submission Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing from the Municipal Association of Victoria.

The MAV does not guarantee the accuracy of this document's contents if retrieved from sources other than its official websites or directly from a MAV employee.

The MAV can provide this publication in an alternative format upon request, including large print, Braille and audio.

The MAV is the statutory peak body for local government in Victoria. The MAV would like to acknowledge the contribution of those who provided their comments and advice during this project. The MAV contact officer for any questions about this submission is Jan Black, Policy Adviser. Email jblack@mav.asn.au

While this paper aims to broadly reflect the views of local government in Victoria, it does not purport to reflect the exact views of individual councils.

Table of contents

Introduction	4
Nature and scale of homelessness in Victoria	5
Social economic and policy factors	11
Policies and practices	14
Recommendations	17

Introduction

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on behalf of Victorian councils to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia.

This submission responds to a number of aspects of the inquiry's terms of reference, including:

- The incidence of homelessness in Victoria
- Factors affecting the incidence of homelessness
- Examples of best-practice approaches to addressing homelessness in the local government sector

Homelessness has increasingly taken the attention of councils across Victoria in recent years. The issue, often characterised as people sleeping rough, is far more layered, nuanced and hidden than the enduring stereotype of the nameless man sleeping on our streets. Homelessness takes many forms and in certain parts of Melbourne impacts on women in far greater proportion than men, and can be expressed by couch surfing, sleeping in cars, public parks and accommodation of last resort such as caravan parks and illegal rooming houses.

For the past three years the MAV State Council has resolved to request other levels of government take a stronger role in developing the levers and mechanisms, including those available to councils, to address homelessness and housing. This submission will explore the key drivers of homelessness, the populations effected and provide recommendations from a local council perspective.

While this submission focuses on the role of local government, the MAV will continue to work with other key stakeholders to develop partnerships that will lead to better outcomes for people who are homeless.

The role of local government in Victoria

The 79 Victorian local government authorities, also known as local councils, play an important role in supporting communities by delivering over one hundred services, caring for the environment and managing land and community infrastructure. As the third level of government in Australia, established in Victoria under the Local Government Act 2020, democratically elected councillors and employees manage assets while working in collaboration with the Victorian and Australian governments.

Nature and scale of homelessness in Victoria

The following details the broad scale of homelessness across Victoria. These high-level statistics inform the council experience of this complex and growing issue:

The broad scale

- Nearly 25,000 Victorians are experiencing homelessness on any given night (ABS, 2016)
- The number of Victorians experiencing homelessness rose 43% in the 10 years to 2016 (ABS, 2016)
- 82,000 Victorians are waiting for social housing, including 25,000 children (Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into social housing, 2018)
- The number of people waiting for social housing is growing by 500 people each month (Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into social housing, 2018)
- 35% of homelessness clients indicate housing affordability is the reason for their homelessness (AIHW, 2018)
- 38% of homelessness clients indicate family violence is the reason for their homelessness (AIHW, 2018)
- Despite the stereotype of the older homeless man, more than 60% of people who seek help from homelessness services are women (AIHW, 2018)
- Victoria has the lowest proportion of social housing of any state or territory, with just 3.3% of all housing being social housing (Council to Homeless Persons, 2019)
- There are only 2 rental properties in Australia which would be affordable for someone on a Newstart income (Anglicare Rental Affordability Index, 2019)

Victorian councils and homelessness

Inner Melbourne

To augment broad data sets from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, local councils have embarked on various ways to understand the issue at the local level. These include street counts, by name lists and partnerships with local providers which often give a personalised overview of this complex issue at the local level.

The local council experience of homelessness is varied. Rough sleeping is the most visible and present form of homelessness and often takes the attention of the general public and councillors alike. The high level of visibility can often result in emotive debate among local communities and prompt calls for action by councils. Many councils have opted to undertake a street count to provide a point in time snapshot of people sleeping rough and provide direction for policy and service delivery.

The City of Melbourne has undertaken a Street Count since 2008.

In 2018 **279 people** were counted (Appendix 1)

- 33% on the street
- 12% in parks
- 48% in other locations
- 77% men
- 21% women

Table 1. Street count numbers, City of Melbourne (2008-16)

Year	Male	Female	Unknown Gender	Total
2016	195	35	17	247
2014	102	20	20	142
2012	87	14	0	101
2011	81	13	11	105
2010	72	14	15	101
2009	51	13	11	75
2008	78	16	18	112

Source: City of Melbourne Pathways Homelessness Strategy 2014-17; City of Melbourne 2016.

In 2018 neighbouring councils to City of Melbourne felt the issue had grown to a substantial enough scale that warranted a combined Street Count to quantify the issue. The cities of Port Phillip, Stonnington, Yarra, Maribyrnong and Melbourne all jointly undertook a street count.

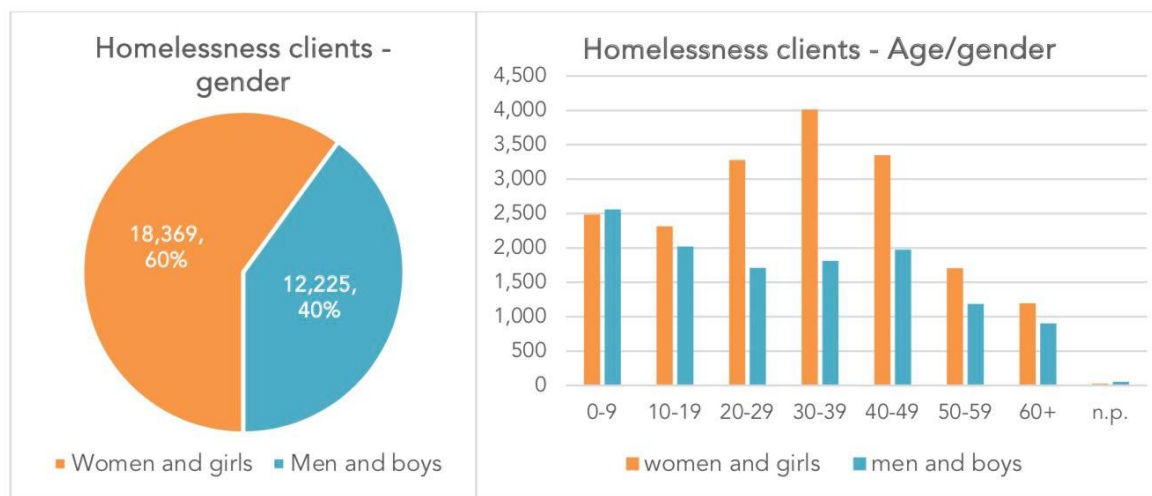
In 2018 **392 people** were counted (Appendix 2).

Where people were sleeping

- 35% on the street
- 13% in parks
- 48% in other locations
- 77% men
- 22% women

Limitations of Street Counts are the point in time nature of the data set and their strong focus on rough sleeping. As a result, Street Count's often skew towards men, as women often feel sleeping rough can be unsafe relative to other forms of homelessness, however the number of women sleeping rough has grown in recent years. When year on year comparisons are made, particularly with the City of Melbourne Street Count the number of women presenting on Melbourne's streets has gone from 14% in 2008 to 21% in 2018.

Figure 1: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Specialist homelessness data 2017 – 18, people using homelessness services in the eastern and southern local area service network.



The above charts highlight the gendered nature of homelessness experienced in the more suburban parts of Melbourne. The data was prepared by the Council to Homeless Persons for a forum held for the fourteen Eastern Melbourne councils in November 2019. The forum was a response to increasing numbers of people experiencing homelessness in Melbourne's east.

The coastal experience

The experience in more coastal parts of Victoria is quite different to that of more urban parts of the state. Mornington Peninsula Shire in their submission to the Victorian parliamentary inquiry recently noted:

'Small traditional caravan parks on the Mornington Peninsula are home to a roughly estimated 1,000 people. There is a significant risk that the trend of the past decades for the closure of such parks will catapult residents into homelessness and stretch, already overstretched homelessness services.'

Mornington Peninsula was the sixth worst Victorian municipality (4.2% of the Victorian total) after Melbourne, Port Phillip, Yarra, Frankston and Geelong for persons who were sleeping rough (i.e. living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out) according to the ABS 2016 census. This was despite having one of the lower levels of total homelessness for the southern region

For the Mornington Peninsula, 298 people were estimated as homeless with 48 of these in "improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out" (i.e. rough sleeping).

Western Port Community Support reports that their new Program has case managed 143 clients who were either homeless or at risk of homelessness. They were mainly female (58%) and mainly under 55 years of age (77%). Fifty-nine of the 143 presented as homeless and either sleeping rough in cars, on the foreshore or in bushland (19) or intermittently living in rooming houses or couch surfing (40)

Outreach to people who are sleeping rough is difficult on the Mornington Peninsula because of the sheer size of the municipality, 723 square kilometres, with about 10% of Victoria's coastline) and a tendency for people who are sleeping rough to resort to various coastal and bushland reserves.'

The unique factors depicted through the above analysis of rough sleeping in a coastal setting is expressly different to that of the inner urban experience. The Mornington Peninsula Shire state that there are also significant service and funding gaps which make it challenging to support the increasing numbers of people presenting to services. The MAV would ask the committee to note these factors and calibrate their recommendations accordingly, particularly noting the geographical issues mentioned.

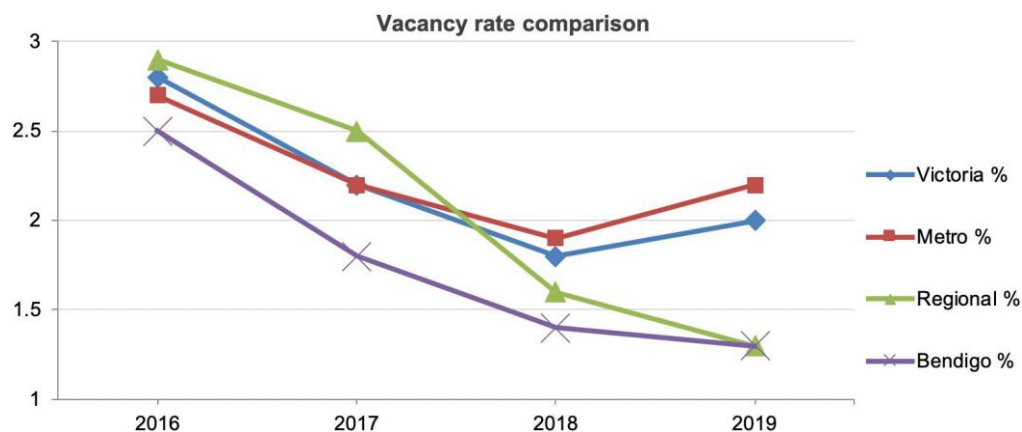
Regional Victoria

Homelessness in regional Victoria is similar in its presentation to the experience in coastal councils. Vulnerable populations can be found in caravan parks and temporary forms of accommodation, all of which is against the backdrop of an increasing lack of social housing. Rental affordability, and the overall availability of rental properties is also in decline leaving many people with limited housing options. The City of Greater Shepparton reports:

The evidence of housing need is alarming, with Greater Shepparton estimated to have a rate of 5.56 homeless persons per 1,000 people, the highest in regional Victoria, with 1041 households on the waiting list for social housing. Rental affordability has fallen by 10% between 2008 and 2018, and 27% of low-income households are experiencing housing stress.

Regional Victoria is experiencing declining vacancy rates in rental properties when compared to other parts of Victoria. Tight rental markets place even further pressure on lower income households by adding to the existing challenges for renters. Such housing vulnerability and lack of secure tenure is often the first step on the pathway into homelessness.

Figure 2: Annual vacancy rate



In recent years there has been a sharp increase in people presenting to homelessness services in regional Victoria. The City of Greater Bendigo report:

In 2006 the ABS Census estimated 257 people were experiencing homelessness in Greater Bendigo and in 2016 this estimate increased to 295 people. However, due to the difficulty in counting homeless individuals as part of the Census, this is likely to significantly undercount the numbers of homeless individuals. The number of people accessing government funded specialist homelessness services has also increased. In Greater Bendigo there was a 34 per cent increase from 2015 (1,969) to 2018 (2,646).

Melbourne's North and West

The experience in Melbourne's north and west is similar to the experience in other parts of Victoria. There is growing demand for housing and in some parts a notable increase in demand for emergency accommodation.

Northern and Western Homelessness Networks have identified increasing demands for emergency accommodation as a result of increasing rates of homelessness, which is linked to Melbourne's housing crisis, particularly to the lack of affordable housing (NWHN 2018).

As at September 2018, there were 4,251 'priority access' social housing applicants on the Victorian Housing Register in Melbourne's west (Victorian Government, 2019).

Since the mid 2000's City of Darebin, in Melbourne's north, has played an active role in addressing family violence. Darebin was one of the first councils to identify the leadership role local government can play in addressing family violence, both through its many settings for which it has management responsibilities and the capacity for advocacy by its elected councillors. Darebin council through their work has noted that women over 55 years are now the fastest-growing cohort of homeless people in Australia and that experiencing family violence is the single most common reason women seek the support of the homelessness service system.

The City of Darebin also advise that women experience economic inequality as a result of wage, wealth and retirement income gaps - increasing their risk of vulnerability to housing stress, insecurity and homelessness. Women who are older and living alone will be significantly more disadvantaged than men their age, less able to maintain homeownership and less able to compete in the private rental market for affordable accommodation. The range of challenges and complex issues increase the need for emergency accommodation arising from crisis situations and there is a paucity of service options in this sector.

The MAV would ask the committee to consider the varied experience of councils across Victoria and specifically note the gendered nature of homelessness and particularly the growing cohort of older women.

Social, economic and policy factors

There are a range of contributing factors influencing why people experience homelessness. The *Specialist homelessness Services in 2017-18 Victoria Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report* states that:

One in 54 people in Victoria (Vic) received homelessness assistance, higher than the national rate (1 in 85). The top 3 reasons for clients seeking assistance were:

- 1. domestic and family violence (47%, compared with 39% nationally)*
- 2. financial difficulties (40%, compared with 39% nationally)*
- 3. housing crisis (37%, compared with 39% nationally).*

On average, 90 requests for assistance went unmet each day.

These data sets are confirmed by the experience of Victorian councils. Many councils report their interactions with local service providers that the three largest contributors to homelessness are family violence, the lack of access to affordable housing and financial hardship.

Family Violence

Family violence is the number one cause of women experiencing homelessness in Australia. Our Watch, established in July 2013 through the *National plan to reduce violence against women and their children 2019 2022* states:

'Domestic or family violence against women is the single largest driver of homelessness for women'.

The MAV submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence in 2015 provided a detailed overview of the link between family violence and homelessness:

We know that a lack of accessible and affordable housing deters victims from leaving violent relationships, pushes victims into homelessness, and can make perpetrators more isolated and increase the risk of repeated or escalated violence. There is a need for a long-term affordable housing strategy that addresses the nexus between family violence and homelessness, including options for women and children to live safely, where possible in their own homes, and affordable housing pathways for perpetrators to ensure they remain engaged with relevant services to help prevent the risk of further violence.

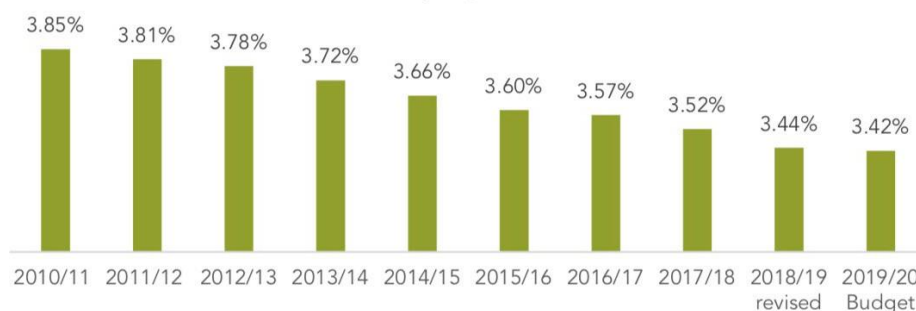
The MAV has applauded the Victorian Government for implementing the Family Violence Housing Blitz as part of the recommendations emanating from the Royal Commission and urges that the link between family violence, housing and homelessness be addressed through future policy initiatives through all levels of government.

Housing investment

In a report prepared for the Eastern Metropolitan Region councils the Council to Homeless Persons note the importance of increased investment in social housing by the Victorian Government. The report states:

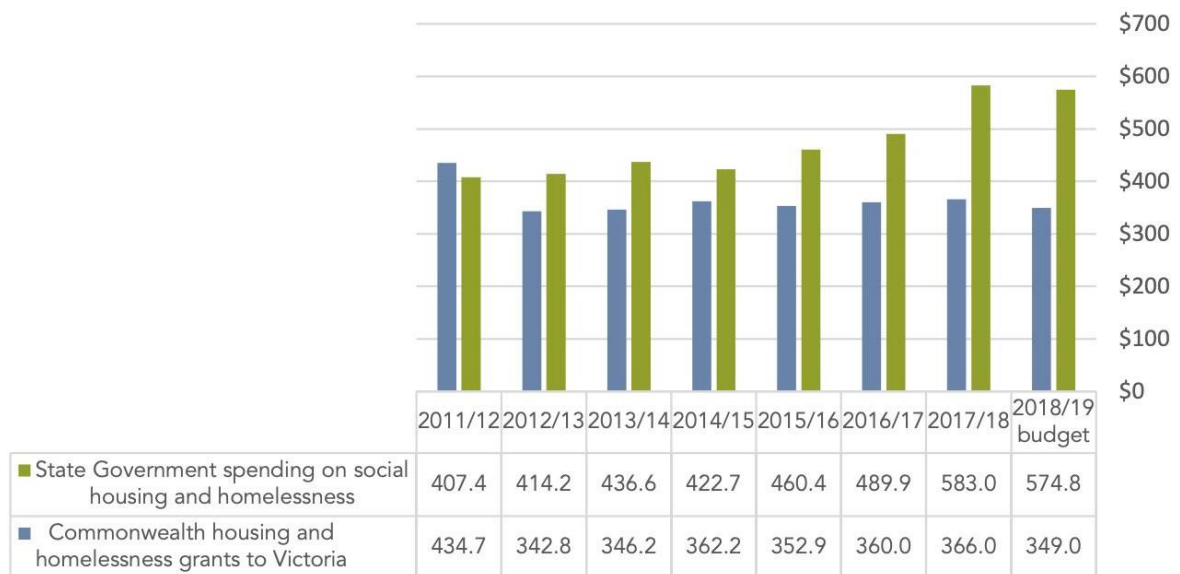
Despite the critical importance of social housing for prevention of homelessness for low income households, it has become progressively more difficult to get into social housing, because the proportion of all Victorian housing that is social housing has been reducing as Victorian investment in new social housing has not kept pace with population growth. There are now 44,152 Victorian households on the wait list for social housing, including 17,717 households in the South and East of Melbourne'

Figure 3: Social Housing as a proportion of all dwellings



The Victorian Government receives funding for social housing and homelessness services via the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement. The chart below details the Victorian and Commonwealth funding via this agreement since 2011/12. It should be noted that while Victorian funding has been increasing the Commonwealth contribution has been decreasing.

Figure 4: State Government spending on social housing and homelessness (millions)



The MAV concurs with the contention put by many councils and the Council to Homeless Persons that there is an ‘urgent need’ for both the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments to deliver more social housing as a homelessness prevention measure.

Lack of safe last resort accommodation

In 2017 the *Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute* at University of Melbourne released a report calling for government investment in last resort housing. The authors note that there has been:

‘a reduction in the supply of “last resort housing”. Last resort housing refers to legal rooming and boarding houses, and emergency accommodation’.

The report:

‘calls on governments to build more new, permanent last resort housing to help the homeless, because the benefits outweigh the costs. Existing last resort housing should be protected and maintained. These are issues for local, state and federal governments.’

The MAV supports this contention given the experience of Mornington Peninsula Shire and the City of Greater Bendigo and their concerns that the closure of caravan parks can result in people sleeping rough given the low-cost housing caravan parks can provide. Councils in Melbourne’s north and west have also raised concerns regarding the lack of emergency and last resort accommodation.

Impact of COVID-19

Victorian councils have supported the efforts of the State Government in providing options for rough sleepers during the first four months of the pandemic. Particularly in Melbourne and the immediate municipalities, many hundreds of people have been housed with a large majority of rough sleepers being accommodated albeit temporarily. The investment by State Government in supporting this cohort of people who are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the disease has been enhanced by the efforts of the housing service sector to pull out all stops in provision of support services. Regional and interface councils are also reporting larger numbers of rough sleepers with unfortunately limited specialist services able to respond.

The burning question for all involved is what happens when restrictions are lifted and the additional support and investment finishes. The need for more social housing to meet the needs of the those who are homeless is compelling and the opportunity to meet economic stimulus goals is equally compelling.

The MAV commends the report commissioned by Community Housing Industry Association on the social housing accelerations and renovation (SHARP) program as one which outlines the economic as well as social benefits of investing in quality homes which will have advantages not just through construction and works phases but in provision of homes for key workers going forward.

https://chiavic.com.au/building-the-recovery/?mc_cid=0180296b26&mc_eid=8ab0219f25

The fact that only 4% of housing is classified social housing in Australia masks the history of the importance of social housing over many decades as a foundation for secure stake in the community. A [new report](#) by University of Adelaide's Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) shows who uses social housing and the pathways they take into and out of the sector. The report indicates that people use social housing as a spring board into private markets including home ownership as well as a safety net. There is opportunity to meet stimulus objectives as well as provision of affordable housing for people on modest incomes through investment of the scale outlined in the SHARP program.

Policies and practices

Housing

Significant investments have been made by some councils in providing land and buildings to address the short fall of housing for homelessness.

The Victorian Government has also provided guidance to local councils regarding how to enact voluntary 'Section 173' agreements for inclusion of affordable housing with developers (DEWLP, 2018). However, there is considerable difficulty in negotiating an affordable housing contribution, requiring resources from council, developers, and often from community housing organisations, with no guarantee that there will actually be an increase in the affordable housing stock. Without certainty through mechanisms such as mandatory inclusion of affordable housing quotas in private developments, councils have limited levers to negotiate for increased affordable stock.

At present, 17 councils are participating in projects funded by the Victorian government via the *Social Housing Investment Planning* grants program. Some councils have gone so far as to identify housing targets at the local or regional level. For example, a stimulus paper has been prepared by Professor Carolyn Whitzman PhD '*Housing targets for regions: how feasible is this for Melbourne's South and East*'. The paper, commissioned by City of Monash, highlights the collective efforts emerging across multiple local governments to address the interlinked issues of lack of housing and homelessness.

The City of Melbourne in the recent Draft affordable housing strategy noted that:

"Economic analysis shows that for every \$1 invested in affordable housing, the economic benefit to the community is \$3.4 Research shows our economy benefits through reduced costs associated with crime, family violence and health, as well as enhanced human capital, educational benefits and key worker retention. "

Good practice from councils

Local government is increasingly turning its attention to the issue of homelessness. A growing number of councils have invested significant resourcing into addressing homelessness in direct and indirect ways. Service responses range from direct funding to local homelessness providers, providing land on which to develop housing, data collection to understand the scale of the issue and strategic advocacy campaigns all the way through to enforcement and compliance-based interventions.

The approach is varied across Melbourne. In coastal and regional areas, councils have strong partnerships with local providers to ensure local people experiencing homelessness can access outreach services, accommodation and emergency relief. Local councils are also active members of formal regional homelessness networks across Melbourne.

For the past 20 years the City of Melbourne has had a strategy to address homelessness and a Street Count to provide a series of data sets to track the issue over time. The City of Port Phillip and City of Yarra for some time have also had a range of protocols, projects and agreements with service providers to address homelessness and rough sleeping in the main across their respective municipalities.

The following examples provide an insight into the range of, and often reactive approaches, undertaken by Victorian councils to address homelessness.

Land

Port Phillip Balaclava Community Housing

The project is for a 31 unit community rooming house, considered a 'flagship' demonstration project for the City of Port Phillip and the Office of Housing. Council owned the site which functioned as car parking supporting the adjacent retail strip. The goal for the clients is to enable the location of a rooming house facility for long-term residents of the City of Port Phillip.

http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/MGS_Woodstock_Display_2008.pdf

Leadership

Monash regional response to homelessness forum

In November 2019 fourteen eastern region councils, led by City of Monash, met to form a regional response to homelessness. Solutions put forward ranged from leveraging land for housing, leveraging regulative powers as well as leveraging collective effort.

Innovation

City of Melbourne and Council to Homeless Persons Connect respect

The Connect Respect program was developed to address an increase in reported concerns by local businesses about the growing impact of rough sleeping and street begging on their operations, and the safety of their staff and customers. The program provides training to businesses on how to connect with people experiencing homelessness so that they have the confidence and knowledge to respond in an inclusive and respectful way.

<https://magazine.melbourne.vic.gov.au/connect-respect>

Darebin Community Shower Access Program

The City of Darebin has recently released its shower access policy, giving those experiencing homelessness entry to recreation facilities. This program provides access for people experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping to the Reservoir Leisure Centre and Northcote Aquatic and Recreation Centre.

Advocacy

Everybody's Home Campaign

Several local governments including the City of Moreland, Melton and Port Phillip have partnered with the national Everybody's Home campaign to advocate to the State and Federal Government around the need to invest in social housing. The Council of Capital City Lord Mayors have also partnered with Everybody's Home in a series of high profile public events, including in this message to supporters from Federal Parliament.

<https://everybodyshome.com.au>

Protocols

Many councils have developed protocols to provide advice and direction for council and council staff to respond to people who are homeless and ensure that council services are inclusive.

[City of Yarra: How to respond to rough sleeping and squatting in Yarra protocol](#)

[City of Port Phillip: Protocol for assisting people who sleep rough](#)

[City of Boroondara: Homelessness Protocol](#)

Conclusion

This submission highlights the growing number of councils grappling with this complex issue and that ultimately, the patchwork of interventions being delivered comes at a significant, often unbudgeted cost. Taking a reactive approach is not sustainable. It brings into sharp relief the need for a more timely and coordinated approach across all levels of government to address this complex social issue. There needs to be a co-ordination of roles and responsibilities of federal, state and local government, private industry and non-government organisations. This is best developed at the federal level within the framework of a national housing strategy

Recommendations

That the Australian Government:

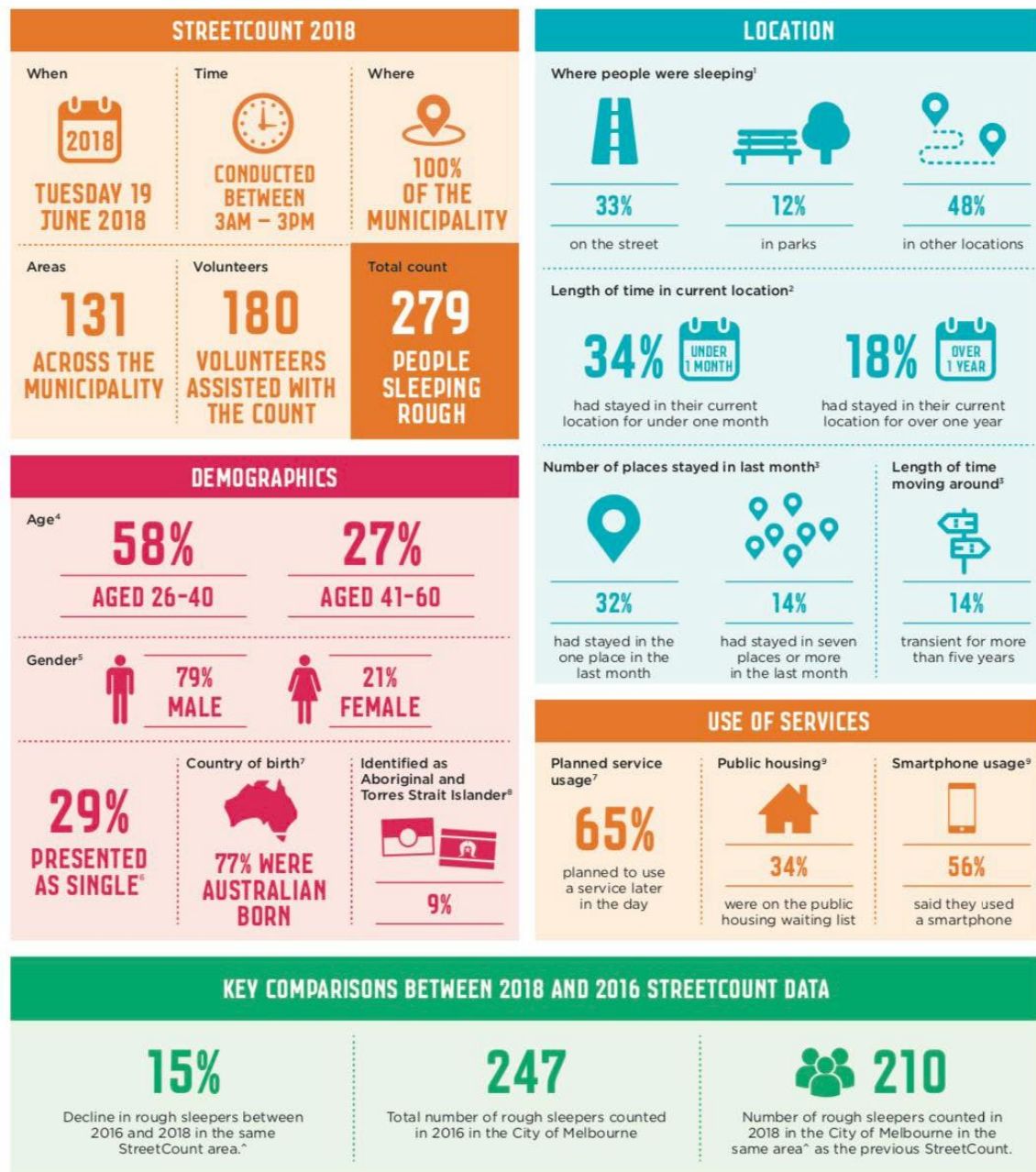
- Introduces a National Housing Strategy, inclusive of a plan to increase social and affordable housing through investment and support for mechanisms such as mandatory inclusionary zoning.
- Acknowledge local governments' role in housing which could also include appropriate funding to facilitate innovative partnership models for housing.
- Optimises stimulus expenditure through investment in social and affordable housing through partnership programs with the community housing sector and state and local governments.

Appendix 1

STREETCOUNT 2018: A SNAPSHOT OF PEOPLE LIVING ROUGH

Municipality
of Melbourne

StreetCount 2018 aims to continue to develop an understanding of rough sleeping in Melbourne. This was the eighth count of people sleeping rough in the City of Melbourne since 2008. Thank you to the many volunteers and partner organisations who assisted in StreetCount 2018.



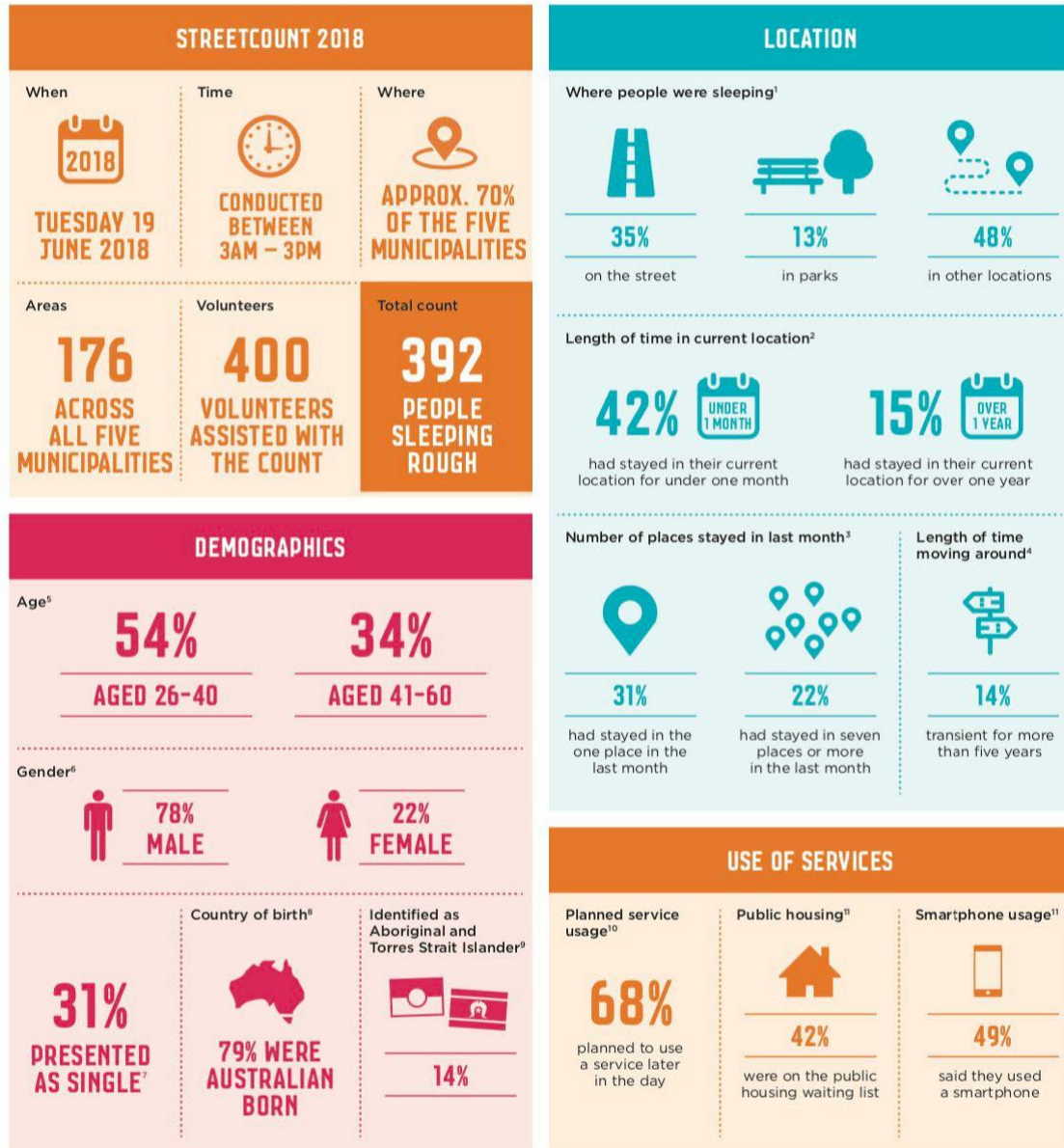
Inner Melbourne Action Plan
Making Melbourne More Liveable



STREETCOUNT 2018: A SNAPSHOT OF PEOPLE LIVING ROUGH

Five Inner Melbourne Municipalities

StreetCount 2018 aims to continue to develop an understanding of rough sleeping in Melbourne. This was the first joint count of people sleeping rough in the Cities of Melbourne, Maribyrnong, Yarra, Stonnington and Port Phillip. Thank you to the many volunteers and partner organisations who assisted in StreetCount 2018.



Inner Melbourne Action Plan
Making Melbourne More Liveable

