

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Supply of Homes in Regional Victoria

Traralgon – Thursday 22 May 2025

MEMBERS

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Wayne Farnham

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

WITNESS

Chris McNamara, Network Coordinator, Gippsland Homelessness Network.

The CHAIR: Welcome. A very, very good morning from Traralgon. Thank you for joining us today at this public hearing for the Inquiry into the Supply of Homes in Regional Victoria.

On behalf of the committee – and I want to thank them for the great work they do – we acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today, the Gunnai/Kurnai, and we pay our respects to their culture and their elders past and present.

We also acknowledge that we went down to Bairnsdale yesterday and had a really, really meaningful discussion with the co-op down in Bairnsdale, and we thank them for their generosity in meeting with us and sharing with us their experiences.

I also want to extend a welcome to any members of the public and the media who are watching today.

We are very pleased to be here in Traralgon, the home town of the Deputy Chair, the Member for Morwell, exploring how the government can support regional communities to build the houses they need to attract the new residents required to remain vibrant and productive and to ensure existing residents can age in place. Gippsland is a dynamic and resilient region known for its strong community identity. As regions continue to grow, access to affordable and diverse housing will be essential to support development and attract new opportunities for residents and businesses alike.

I will just run through some important formalities before we begin our hearing. All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely, without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to any comments made outside this hearing, even if you are restating what you said during the hearing.

You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so to check. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Thank you for making the time to meet with us today. My name is Juliana Addison. I am very proud to chair the Environment and Planning Committee. I am the Member for Wendouree, representing central Ballarat.

Martin CAMERON: Martin Cameron. I am Deputy Chair and Member for Morwell.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Jordan Crugnale, the Member for Bass.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Daniela De Martino, the Member for Monbulk, covering the Dandenong Ranges.

Wayne FARNHAM: Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan, the West Gippsland region.

David HODGETT: Good morning. David Hodgett, the state Member for Croydon.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Would you please state your full name and title before we begin.

Chris McNAMARA: Christine McNamara, and I am the Gippsland Homelessness Network Coordinator.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Chris, for joining us today and making the time to participate in our inquiry. If you would like to, you can provide any additional information for being here today. I am just going to quickly look at Igor. Are we launching straight into our questions? Great. Who would like to kick off? Daniela?

Daniela DE MARTINO: I am happy to. First off, Chris, thank you very much for coming along and giving us your time this morning. It is really appreciated. The more we hear from everyone, the better our inquiry is at the end of the day, so thank you very much. The first question I would like to start off with is if you can actually describe the role of Gippsland Homelessness Network and its member agencies and give us that kind of overview.

Chris McNAMARA: Yes. Thank you for the opportunity. There are nine homelessness networks in Victoria, funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. The membership is the specialist homelessness services that are funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. The homelessness networks are organised under what is called the Opening Doors Framework, which has been in place since 2008. Our aim is to end homelessness and to work together to deliver a coordinated homelessness response to the communities that we work within, so for me, it is Gippsland. And that is within the available resources that we have. Our belief is that access to secure, safe, affordable and appropriate housing is a basic human right and that homelessness should be rare, brief and non-recurring. For Gippsland we have two local area service networks that meet, one for inner Gippsland and one for outer Gippsland, and in total we have 12 specialist homelessness services funded to participate.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Deputy Chair?

Martin CAMERON: Thanks, Chris, and really appreciate you coming in. This inquiry – as we have travelled around Victoria, we have asked people to be frank and open, because we are here to collect the data and actually be able to give not just a report back to government but a report that hopefully can make a difference into the future. Can you give us a snapshot or an overall view of the issues that we do have here in Gippsland with homelessness?

Chris McNAMARA: Yes. I can probably tell you more about the demand for housing rather than supply, and some of this will be on a statewide basis as well. In Victoria the current proportion of social housing, which is public and community housing, is 3.1 per cent, compared to a national average of 4.5 per cent. Over the next 10 years in Victoria we are going to need 80,000 new social housing properties to be built to catch up to the national average. Currently there are 65,500 households waiting for social housing on the Victorian housing register, and last year there was an increase of 8 per cent. But it is not just housing that is required; it is also the support for those people and those households going into any housing that is built and available.

Gippsland has a total of 12,687 households on the Victorian housing register broadband waitlist. The broadband waitlist: people making an application to the Victorian housing register who have the opportunity to choose five broadbands. So that number of 12,687 is really not the actual number, but our sector has no way of determining exactly how many applications, because we are not looking at preference number one being Gippsland – here; it could be a range. So that is what we work with, 12,687.

There are 7,399 households on priority access. That is for the people who are most in need, who have support needs, who are in inappropriate housing and need changes to their housing: family violence – that grouping. Then there are another 5,288 households on the register of interest. That is for people who are eligible for social housing and do not meet the priority access criteria but want to live in social housing.

The causes for us in terms of homelessness are quite broad in our region. Family violence is a major contributor to homelessness. Gippsland has two local government areas that move between number one and number two for the highest rates of family violence per 100,000 in Victoria, according to crime stats. Financial difficulties for people, the housing crisis that we are experiencing and inadequate or inappropriate dwelling conditions are a common theme in terms of people accessing a homelessness entry point. Private rental unaffordability – Gippsland has had an increase in median rental of over 50 per cent in the last five years, which is enormous. Young people and singles on Centrelink payments are the most affected and often locked out of housing. That also includes social housing, particularly around the Big Housing Build, where we have had community housing providers building – in some areas they are not able to take young people or singles into Big Housing Build developments because they cannot pay for the rental. The Big Housing Build was actually set up for those groupings of people.

In terms of unmet need for people sleeping rough, it is visible to us. Five years ago I would not have said that. We have in this region no assertive outreach, so we cannot go and meet and be with people and support people where they are actually living in those situations.

Apart from what I have to say, there is a small project that is being run in Bass Coast, which is absolutely fantastic, but how that has been cobbled together is that there have been some agencies that have found some money somewhere and the department has found a little bit of money, a little packet of money. They are just operating two days a week, but there are about 30 people who have actually benefited from that and have been

brought into service, have had applications made and are actually getting some case management support. But we have no idea of the number of people who are rough sleeping because we cannot get out there to actually do anything much about it.

Unoccupied dwellings – at the last census in 2021 Gippsland had more than 29,000 unoccupied properties. They may have been short-term accommodation. There are a range of reasons for those properties to be unoccupied. But something needs to be done when we have got people who are rough sleeping and we have got 29,000 properties that are unoccupied.

Martin CAMERON: Do you have any idea of the timeframe that they have been unoccupied?

Chris McNAMARA: No, I do not. This is just the census, so it is the night. I do not know whether there is any further work that has been done on that, but I think there has been concern around short-term accommodation. I know that the state government has applied a levy of 7.5 per cent to short-term accommodation. I mean, that is fine for raising some taxes or money, but it is not really addressing the situation. Also – this is on census night – there were 7500 Gippsland households that were either experiencing homelessness, including severely overcrowded homes, and that is also very hard to determine, or in rental stress, so that is spending over 30 per cent of their income on rental. So I guess that is a bit of a picture.

I can also say that our homelessness entry points are overwhelmed. We have had situations where entry points are taking appointments only, so people may not get seen on the day. There are also issues around occupational violence and aggression towards staff, because people are very frustrated. They are desperate. They are coming wanting something, and we have very, very little to offer apart from some crisis accommodation for a couple of nights in a motel, maybe, if they have got an exit point – if they have got somewhere else to go, to family or some other option. Rooming houses are the other option, which are not suitable for women and children, and they are really not the best option. I mean, that is still considered to be a form of homelessness, really.

So yes, it is tough for the sector. It is impacting on the workforce for case management support. From a homelessness entry point there is an initial assessment and planning that is done, and part of that might be a referral over to case management for that household or that person. But there is no movement – we cannot get into case management because some of our services have a six-month waitlist for case management. So the system is really quite bottlenecked. It is not getting any throughput. Because we do not have the supply of affordable and public housing, we are not getting people out of transitional housing and we are not getting that movement through which we used to have. It used to be that you would get a social housing property in probably six months. So big, big changes.

The CHAIR: Jordan, do you have a question?

Jordan CRUGNALE: Yes, I do. Thanks for coming, Chris. You have been a very big advocate for many years now, so it is lovely to see you here today, especially in my area of Bass Coast and Gippsland more broadly. The assertive outreach program obviously is a one-off thing, but as you said, 30 people have benefited, and they are people that would not necessarily have come through the other access points. I guess my question is: how do we look at that program and what kinds of funding mechanisms – you know, with the 30 people that have come through there, has there been a housing outcome or a support outcome for them? My question is: we have got so many people on the list and then there is not enough housing, but we have got this amazing program which was a one-off funding. So how do we advocate to get that funding –

Chris McNAMARA: And move it along?

Jordan CRUGNALE: and move it along? Yes, thank you.

Chris McNAMARA: Well, we have just had the budget. The rough sleeper action plan, which was initiated in around about 2017, funded assertive outreach, and programs like Street to Home in some parts of the state, like Gippsland, never received any of that funding at all. Those programs were going to lapse on 30 June, and the sector hoped for an expansion of that coming towards the budget. We are all very pleased that wherever in Victoria those programs have been retained, but we have nothing here.

We know that there are programs. If you are actually working with people who are sleeping rough, you can work with them while they are in that situation, making sure that they have got adequate food, that they have

got adequate health care and that they are connecting and making applications for social housing. Even though that may be a long way down the track, there might be opportunity for a transitional property. But that support is going in to those people. Many people have mental health problems as well, and trying to connect them to mental health services is another blocker that we have in terms of the system as well. But we do now have the mental health and wellbeing locals, and they provide a bit of a pathway in there, so that is something that is really, really useful.

There is a program called Advance to Zero that we are particularly interested in Gippsland, and it is connected to the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness. What that is about is working in a collective impact way, so that there are a number of providers or sectors involved in the care of a particular individual. It could be mental health services, drug and alcohol, family violence and police involvement, but we are all working together – and very much with local government as well. We have had great support from Latrobe city in terms of this initiative and being part of this national work. In the City of Port Phillip they have had amazing outcomes from Advance to Zero.

Of course the other one that we all want and that we have got a little bit of is Housing First. Victoria has developed I guess a bit of a variation around Housing First, the international model, called Homes First, which is based on From Homelessness to a Home. When we went through the COVID experience there were many people who were housed through the From Homelessness to a Home program. Those people were mainly in motels for very, very long periods of time. But the housing is not coming first. The housing is coming; it is guaranteed. I know in Gippsland we have got some places for Homes First, and the housing has been guaranteed within a year for the people who are part of the program. They have had one intake and are just about to take up another. I think the total is around about 50 people who will benefit from this over a five-year period. They get three years of support. So that is something, but in order to get that housing stock it is on an emergency management category, which takes it away from priority access. So there is a bit of juggling that goes on.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Chris. I just want to say we have Street to Home in Ballarat, run by Uniting, and we are hearing about the great work they do when they are funded to do that proactive and assertive outreach. We had hoped to hear from them when we were in Ballarat, but unfortunately someone was unwell. But I might just look at the secretariat and say it would be good to follow up with Uniting in Ballarat about the Street to Home program, because it is effective. Wayne, would you like to ask a question?

Wayne FARNHAM: Thanks, Chair. Hi, Chris. How are you?

Chris McNAMARA: Hi. Good, thanks, Wayne.

Wayne FARNHAM: One of my main concerns – and it is one thing that comes a lot through my office, and I have got Quantum down in Warragul, who I work fairly closely with – is it is pretty well reported that the state average for a woman trying to escape domestic violence is about a 23-month wait to get into a property. A couple of points to this: one, is that about the same timeframe we have in Gippsland, that waitlist for someone trying to get away from family violence or domestic violence? Is it about a 23-month wait here, or is it longer to find accommodation for them? And the other point: I have had people that have had to go into emergency accommodation, but they only get funded for two or three nights.

Chris McNAMARA: That is right.

Wayne FARNHAM: I had a situation where I had a lady that only got funded for two or three nights, and then child protection services were saying, 'Well, if you can't find somewhere, we're going to take your kids away.' Thankfully through Quantum we found her accommodation, but that was in Rosebud. It was the only option we had to get this woman into a home. Is this a typical scenario in Gippsland at the moment? Just going by the figures you have given us on waitlists in Gippsland, it is literally the whole big build of 13,000 properties we are short in Gippsland. Is this typical in Gippsland – and those figures, the percentages, the waitlists?

Chris McNAMARA: I could not say that 23 months is the average – I do not know that – but I can provide that, find that for you, in terms of people escaping family violence being housed in social housing. I cannot say that, but what you are talking about in terms of emergency accommodation for a couple of nights in a motel, looking around the state for other opportunities – that is what our workers do. You know, they are trying to connect with family. There might be family somewhere else outside of Gippsland. Are we going to try and

restore relationships or work together to get relationships back together? So it is very much about that work of trying to find some option, some housing option. We have very few.

Wayne FARNHAM: Bearing that in mind, there being a housing shortage and the limited funding we have for emergency accommodation, until we get the housing supply back up and going again, do you think state government should really be – especially for services like Quantum, and I will reference them; that is who I work most closely with – putting more funds into agencies like Quantum to give them more money for emergency accommodation? Because to me two or three nights just is not long enough when you –

Chris McNAMARA: What you are talking about is what we call the Housing Establishment Fund; we call it HEF. Once upon a time HEF was about establishing a tenancy – it was the fund that you used to help people buy a bit of furniture or do things like that. Now pretty much it is exclusively used for emergency accommodation, and that is in motels. And they are not appropriate for people. They are not appropriate for children. You know, children living in motels for long periods of time – it is not okay.

We have not had any real increase to the Housing Establishment Fund for a very long time. We – and when I am saying ‘we’ I am talking about the Victorian Homelessness Network, so all of the networks together – work with our peak body, and I know that their budget bid for this recent budget related to increased funding to homelessness entry points. We have very little staff to actually do this work as well. One of the entry points in Gippsland that is operating out of Morwell and also operating out of Bairnsdale has three funded staff for initial assessment and planning. There is an expectation that they are making arrangements for services to be delivered in Orbost, in Yarram – you know, from one end to the other. It is just impossible. This is a huge region, and it needs to be funded adequately. All of the rural regions are huge. We all know – I mean, it is –

Wayne FARNHAM: Yes, it is not like Melbourne metro.

Chris McNAMARA: No. But that has its other challenges as well.

The CHAIR: David, did you have a question?

David HODGETT: Yes, I did. Chris, I often hear, and we heard a little bit about it yesterday, about the amount of affordable and public housing that is offline for legitimate reasons. But the problem is they seem to be offline for an unreasonable period of time. I gather that is for a range of reasons: access to trades, equipment, the amount of work to be done. It is not a grand solution, but it could be a quick win to actually get a family or a person back into a home pretty quickly and therefore have one person less that is homeless. Have you got any feedback or information about that that we could use or would be helpful for us in our inquiry on where we might get government resources to getting these places back online quicker?

Chris McNAMARA: I would love that information. A lot of my role is around advocacy as well, so I will call the department’s housing services when I hear that on Phillip Island there are two units that have been vacant for more than 12 months and ask why that is happening, and they come back to me and say it is a part for something that they have not been able to get. But I just wonder what other arrangements can take place. Maybe people could go in while the final touches are being done to maintenance, and at least give something to people. But they are hanging out there really without anything much at all.

David HODGETT: What are some of the reasons you hear for the length of delays?

Chris McNAMARA: Maintenance is a big one that we hear, even in transitional housing. The community housing providers are getting that there are lags and delays from when there has been a vacant property to when they can re-tenant it because of maintenance issues and the maintenance provider. That is sort of the biggest one. Sometimes there are issues around drugs, meth labs, that type of thing, so we hear a bit about that.

David HODGETT: Do you have a number on the vacancy rate in Gippsland at all or stock that is not available?

Chris McNAMARA: No, I do not have that detail. You would get that from DFFH housing services – they should be able to tell you how many are offline, and the community housing providers that run the transitional housing programs. I am happy to have a go at getting that for you if you would like me to do that.

David HODGETT: Also, you spoke before about the costs of rents going up. Do you know whether there has been any impact on the availability of the pool of rental places for those that can afford to rent – is it declining, growing, stable?

Chris McNAMARA: We are hearing that there are a lot of mum-and-dad investors pulling out of putting up their properties for rental because of land tax. The auspice for my program is Quantum Support Services. They actually provide the tenancy advice and assistance program, so people who are having issues with tenancies and all that sort of thing. They are seeing many, many people coming to them, and real estate agents are saying the same thing – we have quite good relationships with the real estate as well – that they are losing stock, they are losing properties because people are selling, and partly due to the amendments to the *Residential Tenancies Act* as well. So we know that that is happening and that is impacting.

David HODGETT: Okay. Thank you.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Just picking up from that, what has been happening to that stock? Are you getting any anecdotal evidence through? Is it then being sold to new landlords who are then renting it out?

Chris McNAMARA: Airbnbs are sometimes what people go with rather than having the issue around renting, but then again that has its own issues as well. But, yes, we hear a lot about that.

The CHAIR: I note that 28 per cent of people experiencing homelessness were aged between zero and 17, and that figure is over 2000 children. Could you provide any sort of explanation of the changes in cohorts that you are seeing experiencing homelessness across Gippsland?

Chris McNAMARA: I mean, family violence just is getting greater and greater. In terms of –

The CHAIR: Just when you say that, do you believe that after the Royal Commission into Family Violence there are more support services for women? Do you believe that people are now acting and leaving relationships that are violent, or do you think the number of violent occurrences is increasing?

Chris McNAMARA: It is really hard to say. We have the Orange Doors, and they provide a really good service and a one-stop shop, really, for people – for perpetrators as well as victim-survivors who are experiencing family violence. It is really hard to know whether it is because the service is there, more people are coming forward. There is so much more in the media, and, you know, people are calling it out, and it is quite intolerable. So it is hard to know if that is the case.

Young people: we have only got two youth refuges in Gippsland. We have got a total of 16 beds for Gippsland, which is not enough. We have got six in Latrobe Valley and 10 in Bairnsdale. So kids who might live in Sale have to leave their communities and either choose to go to one or the other. I have heard anecdotal information about kids who have been placed in Nungurra, which is the Bairnsdale refuge, who are from Morwell getting up at 7 o'clock in the morning and catching the train back to Morwell to hang out with their friends and then going back on the last train at night. So we need a youth foyer, absolutely. We need a youth foyer, and there is an opportunity there for young people to have two years in an environment where they can receive education and support and learn how to live, share and rent. I have visited a number of youth foyers, and they are spectacular. But I think the issue is around operational funds for a lot of this. You may get the building up, but it is the operational funds and getting that money coming in to support and staff those organisations. That is the issue that we have. You may get some philanthropic money to help you do a build, but it is the support, that ongoing funding, that we need for operational expenses.

The CHAIR: Now, I am conscious of the time, so I am going to look to the panel if there are any further questions.

Jordan CRUGNALE: I am keen to understand, Chris, with the youth foyers, as a big advocate for them and also YPARCs, if you had the funding and the operational and all that, where would you see the greatest need is throughout Gippsland?

Chris McNAMARA: I have been down the path of involvement in working groups for inner Gippsland, and there was one that we were really looking for for Latrobe, which we felt would be accessible to kids in Warragul and to South Gipps and around that area. Then also in outer Gippsland, the thought was Bairnsdale.

Both those working groups had some serious work done in relation to it. It was a really strong business case that was put up by Quantum a few years ago, but we did not have the building.

Martin CAMERON: We went close to getting one.

Chris McNAMARA: I know. There was something like \$50 million for youth out of the Big Housing Build – it was very close. In terms of where it should be, you would probably want them in both. But if you had to choose and only could get one, it would need to be near the university, so it would need to be in the Latrobe Valley, I would say, to have that access.

Jordan CRUGNALE: And Wonthaggi.

Chris McNAMARA: My auspice are actually off to a conference next week. It is still burning. It is a slow burn for the youth foyers for Gippsland, but it is still happening. We are still in there lobbying hard.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Chris, you have provided us with a lot of great information. Perhaps you have already answered this, but if we could just finish this session by asking: in your view what are the top three strategies that the Victorian government should be taking to improve housing supply diversity? What are three things that you would really like to highlight that you would love to see this report and this inquiry addressing? What is your top three?

Chris McNAMARA: Yes, I have got three. The Big Housing Build, and then what? Basically my question is: what happens? I tried to get some data for you on the Big Housing Build – how many Big Housing Build properties have been completed and how many are under construction, to give that information to you. That little site that we would normally go to, that was entitled ‘What’s happening in your area’, has been pulled down, so I cannot give you that. That is really frustrating that we do not know that. We need to know – the community housing providers and the sector need to know – where stock is going, how much there is going to be, who the community housing provider is and how we can actually have some connection with them. We have been asking for a long time for this information and have not received it, so I would really like that.

The Regional Housing Fund – we know that in Gippsland we are getting 110 properties for inner Gippsland, and we are getting 65 for outer Gippsland, but we do not know exactly where they are going. For planning for organisations – the network is a really strong network, we have got a good strategic plan, we work together. But that information will help us all in the way that we can plan.

Mandatory inclusionary zoning has to happen. It needs to be legislated. Not everyone loves that idea, but it has been successful internationally. There are many local governments that want to do this.

The CHAIR: Chris, if Martha Haylett, the other member of our committee, was here today, she would have asked you about that because that is an issue she is very passionate about. Thank you for raising that, because Martha would have asked you about it, I am sure, if she had been able to be here.

Chris McNAMARA: And the other one is the short-term accommodation, so something needs to be done about that and unoccupied dwellings. I think in Victoria there are something like 36,000 short-term accommodations. Just imagine what that could do if that was put into rentals for people. That is probably it for me.

The CHAIR: Amazing. Thank you so much, Chris, for your time. It is a really great way to frame the day for us: to hear about the many challenges across Gippsland. If there is further information that you would like to provide or any other responses that you would like to give to us to questions that you have been asked, please follow up with the secretariat. As we said, we will be in touch with the draft transcript, and our report will be tabled in the Parliament in November, with the government having six months to respond. Thank you so much for the work you do and the organisations across Gippsland, because we have heard there are many, many challenges and we are really grateful for the work you do. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.