

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Melbourne—Tuesday, 23 June 2020

Hearing via videoconference

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WITNESSES

Mr Ashish Sitoula, Team Leader, Community Advocacy, Greater Dandenong City Council;

Ms Venita Mackinnon, Social and Community Planner, Frankston City Council;

Mr John Baker, Chief Executive Officer, Mornington Peninsula Shire Council; and

Mr Nick Grant-Collins, Acting Coordinator, Inclusion and Wellbeing, Connected Communities, Casey City Council.

The CHAIR: I can now declare the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria open again. We have just had a short break between witnesses so we are all back on board now. I would also like to welcome back any of the people who are watching the broadcast from wherever you may be. Thank you all for joining us. I think we are all very much looking forward to this discussion.

We have spoken to some local governments, but it is great to have you all together for this program, and I am sorry that we could not actually make it down to your neck of the woods. We had great plans and I think we were probably booking some of your facilities down in the south, so again thank you very much for joining us. There is just a little bit of housekeeping before we get going, and that is just to let you know that all evidence is being recorded, but it is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by our *Constitution Act* and by the standing orders of our Legislative Council. This means that the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law; however, if you were to repeat statements outside the hearing, they may not be protected. I also need to let you know that any deliberately false or misleading evidence to the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. You will receive a transcript of today, so that will enable you to have a look and make sure that we did not mistake anything that you said or misrepresent any of the points that you have made today.

As I said, the committee is all here and very keen to hear from you, so if I could ask that you make some opening remarks, and then I will open it up to the committee members for a more open discussion.

Mr SITOULA: I am happy to start off. Thank you, honourable members. Good afternoon, everyone. I collectively acknowledge all the traditional owners of the lands that we are individually in today and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I also pay my respects to any First Nations peoples that are with us during this presentation or watching us live. My name is Ashish Sitoula, and I am the Team Leader for Community Advocacy at the City of Greater Dandenong. On behalf of the City of Greater Dandenong I thank the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee for this opportunity to present on and discuss homelessness.

The City of Greater Dandenong has high unmet needs for social and affordable housing, as do many other municipalities across Australia. Socially and economically viable solutions that address this need are an absolute necessity if the health and wellbeing of the whole community is to be prioritised. The City of Greater Dandenong is the most multicultural and diverse municipality in Australia, with residents from 157 birthplaces. Over 64 per cent of its population was born overseas. Over 70 per cent of the residents speak more than 200 languages and dialects. Cultural and social diversity is prominently visible, as is social cohesion. Greater Dandenong is a refugee welcome zone and is known for its warm welcome to migrants. People from refugee backgrounds and people seeking asylum continue to find it a preferred place of residence. The city is also an industrial hub for Victoria and every day welcomes 90 000 workers from different parts of Victoria. Combined with other municipalities in the region, most of which are represented here today, it is enriched by its Aboriginal heritage and culture. Within itself, the combination of the municipalities of Casey, Frankston, Greater Dandenong and Mornington Peninsula is a tourism hub for Victoria. It is a picture-perfect postcard for the region and for Australia—or is it?

Greater Dandenong has the highest level of homelessness in Victoria. Within the narrow ABS definition of homelessness, 1942 people were found to be homeless on census night in 2016; that was 1.2 per cent of the population. Broaden the definition into overcrowding and a slightly different but extremely concerning picture emerges. In 2016, 5720 homes—4.1 per cent of private dwellings—in Greater Dandenong were overcrowded. These figures grow even higher for rental households, where 7.2 per cent are overcrowded. Please define these

accommodations—are they houses or are they homes? There is a great distinction between the two. Based on these figures, over 12 000 people were homeless on census night even though they were not roofless—that is very important.

Homelessness in Greater Dandenong is very different to inner-city or CBD homelessness. It is hidden; it is not easily discerned. Many presenters before me have adequately presented data on the triggers of homelessness, and I will not dwell on the same data here. Our formal written submission to this inquiry elaborates on the nature of homelessness in our municipality, the vulnerable cohorts and the compounding socio-economic factors. Let me re-address some of those factors here: high levels of family violence, rapidly rising rents, lack of affordable rental accommodation, lack of federal government support for people seeking asylum, high levels of unemployment and high levels of youth disengagement are some of the primary reasons. All of these are cofactors that lead to poverty and destitution. Understanding this will make it easier to understand homelessness as it occurs in the City of Greater Dandenong.

There are just not enough crisis accommodation facilities for women and children escaping domestic violence. Every year the crisis access points in Greater Dandenong, Casey, Cardinia, Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula turn away over 500 women or victims of family violence because there is inadequate crisis accommodation. Options for the women to continue living in their homes are also fraught with challenges, and what happens then? They become faceless statistics, either in a mortuary or in a number of advocacy papers.

There are over 5000 people on the waiting list of the public housing register in Greater Dandenong. Unless anyone is on the priority waiting list, they will have to make do with living in rooming houses and may never get into public housing, which by definition is homelessness—living in a rooming house. So a solution for one kind of homelessness is another kind of perpetual homelessness. This vicious cycle has to end. In 2001 people receiving Centrelink benefits could afford to live in 83 per cent of rental properties in Greater Dandenong. Twenty years hence only 4.9 per cent are affordable. Where will people go? The only option is to be uprooted from the community and move somewhere else affordable, and that has many interlinked vulnerabilities associated with it.

Council services have been overwhelmed from 2018 with requests from people seeking asylum to provide housing, employment and other solutions. The City of Greater Dandenong is home to 25 per cent of the people seeking asylum in Victoria. Since the federal government cuts to the Status Resolution Support Services payments, which amounted to 85 per cent of the already-low JobSeeker payment, the vulnerability and the destitution among people seeking asylum grew exponentially. Currently over 1300 people seeking asylum live in Greater Dandenong, and many of them are receiving no income support whatsoever. Council is advocating strongly with the federal government to change this situation, but in the meantime council and many not-for-profit support agencies in the municipality are stretched in their resources to provide the necessary support. With the onset of the COVID-19 era, many who did have work have now lost it and are in desperate situations.

We advocate for some commonsense solutions to these commonly seen problems. Activating private rentals is one of them. The ABS in 2016 revealed that 3500 homes were unoccupied on census night in Greater Dandenong and over 1 million all over Australia. Since 2019 council started an initiative by sending out a brochure to private rental owners, urging them to make their homes available for social and affordable housing. Over 100 home owners have shown interest so far. To date eight homes have been activated. Just activating these eight homes has saved significant amounts of money for federal and state governments. But what was the gap? Why only eight out of 100? Because of lack of funding to activate these rentals and the inadequacy of the Centrelink and JobSeeker payments to match market rental rates. A significant number of private rentals can be activated into crisis and transitional accommodation to subvert the housing crisis. The home owners in the community are ready. We just need top-up funding to facilitate it.

Other options are to put a cap on rent until the problem of homelessness is solved. These are not new proposals in Australia. Rent capping happened during the time of war and as late as the 1970s. The massive level of homelessness in Australia requires wartime solutions.

Another is to increase investment into social and affordable housing. The balance sheets of the housing agencies present clear cases of the economic viability for increased investments into social and affordable housing. Private investors and developers represented through Housing All Australians have presented the

economic viability of activating private rentals and also the need for increased investment in housing infrastructure to enable social and affordable housing. Greater Dandenong council is committed to increasing the social and affordable housing stock in the municipality, as elaborated in its housing strategy, which was developed in 2014, and this includes activating council-owned land. However, the lack of a strategic approach from the state and federal governments and the lack of funding has not allowed for the achievement of the high goals that the council strategy intended. How can we reconcile the fact that Greater Dandenong has the highest level of homelessness in Victoria when it ranks 23rd in the state in the ratio of social and affordable housing?

In alphabetical order, clothing, food and shelter are the three fundamental human needs that are essential to sustain human life. Any human being can survive with just clothing and food, but to maintain a life of dignity and to protect the clothing and food that they have, one needs shelter. Take away the shelter and everything becomes meaningless. These are words echoed by thousands of people with lived experiences of homelessness, and these were my personal feelings when I and my family were on the brink of homelessness just two years ago. The City of Greater Dandenong has endorsed the Everybody's Home campaign, and the solutions advocated by the campaign are achievable as long as there is a political will to achieve them.

The Australian dream not too long ago was to own a home. The dream of today's generation is to maintain a roof over their heads. The issue of homelessness is a ticking time bomb in Australia that will have a massive impact on Australian social cohesion if not addressed immediately. I end with a quote: if you wanted shade, 'the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is now'. Thank you for the opportunity to share, and I am happy to answer any questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ashish. I think we will continue through with the presentations and the introductory statements. From Frankston, Venita, thank you.

Ms MACKINNON: Thank you very much. I would like to thank the panel for holding this public hearing in our area. It is so good to be able to share the pressures that we face in responding to homelessness and give some context to how differently homelessness looks across our region.

Visual presentation.

Ms MACKINNON: Now, as you can see I have prepared a PowerPoint presentation for you to accompany what I have to share today. But I am very happy to stray from the script, so please do feel free to interject if you have any particular questions.

The CHAIR: Venita, what we might do is to get everyone to speak first and then we will open it up for questions at the end, just from a timing perspective today.

Ms MACKINNON: That suits quite well. Thank you very much. So for orientation, I will remind you that Frankston city is a bayside municipality located about 40 kilometres from the CBD, with a population of just over 140 000 residents. We are an established residential municipality, with a lot of older style 1960s and 1970s suburban estates of three-bedroom homes on large suburban blocks. As you can imagine, they are subject to increasing developer interest in recent years, which is particularly responsible for pushing up the property prices in our area and impacting on our homelessness rates. Our homelessness rates in Frankston have been on the rise for the past decade, mostly hidden but with visibility increasing, particularly in 2017 and 2018 prior to the introduction of the Launch Housing assertive outreach team in the area.

Before delving into the state of homelessness here, though, I would like to present up-front our bid for change. In summary, our bid for change involves four key asks. If we were to break it down to four, it would be to adopt a statewide Housing First approach to end homelessness, to deliver additional social housing across Victoria, to introduce mandatory inclusionary zoning, and rooming house regulatory reform. Before jumping too quickly, though, to the solutions, we would like to highlight some of the prominent common community issues needing to be addressed in Frankston to achieve Frankston's ideal community landscape.

For illustration, I have circled in red the issues that have a causal link to homelessness.

The CHAIR: Venita, we can see the whole screen, but we have just got thumbnails of the page that you are talking to at the moment.

Ms MACKINNON: How large is that screen for you? Is it not large enough?

The CHAIR: All we have got is your opening—I think everyone is the same. The opening page is presented, and down the sidebar we can see the other slides but they are not scrolling through.

Ms MACKINNON: Oh, that is such a shame. I may need to move away from the presentation, the PowerPoint slideshow, and just keep talking if that is okay with the panel. Okay, so just bear with me on this.

The AIHW tells us that the principal drivers for homelessness in Frankston include financial difficulty, unaffordable housing, housing crisis, family violence, followed by mental health and lack of family and community connection. Based on this our community dashboard, which I would have otherwise shown you on the screen, shows just how exposed portions of our community are to experiencing homelessness at some point in their lives. The data here shows us that we have a median weekly household income of almost \$100 less than the state average. We have astronomical rates of rental stress, rivalling those in the City of Greater Dandenong and claiming over one-third of all renters in our municipality. We have close to 20 per cent of all households in our municipality that are earning less than \$650 per week, and a quarter of all homes are occupied by a single person. We have extremely high levels of psychological distress in our municipality and the highest rate of reported family violence in Victoria. We also have the second-highest substance abuse-related hospital admission rate in Victoria.

The ABS 2016 census data identified 546 people as homeless in Frankston, but we consider this to be a significant undercount, with housing support agencies reporting about 2000 people presenting for homelessness supports in the same year. But even if we go ahead and use the ABS figures, our rates of homelessness in Frankston are higher than the Victorian and Australian averages and are more than double the rate of our municipal local population growth for the period of 2011 to 2016. In Frankston our dominant forms of homelessness are rough sleeping, rooming house residency, transitional housing and the use of motel rooms as temporary crisis lodgings, and my colleague from Greater Dandenong accurately articulated, homelessness is not simply rooflessness; homelessness to us encompasses all of these forms of inappropriate shelter. So in Frankston our rough sleeping rates are the highest across our whole region and almost twice those in the next highest municipality, which is Mornington Peninsula shire. Rough sleeping here is largely hidden and takes the form of makeshift foreshore or bushland squats; occupancy of abandoned buildings and public toilets; people, especially women and children, sleeping in cars, and whole families in fact sleeping in cars; rough sleepers squatting in car parks; and more recently, increasingly rough sleepers sleeping around the train station and the Bayside shopping centre region.

Most of our chronic rough sleepers it is fair to say are men between the ages of 40 and 70 facing a range of issues, including trauma, mental health, substance use and other predominant issues. In terms of emerging cohorts of homelessness this is where it gets a little bit harder to report. Children aged zero to nine represent our fastest growing and largest cohort of homelessness, typically accompanying displaced parents typically fleeing family violence. We saw a 33 per cent increase in homelessness of children aged zero to nine from 2017 to 2018 in the Frankston city municipality. We saw similarly high rates of children aged between 10 and 19 for the same time, representing 18 per cent of the overall homeless cohort; and women aged 60-plus, who have been law-abiding citizens paying their taxes, living as ordinary citizens throughout their lives, falling into homelessness at a rate of 12 per cent of our total homeless population in recent times.

These emerging groups of homelessness largely represent, as I just mentioned, first-time homelessness. Sadly the only housing options for families in our area currently include temporary motel accommodation, and for singles the only option is rooming house placement. This includes the model citizen who has fallen into homelessness over the age of 60 for the first time, where she is only offered a place in a rooming house where there is one bathroom for 10 residents.

I would like to give you an example of a story that council heard. Council was advised about a year ago of a woman who refused residency in a rooming house for fear of her own safety and security and instead opted to dig under one of our local beach boxes on the foreshore for shelter and opted for that to be her accommodation, which she found to be safer and more appropriate for her than a rooming house in our municipality. We recognise that.

As discussed today, we have increased rates of homelessness and rough sleeping across our municipality and increased rates of first-time homelessness. We have also touched on the increased challenges in responding to homelessness, which are actually seeing a systemic entrenchment of homelessness within our municipality. This is causing a cycle that is extremely difficult to break, and it is caused by a melting pot of connecting factors and systemic disconnections, making it very difficult for us all to get a handle on.

Even local government is entirely subject to state and federal policy, regulation and funding parameters and has fairly limited capacity to enact effective changes locally without state or federal partnership, involvement or leadership. Affordable housing here is a key. However, without concerted efforts our affordable housing deficits will only continue to increase in our municipality. In 2016 Frankston city had approximately 50 000 dwellings and an affordable dwelling deficit of 7000 properties. This is projected to increase to approximately a 9500 to 10 500 property deficit by 2036 without some concerted efforts in supporting an increase in the supply of social and affordable housing that is affordable enough for our lowest income residents to afford.

In summing up, I would like to say that we do consider that in an ideal world we would and should leverage the entire system to achieve the necessary reductions in homelessness, to increase the supply and diversity of affordable housing and to support rehousing interventions and sustained homelessness prevention and recovery approaches. We believe our bid will help us achieve this. Thank you very much for listening, and apologies for the difficulty with the PowerPoint.

The CHAIR: Please send it through so we can use that. And now I would like to welcome John Baker from the Mornington Peninsula.

Mr BAKER: Thank you, and thank you to my colleagues as well, Venita and Ashish, who very eloquently outlined the challenge that we are all facing in this area. It is a significant issue of worry to us. I suppose all three of us, at the closest level to community as far as government is concerned, see these issues on a daily basis. I do not intend to spend a huge amount of time documenting just how bad we are compared to everybody else—Venita was kind enough to kind of include a little bit around Mornington Peninsula in her presentation. But I do want to pick up one of the things that Venita touched upon, which is the power that local government has actually to address some of these issues and the authority it has to do something about what is a well-recognised and growing significant issue for some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. Of course Mornington Peninsula is no different—sixth-highest municipality. I just said I would not do it, and look, there I go.

But what I do want to do is actually highlight for you the structural issues, in our opinion, that need to be looked at, and I would welcome a conversation around that. My view, the council's view, is the regional approach to addressing homelessness is not working. It is broken at the moment. The southern metropolitan area is really not homogenous, and when you look at the granular nature of what Frankston have outlined and what Dandenong have outlined, you know, we are dealing with these issues at a street level—literally at a street level. So every year we are at Rosebud foreshore at the end of the summer season moving homeless people on. I am ashamed to say that is part of my role. I actually am most engaged in homelessness as the CEO of a local authority when we need to move people on. What an appalling state of affairs that is. So for me, something is broken and each local government authority has kind of got different issues and different needs, but I believe that some of the issues that we are facing—or rather some of the solutions—are the same.

The first for me is duplication. There seems to be a range of agencies doing the same thing on the ground at the moment, and I believe that to be a significant issue. Do not get me wrong, there are examples of superb work and fantastic coordination going on on the ground—I do not want to say that that is not the case—but there is most certainly in the way that these services are commissioned at the moment a lot of duplication going on at the moment and fragmentation. So there is not enough sharing of information between local agencies. There is not enough sharing of information, there is not enough sharing of services on the ground at the moment, and as a consequence I believe that there are pockets of superb practice but there are very significant gaps at the moment in what is actually being delivered—because, to be blunt, there is no real system in place. There is a gap between the state level, the regional approach to this at a DHHS level—which is huge when you look at the region that they are trying to grapple with—and then that translation of those challenges into me dealing with people at Rosebud foreshore. There is a huge gap there as far as stewardship is concerned, and I do not believe

it is being filled at the moment. So I would like to see that addressed, and I believe that there are some solutions that could be done and could be affordable.

As a consequence, we all know when there is fragmentation and when there is duplication there is wasted money. So it is not always about additional money being poured into these areas, and I am keen to kind of look at how we could remove some of that duplication. I believe we need an approach that is better coordinated, allows for a lot of local innovation and is place based. And in order for that to happen I think we need all levels of government to start working more effectively together. Local government, yes, is on the front line dealing on a day-to-day basis with some of these issues but is highly dependent on the skills and capabilities of the people within the state that have a huge level of expertise to bring to bear and of course our colleagues in the not-for-profit sector that also work in this. So we need a coordinated approach between all levels of government, particularly I believe in the provision of crisis accommodation where, for me, there is a huge gap. And I think my colleagues have kind of documented that.

I would like to see an economy where local government is actually empowered to coordinate and commission homelessness services at a local level. I believe that local government is best placed to provide that oversight and that market stewardship needed to create an integrated system. I have worked in a system like that abroad, and I see some of the benefits of it. I am not saying everything is perfect—nobody really, any country, has actually cracked this issue. But I certainly know that what is missing at the moment is an agency on the ground that is on point. What we see are lots of different agencies doing elements of the solution. We need to have an agency on point, and my experience is local government in other countries does that particularly well, not least of which in innovation in service delivery, so to respond flexibly to the needs of people that undoubtedly live chaotic lives, are highly vulnerable. Those solutions are so individual to those particular needs, and me going down to the foreshore and saying, ‘Don’t worry. We’ll find you a place to stay, it’s in St Kilda, unfortunately’ is so inadequate and so unnecessary given the coordination that we could bring to bear on this. But it does mean the freedom to do what is needed to address unique individual needs as opposed to this kind of systemic approach that we have got at the moment around trying to solve a solution and then industrialise it.

So I think, in line with my narrative around that, what is really key is that services are located at the point of need. That conversation that I have just described to you offering someone accommodation in St Kilda is insulting to them. They are residents of the Mornington Peninsula, they are residents of Greater Dandenong, they are residents of Frankston, and why should we be offering them accommodation elsewhere? So we need to be able to provide those solutions, to provide those resources at a local level. I believe that everything from intake assessment, case management—all those things—actually needs to be better coordinated than they are at the moment, and I believe that it is possible to do that within the budget that I seek overall provided that there is a place-based approach to it.

The last thing is more of a plea and an example of, for me, the connectedness of a solution and the requirement for it to be at a local level. If I look at the state of public transport on the Mornington Peninsula, we have some of the worst—the second worst, next to Cardinia—public transport. We have a few buses going up and down to Frankston. Ultimately when you have not got those local services, imagine what that kid, imagine what that vulnerable woman, what these men are going through when they have to try and access services in Frankston when they have got a 3½-hour bus journey to get there. We need to be providing these services at a local level. There needs to be an agency on point, and I believe local government could do that really well.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Great, very rousing, John. Thank you very much. And from the City of Casey, Nick Grant-Collins, welcome.

Mr GRANT-COLLINS: Thanks. The City of Casey would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet and pay respects to all the elders, past, present and emerging.

Council wholeheartedly welcomes this inquiry and are particularly pleased that the committee has prioritised this hearing here in Melbourne’s south-east to explore in greater depth the key dynamics and staggering scale of homelessness in this region. In these comments I will focus on some data insights and key aspects developed in Casey’s submission.

I will just start by underscoring all of the great points made by John, Venita and Ashish, as well as the link between family violence and homelessness in Casey and the implications therein. The overall majority of those

presenting at specialist homelessness services from Casey are experiencing homelessness for the first time, which is a reversal of the dynamic of homelessness in CBD environments, and I would also underscore of the dynamic that tends to inform rough sleeper strategy and policy. I will also touch on the prevalence of rooming houses in Casey.

Beneath this layer of specificity, though, council affirms that fundamental tenet shared by many throughout this inquiry: that housing solves homelessness, and a greater investment in social housing is the fundamental factor in addressing homelessness in this and any region. We also affirm the exigency of and our commitment to working in close partnership with the local governments present here in the east and south region and in close step with local government and sector and private partners as well, and again underscore what John has brought out about unlocking innovation at that local scale.

This historic moment has clearly underscored the way in which adequate social housing and a healthy, funded and geographically distributed homelessness services system are fundamental public health assets. The City of Casey has a large and diverse community, indeed communities of those experiencing and at risk of homelessness far more than the 1285 recorded in the 2016 census, and it is increasing. In recent years the sharp increase in numbers of people presenting to homelessness services in the region is really captured in that in between 2017–18 and 2018–19 the Melbourne south-east, which is the SA4 region, experienced the greatest percentage increase in greater Melbourne, an increase of 11.7 per cent. Of those 1346 community members that comprised that increase in the south-east, which includes Dandenong, Casey, Monash and Cardinia, 844 clients were from Casey. Our rate of SHS clients—I will use that acronym for specialist homelessness services—has increased from 88 per 10 000 for 2016–17 to 119 per 10 000 in 2018–19.

Homelessness in Casey is characterised by an over-representation of women and children, strong links to family violence and again a large number of community members experiencing homelessness for the first time. Each of these dynamics has significant implications for the scoping of effective service provision and policy settings in the municipality and the region, and I will underscore here and throughout the amazing work done by the service sector, many of whom are participating today in the face of really significant challenges in Casey.

Casey, unfortunately, had 4668 family violence incidents in 2018–19, which is the greatest number in the state. Domestic and family violence, unsurprisingly, is the main reason that people seek assistance from SHS providers—40 per cent of the time, which is nearly double the second leading cause of housing crisis at 21 per cent—and there has been, accordingly, an alarming increase in the numbers of families and children presenting over the last 12 months. The zero- to 9-year-olds presenting grew from 475 to 843 in Casey. There is a severe lack, as many have underscored, of crisis and emergency accommodation as well as medium-term transitional supported housing that will allow this demographic to adapt and to get back on their feet.

As with Dandenong, the private rental market in Casey is particularly unsuited to this problem, with only 0.3 per cent of rental properties affordable to families on very low incomes and a third of all rental households in Casey in rental stress. This means that women and children in many cases do not have a safe place to go to escape family violence and are forced to resort to couch surfing and in many cases sleeping in cars—what is sometimes referred to as the hidden face of homelessness. This is why council has advocated strongly for an Orange Door facility in Casey where we lack the requisite density of service provision to address this challenge.

The data also indicates again that in Casey there is a high number of clients receiving services who were not homeless the month before—2344 of the 3221, or 73 per cent—and there is a gendered aspect to this in that 1647 of those clients were women. Again, a reversal of the prevalent dynamic in Melbourne or any other CBD in which those who are more chronically homeless, people that were homeless the month before, far outweighs those that were housed. Casey really sees this as a key insight into understanding and addressing the drivers of homelessness more broadly in Victoria and starting to articulate the way in which interventions in growth areas can work within a preventative service and infrastructure ecosystem.

In Casey, though, we have large numbers of women and children coming into contact with these providers who are not chronically homeless, and these are people that with the right transitional, supported intervention will not enter and get stuck into what has been documented as the ‘highly traumatising homelessness system’. The *A Crisis in Crisis* report by the Northern and Western Homelessness Networks really documented the harm from substandard accommodation and also the deplorable return on investment of the funding in crisis

accommodation. And unfortunately in Casey the infrastructure of housing assistance just not does not match the need and opportunity there.

In terms of rooming houses quickly, there are 44 registered rooming houses in Casey, which suggests that the ABS count of 53 persons in rooming houses in 2016 is quite under. Rooming houses do play a role in the housing supply continuum. However, this role is unclear and there is growing reluctance among housing support agencies to place clients there, and I would reference the HEART initiative that Wayss is involved in and is a great practice in this space. Traditionally residents used rooming houses for short-term affordable accommodation. However, currently the studies indicate that in Casey rooming house rent is unaffordable and that tenants stay for years. I also flag that planning controls to prevent the development of rooming houses in areas away from services would improve the standard of living, particularly in service-poor areas such as Casey and, as John flagged, around transport in Mornington, and that the recent planning scheme amendment VC152 actually facilitated the development of rooming houses without guidance as to their appropriate location.

At the Casey Cardinia Housing Summit in November last year director of the Institute of Global Homelessness David Pearson drew the analogy between the current state of homelessness service provision in Australia and the practice of ambulance ramping at hospitals. Ambulance ramping is in part a problem of supply in the state's hospital beds but is also inherently tied to the difficulty of moving community members through the service system into supported exit pathways. The Council to Homeless Persons has referred to this problem as a housing bottleneck in the south-east regions, and the impact of the shortfall in social housing is amplified in under-serviced growth areas as vulnerable individuals face the potential of long travel to services and the lack of wraparound support.

As one of the fastest growing municipalities in Victoria Casey definitely faces significant challenges around matching that large, growing population with support infrastructure, and the homeless, marginally housed very low, low-income and moderate-income residents in rental stress are acutely vulnerable in this context. This problem is coupled with the tendency of registered housing agencies and funding bodies often choosing to invest in new social and affordable housing in well-serviced areas. While the housing sectors in growth areas are not as established as the counterparts in the inner city, significant opportunities and needs dictate that all stakeholders work in partnership to increase the capacity of housing and service providers in the outer suburbs.

The pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbate the strong connection and reinforcing risk between family violence and homelessness in Casey and the need to provide safe and suitable housing options geared to the specific dynamics of the region. Thank you. I look forward to discussing further.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Nick, and thank you to you all. I think there were certainly some common themes coming through this, and I know that the committee will want to explore some of those in some greater depth in the time that we have together. I will open to see whether there is consensus around mandatory inclusionary zoning. I think Venita might have mentioned that Frankston has been doing some work on 15 per cent inclusionary housing. Is there consensus amongst the four southern councils that there needs to be mandatory inclusionary zoning? And is there a consensus about what percentage or what that size should be? Maybe if I could start with Venita, but I would love you all to answer.

Ms MACKINNON: I am happy to jump in and start by mentioning that Frankston City Council, along with the other councils present here today at the panel, is part of a broader regional council local government forum group, and the group has put together a regional charter which sets out our call to action and our key advocacy asks for the state government, and mandatory inclusionary zoning is among those key asks. So in terms of the proportions, that is something that through the SHIP funding—the social housing investment program funding—that was released by the state government about 18 months ago or so, various councils, Frankston being one of them, have had the opportunity to undertake feasibility studies to make some determination around what sort of the right proportion could or should be of both affordable and social housing and what size development will make it viable as well when we are talking about private-public partnerships to enable that. So I think with the proportions, while we are proposing 15 per cent—10 per cent being affordable housing, 5 per cent being social housing—I would suggest further consideration. I would be interested myself in hearing from other councils to hear whether that is a viable working number.

Mr BAKER: Just to reinforce what Venita was saying, we are certainly supportive of the concept, and the sorts of percentages that Venita was talking about are certainly the types of percentages that we have been

considering in a lot of the work that we are doing. The challenge for us I think at the moment, going a little bit back to what I was talking about, is we need to understand the demand model at the moment. I believe there are so many interventions that we can be doing earlier than simply dealing with crisis accommodation and social housing in this way. Actually for me I am very keen at a regional level for us to model that demand more effectively and then model how certain interventions would impact to get those proportions exactly right. So just to reinforce: is there a need for this? Absolutely. And the proportions look about right that Venita is describing, but I still believe that there is more work that needs to be done on really defining what that might look like, particularly from a social housing perspective. And it ties in with the rest of the market as well. When I look at what is going on for specialist disability accommodation and the inadequate funding or the low funding from NDIA at the moment in this space, there are aspects of that that need to be tied in as well I think to this model.

Mr GRANT-COLLINS: Yes, I would echo that, and absolutely at a regional scale Casey is part of that advocacy and currently developing a social and affordable housing strategy that we will consult with community on to really get into the specific numbers. So the shorter answer is yes, and I would also say that it is part of that larger piece around raising capital in growth areas and how best to scope those projects. To me it links in with something like the Homes for Homes initiative, which is a different way to raise capital in these growth areas and how can we engage with state government and all government sector partners and really develop the capacity of the services here.

The CHAIR: Just following on from that and picking up on John's comments about those on-point organisations and that those could be local governments and that certainly the work that you can do on the ground in working out what inclusionary zoning looks like and what is effective is probably something better done at a local government level than done at a state level really. I suspect possibly it may vary from region to region, so a blanket number is not effective. But following on from this—local governments becoming more on point—with things like rooming houses, of which we were hearing there are literally hundreds in the south, currently my understanding is that most of the regulation and control of those is still done at a state government level. Is that something that you would like to see local governments having greater control of, as an example?

Mr SITOULA: We have the highest number of rooming houses in Victoria in the City of Greater Dandenong with 106 registered rooming houses. Rooming houses are monitored through five different legislations that are split between federal and state, and the only authority that the local government has is to conduct one environmental health screening a year and when they come for a building permit. If the construct is post 2010, then the disability access standards kick in and we monitor for that or for fire safety. Legislatively we do not have any role in managing rooming houses or monitoring rooming houses, and the responsibility lies with the state. So there is definitely a gap there that local government can fill, but again that will be tied to resources. And that is something that requires a little bit of discussion, because continually local governments are increasingly taking on roles that the state needed to manage and the resources are getting more stretched, and there will come a point where the local governments cannot be stretched any further. I think a discussion about resources needs to happen if certain responsibilities are to be taken over by local government.

Mr BAKER: Just to reinforce Ashish's point there, for me at a local level we are doing a good job, in conjunction with our colleagues in the not-for-profit sector, at patching—I would argue in some instances almost too good a job, because actually we then do not end up addressing the fundamentals. If I look at the economics of this—I will say something a little bit controversial here—there is probably enough money in the system. The challenge that we are experiencing is that it is not coordinated or managed. So if you look at crisis accommodation, ultimately many of the providers of that crisis accommodation are pretty much able to charge what they want for how they go about doing that. I saw this in the UK as local government pulled out of this market. The lack of anybody providing any real oversight and control within the market left fees exponentially rising. So is there a role for local government in that as almost a lead agency in managing that market? I think there is. I think that it would require a place-based approach where we look at the dollar that is spent on homelessness. If you actually look at the public sector dollar of what is spent on homelessness, there is more than enough money; it is just distributed in a perverse way at the moment.

The CHAIR: I think you are right, John, and I think certainly we heard previously—I mean, now when we have got people in hotels rather than rooming houses, the economics of scale have changed.

Ms MACKINNON: Can I just quickly highlight and reiterate that currently, as Ashish has said, there is a real patchwork quilt of regulation that is happening at the federal and state government regarding rooming houses. We believe that this is such a serious issue in moving forward for the state that it does, in our opinion, require a further in-depth inquiry. We are seeing our rooming house operators charging based on the serviceability of the client as opposed to a standard room rate, and that is just really unacceptable. We are also seeing deficits in the planning scheme which have allowed the Frankston city municipality to go from 52 rooming houses to 71 in the last 12 months. We have got three rooming houses in one street, and that is just really not a good recipe for anything. So we would really like to encourage one of the key recommendations of this inquiry to be a further in-depth inquiry into the rooming house space. There are several loopholes that are currently being exploited, and we would like for those to be closed and we would like for increased communication across the state government and between the state, federal and local government sectors to help really nip this in the bud.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Venita; I heard that loud and clear.

Dr KIEU: Thank you to the representatives from the different councils for your very in-depth presentation—and also sometimes very passionate. There are so many issues I will not have time to delve into. I just only want to make a comment and a question. It is very disheartening and concerning to hear that in the south-east the problem of homelessness is very severe. It might be the most severe in the state, and there are many reasons. Each of the councils have a different, unique situation, but overall it is because of the low socioeconomic situation, the unemployment and a few other things. So that is on the demand side.

On the supply side I have heard from John and from other people who have submitted that there is some degree of overlapping and application of services, and that has led to waste, at the same time leaving some gap behind. John also advocates that the local government should be more active and more involved and do more research into this. That is true, but this problem is usually connected to all the problems like health, mental health, family violence and all these issues—not just housing and not just houses for people to stay in but some other underlying situations. There must be a bigger and more unified approach to this. And in order to deliver we have to have the data, and the sharing of information and the data collection is not there yet. Also if we have better data collection and a better sharing of information, then we can have a better analysis of the situation. For example, new organisations can then use that as a basis for their presentation, for filling the gap and to further their services. My simple question is: in the southern—the south-east is a little bit more localised—region is there regular sharing of information between different councils or different organisations who are involved with the services and helping homeless people?

Ms MACKINNON: I am happy to start in response.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Venita. And then we will go to Ashish.

Ms MACKINNON: What I can share is that AIHW data is effectively specialist homeless service data. It is not data that is typically shared beyond the specialist homelessness services in a way that is broken right down to the local government level, so that certainly presents a data deficit for us. So local councils, including Frankston, have had to introduce alternative means of doing what we can to cobble together the data. I understand that there are also potentially some data collection issues associated with that as well in that the services that are intaking the person can typically only place the first presenting issue which is recorded as the presenting issue. What Frankston council has done is we have introduced a Strategic Housing and Homelessness Alliance, bringing together the 15 agencies operating within our municipality that have a stake in providing services to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, to introduce a local data sharing approach. We do not consider this to be the ideal approach, in that if this is done individually across the board, it will, I suppose, show up different metrics of data collection and it will not be the key solution. But this is our interim solution, and certainly we would like to see a releasing of AIHW data from the state government to local government authorities on a regular basis.

Dr KIEU: To add onto that, data collection methodology and the issue of privacy and also maybe some regulatory requirements have to be put in place before we can share it more effectively to protect the privacy of the person or organisation involved.

The CHAIR: Ashish, if you wanted to respond to that, if I could just get you to respond quite quickly. I am conscious I have got other members who would like to ask questions.

Mr SITOULA: Yes. We do try and coordinate and collaborate as much as possible with the service agencies, but the information about the funding that is being channelled and the services that are coming into municipalities we receive very late. The services will already be in operation for six months and then local government finds out, 'Oh, such an organisation has come in for homelessness and a mental health service et cetera'. If this kind of information could be channelled to us from the beginning or involve us in the planning stage of those services, then we can provide input into how that can be meaningful and the value for moneys that are spent can be achieved. Because if you look at the homelessness service provision, it is still driven by a rough sleeping initiative, and that is where most of the moneys are going, instead of looking at the large at-risk population that requires immediate housing, if not they will spill into the streets. So this is where the information-sharing vacuum is not allowing for synergies to be developed. Thank you.

Ms LOVELL: John, you are the first CEO that I have ever heard argue for the state to shift services to you, which obviously always ends up in a cost-shifting exercise. I was interested in your comments around local government being able to much better coordinate the homelessness response, and I was just wondering: is that just your opinion or is it a policy of your council or even of the MAV?

Mr BAKER: It is not a policy of the MAV yet; I am talking to them at the moment about it. Certainly council have a lot of sympathy for this. The councillors are the ones on a day-to-day basis that are having those conversations with those vulnerable adults. I am seriously concerned about what is a broken system. The one point I want to emphasise about this, though, is it will not work if local government are given sole responsibility for this. Nothing gets delivered in the public sector anymore in isolation of all the other services. What we are arguing for is to be the market steward, is to support coordination on the ground. And, yes, there is a huge fear that that would be a cost-shifting exercise. I would argue it is happening now already. So we are already experiencing that. I would rather we have an up-front conversation with the state about responsibility of local government in this area, and I would like us to take on a role of helping to coordinate this.

So going to Ashish's point about resources coming in an uncoordinated fashion, we all know that certain areas are getting more funding than others. Now, within this market we have got brilliant not-for-profits, but they are very agile and they chase money—because they have to; right? So if there is suddenly a funding stream for a particular area, even though they know the gap is over here, they go for it because they have to. It is the pure economics of it. You need someone in the middle at a community level saying, 'We've got enough of that. We need a bit more of this now. Let's put the money over here'. And that should be local government.

Ms LOVELL: It is called a place-based response.

Mr BAKER: Exactly.

Ms LOVELL: So would you support recommissioning of all the homelessness services, first of all, to do the mapping, to establish where the gaps are and establish where the duplications are, and then a recommissioning of the system to ensure the money is being spent more wisely?

Mr BAKER: From a place-based perspective I do not think we have to reinvent the wheel, first of all. There are some fantastic agencies out there doing brilliant work, but there are these gaps. I think we just have to map the gaps. And what I am keen not to do is turn that into an industry—another two-year epidemiological study of homelessness. We have got reports coming out of our ears on the terrible crisis that we are facing now. We actually need some action on the ground. And I know I can go out there tomorrow and have a conversation with the agencies that are involved on the ground in the delivery of these services and they will tell me where the gaps are tomorrow.

Ms LOVELL: Yes. You also said, though, that there was a lot of duplication. So do you think every council would be in a place to actually articulate that to the minister: where the duplications are, where the gaps are and how we could better respond and spend the money in their area?

Mr BAKER: I do, Wendy. Given the market that has been created, it is actually a very competitive market in certain spaces, and so to ask agencies that are economically driven to chase money within this space—do not get me wrong, they are doing great work, but there are too many in certain spaces—you need an arbiter, you

need someone to kind of go, 'Okay, let's funnel this money where it's needed' and incentivise agencies to set up certain types of services in certain areas, and the best placed agency to do that in my view would be local government. It does not have to be, but somebody has to be on point to coordinate it.

Ms LOVELL: And just one more on cost shifting, you spoke about inclusionary zoning. Personally I see that as a cost shift from state government and their responsibility to supply affordable housing to the developers, and that will only drive up the cost of regular housing in your communities. Do you feel that you are really, by promoting inclusionary zoning, letting the state government off the hook?

Mr BAKER: Perhaps some of my colleagues want to get in, but from my perspective I believe that it is a necessary part of an overarching plan, but we do not have an overarching plan.

Ms LOVELL: Are you concerned about it driving up the cost of housing in the normal households?

Mr BAKER: I think Ashish wants to come in. Yes, it is a worry, but I think it is manageable in my opinion.

Mr SITOULA: With inclusionary zoning and the debate that is going on, even if it comes into force, these are homes that will be delivered after 10 years, 15 years. The need is now. I mean, this is legislation that can run its cycle either earlier or later, but the need for homes is already there today, so that is where I think the focus should be. Fifty thousand homes are built in Victoria every year. If 15 per cent went to social housing, that is 7500 homes; that is only half. That is not enough to fulfil the current gap. In Greater Dandenong alone 5000 people are on the housing register waiting list. If you combine all over Victoria, that number goes way higher. The number of homes through inclusionary zoning today is not enough to cater to current demand, and if you look at it, some of the ways this zoning mechanism has worked is to deliver homes through a development after 15 years or 20 years.

Ms LOVELL: So just for me to get that straight, you are saying that inclusionary zoning is not the answer now, that that will not deliver anything for 10 or 15 years, that we actually need investment from state government now?

Mr SITOULA: Yes. That is a mechanism to address future homelessness and that should be considered, but investment today for the needs is the necessity.

Ms LOVELL: But it will not deliver anything for 10 or 15 years?

Mr SITOULA: Yes.

Ms MACKINNON: I am not sure that the cycle is quite that long. I think inclusionary zoning can be enacted more quickly, but I am not going to enter into debates on that. I would like to make a suggestion or recommendation to include within the inquiry recommendations that the priority task force of the state government look further into inclusionary zoning to look at what the proportion of properties might need to be to enable inclusionary zoning overlays in such a way that it will not run that unintended risk of driving up the property prices associated with the development.

Ms VAGHELA: I would like to thank all the presenters for their submissions and their time today. In terms of the recommendations that I heard today and also in the submissions that have been provided, there are some common themes and the recommendations are for either the state government or the commonwealth government. While we have got quite a few representatives from different councils here today, the question that I want to ask is: do local governments have the opportunities for cross-collaboration between municipalities in your region to address the issue of homelessness and housing issues? And whoever wants to answer, I am not pointing at anybody.

Ms MACKINNON: Well, if I may, my understanding is all of the councils represented here today are also part of what we have coined the SEM city deal, which is a group of eight local government areas that understands the value in the collective impact approach to attracting large-scale investment at a regional level into our region, with a focus on housing, on education and on employment. One of the key housing levers that the SEM city deal group is currently exploring is the opportunity for a potential land bank that is comprised of available state, federal or local government land that could be leased out on a long-term lease, similar to what is happening in pockets across regional Victoria and in Canberra most notably. That is a key opportunity for us to

act at a regional level to generate housing solutions at scale. We believe that it really does need to go beyond local government municipal bounds to achieve the level of investment that is required and the consideration and consistency that is required. So we are working in partnership. It is a partnership to enable a coordinated approach, as John has so eloquently highlighted the absolute need for, to ensure that we have a single message, we are clear on our key goals and objectives and we are clear in the way that we think as a region we can make some real inroads to addressing housing disadvantage within our municipality.

Mr SITOULA: We are already coordinating in a way in terms of looking at how to activate private rentals and bring them into transitional accommodation with the intent of passing on the rental agreement to the tenant through a supportive process. That is something we are already trying out, and like I said before, eight homes were activated through that last year.

Just if you look at the cost to service a homeless person and add the cost to service victims of family violence, the composite cost comes to around \$60 000. How many homes can we activate with that price in a year? That is five homes. So service to one single person: five homes. It takes care of probably—with a family of three or four, multiply that. These are the things that we need to keep on looking at, and that is a recommendation that we have made in our formal submission as well—to build in top-up funding to activate private rentals until a period where the investments into bricks and mortar actually happen.

Mr GRANT-COLLINS: Building on what Ashish said, I think it is seeing the issues like crisis accommodation, like transitional accommodation—you know, the scale of that system is not one local government area—and working together on funding submissions. And when we talk about data sharing, place-based data is not data locked in local homelessness networks; right? It is understanding the way in which in certain regions transport and social isolation mapping is part of understanding effective homelessness interventions, sharing that data across LGAs and, as we have recently, in a grant to DSS, working together to say, ‘In this region how can we not get locked into that local government border mindset but, say, increase that provision of crisis accommodation?’.

Ms VAGHELA: John, we all know it is a big problem—homelessness and housing issues. You also acknowledged that currently fantastic work is going on. Are there any programs or initiatives or grants or organisations that you think this committee should investigate as best practice?

Mr BAKER: Yes, certainly. I mean, as far as the coordination, the work that Andi Diamond has done in Monash in coordinating south-east Melbourne and getting all of those local authorities to come together, to have a discussion on homelessness, is very powerful, really good work. There was a group that was established subsequent to that coming together. The output of that I think would be extremely useful to this committee, so I think that is one area.

More broadly, as far as best practice is concerned, a lot of what we have been discussing today has been about place-based budgeting and place-based approaches to this. For me the best example that I have come across, which admittedly is an international one, but one of the experiences I have had is the place-based budgeting approach on homelessness in the Greater Manchester area, where rather than being confined by local government, as Nick was talking about, it actually looked at and mapped the spend across Greater Manchester in tackling homelessness. They realised that there was a huge amount of money from the 22 local authorities within Manchester being spent in this area and it had been very poorly coordinated. The reason I am highlighting it, I think, for this committee is that the solution that came up was about actually approaching things across a range of things that were demand and supply driven that then addressed the issue of homelessness at a very granular level, street by street almost. So the analysis was really interesting because it was right across this massive area, but actually the solution that they came to as far as making that pound go further was actually not even at the local government area. It was at a very, very small kind of area, but it was themed across things like domestic violence, it was themed across things around crime, drug and alcohol abuse. All of these issues came into play in tackling homelessness in a meaningful way. So I think place-based stuff is really, really important. There is really good work out there. Canada have done some really good stuff as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you, John. Thank you, Kaushaliya.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, everybody. It has been sort of very sobering, the challenge ahead, but also very, very interesting. John, obviously I think my best guess is that you have worked in the UK and I am familiar

with the councils' involvement at that lower level and it is something that I would like the committee to explore a little bit further because I agree—I agree that we have got this huge amount of all these different services. We are all doing magnificent work, but we are missing something. There are gaps and there is doubling up. There is no question about all that is happening. And there are things I can certainly recall in the UK where—I cannot remember whether it was council housing, but it might have been all housing in a particular area—if a person is about to be evicted, the real estate agent contacts the council, then they send someone down there and say, 'Hey, what's happened?'. I think that is an absolute something I would like to see: intervene before things go pear-shaped. I think that could possibly be a role. Do you think it could do right down to it like that, John, or would you see that sort of role for council?

Mr BAKER: That has actually changed, Rod—and it is good to see you again, by the way. That has actually changed slightly in the UK now, anyway—I mean that old model of the housing department. I was director of social services and housing in a couple of places, and I am a social worker by background. Yes, there was that model of homelessness or someone at the edge of homelessness. You would come to the council because they had responsibility—statutory duty, actually—to house people. Now, you are not going to get that here necessarily, but the way it changed predominantly was around a lot more arms-length management organisations which still had that statutory responsibility via local government to house people—and the market stewardship, the market coordination of that.

I think that is an area that should be of interest to us. We do not have to go down the statutory route. I think it is in the gift of the state now to empower local government to do that. They could do that tomorrow if they chose to do it. But clearly the resourcing required to do that and the money associated with that—not all of it, because I believe there would be huge efficiencies in doing it in that way—would need to transfer. But yes, I think, Rod, that type of model would be more effective than the model that we have got at the moment. I do not know what my colleagues think; I am talking.

Mr BARTON: Well, I can just say that I floated this idea whether the councils should get it at a previous meeting and it was about as successful as a wrought-iron hang-glider, so different councils will have different views.

The CHAIR: Venita, if you would just like to comment on that.

Ms MACKINNON: Thank you, Fiona. To pepper in more commentary, the real estate agency sector seems to be a bit of a missing link in what is happening here, particularly if we are looking at supporting—for us, you would have heard stories about people living in transitional properties being unable to move from transitional properties to the private rental market, so there is a gap in the system right there. So yes, I think you are onto something in suggesting that the real estate sector is brought more closely into the mix. How that looks, that is where the question lies. The question is: who—as John said, who the appropriate body is for that. But certainly in Frankston we really do see that the real estate agent industry needs to be brought into this narrative, be brought in to be part of the solution here. We would also like to highlight another of the gaps within the system, and that is the serviceability assessment undertaken and rates undertaken by real estate agents for private rental properties compared to those that are undertaken by the specialist homelessness sector, and suggest there might be some disconnections between those two, causing additional complexities in supporting people moving from supported accommodation into the private rental market.

The CHAIR: That is interesting. Well, look at your hang-glider there. It nearly flew there, Rod.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you for coming along and talking to us today. I just want to go back to the issue of activating in the private rental market, because the issues around obviously inclusionary zoning—the benefits of that are somewhat off—and investments in affordable and social housing also involve a lead time, whereas with the private rental market we potentially have these stocks sitting there vacant. I guess the question is: what more could be done to assist initiatives or to basically activate or access those properties that are sitting there vacant? Ashish, you mentioned that you were able to bring online eight in the last year out of a possible I think it was a hundred and something. What other initiatives could be put in place do you think to basically better activate those or get access to those as a sort of a quicker way of accessing property?

Mr SITOULA: For this reason, for crisis accommodation for women and children escaping domestic violence we have eight units—only eight units—that are safe, secure accommodation. Over 500 women and

children are turned away every year by the crisis access point. Right? There are opportunities to house these women and children before it hits crisis stage, but these women and children do not have a rental history and the private rental market will never entertain them. But the homelessness entry points do not have the funding to activate the private rentals. There was funding that the state government put in for transitional accommodation as part of the family violence refuge program. That activated 12 homes in the first year; it went up to 16. Looking at the demand, the supply is far too low. But the homes are here. There is a rental cap because the money is also coming out of the Centrelink benefits that these people in need contribute, and that is very low. That does not meet the private market rental rate.

Now, it was very heartening that two real estate agents supplied two homes into this initiative on top of the eight that were activated. So it is also about educating the real estate sector about the needs of people—the vulnerabilities—and ensuring that the current supply actually meets the needs of the vulnerable people. We need that top-up funding for these agencies to bring private rental accommodation for transitional accommodation. Once the wraparound services enable the person to again stand back on their feet, then the rental agreement can be transferred, which is what the family violence refuge program is wonderfully doing. That is an example to take.

Mr GRANT-COLLINS: Just to add to that, I think the argument that comes from this is that this is potentially an incredibly economically viable solution to house people right now when compared to the costs of bricks and mortar. Of course everyone here unequivocally advocates for bricks and mortar as well. I think also this region has ideal settings to be the proof of concept of this initiative, due to possible opportunities around land banking and around the availability of properties. To scale it up will require funding and also support for organisations like Wayss, who would bear the administrative burden of this in the initial run. If we are able to maximise this opportunity, there is a chance, as Venita said, to really engage the rental sector to build capacity, but the funding stream plus the administrative support is essential in making this cross that initial threshold and prove that it would really work.

The CHAIR: I think that is a great segue because our next witness is from Wayss, so I think this was a great ending. Thank you all. This was a really provocative session, and I think there were some really interesting concepts that came through. I think you have provided some challenges as well as highlighted some opportunities for going forward here. Thank you all very much for your time here today. As I mentioned earlier, you will receive a transcript of today's session, so please have a look at it and let us know if we have made any errors. Ultimately, that will go up on the website. Certainly I think this conversation and your submissions will really provide a great deal of guidance for the committee in its final reporting.

Witnesses withdrew.