

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria**

Melbourne—Thursday, 10 September 2020

*(via videoconference)*

#### **MEMBERS**

Ms Fiona Patten—Chair

Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

Ms Jane Garrett

Ms Wendy Lovell

Ms Tania Maxwell

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

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Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Lee Tarlamis



## WITNESSES

Ms Vicky Mason, Director, Health and Wellbeing, and

Cr Margaret O'Rourke, Mayor, City of Greater Bendigo; and

Mr Martin Collins, General Manager, Community Wellbeing, Central Goldfields Shire Council.

**The CHAIR:** Good morning, everyone. I am very pleased to declare open the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues public hearing for the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. It goes without saying, but for committee members microphones should be on mute but particularly phones should be on silent—and maybe for our witnesses as well.

May I start the proceedings today by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the many and various lands that we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee, and certainly those who are watching online as well. I would like to welcome everybody who has joined us online. I guess it is one of the positive side effects of COVID and of not being able to travel as we might that we are actually broadcasting a lot more of the work that the committee is doing, and while we would love to be in Bendigo, we are very pleased that all of Victoria can join us technically in cyber Bendigo.

Thank you very much, and I would like to welcome Cr Margaret O'Rourke, the Mayor, Martin Collins and Vicky Mason from Greater Bendigo and Central Goldfields shire councils. To introduce our committee: I have Wendy Lovell, Tania Maxwell, Kaushaliya Vaghela and Rod Barton here today. I am Fiona Patten, the Chair of this committee.

To the witnesses, I will just let you know that all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. That is through our *Constitution Act 1975* but also the standing orders of the Legislative Council. This means that anything you provide to us or say to us today is protected by law. However, if you were to repeat that outside, you may not receive the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee could be considered a contempt of Parliament.

As I mentioned before, we have Hansard teams behind us and we have a whole bunch of people making this possible. They will be recording every word and creating a transcript for you, which will be sent to you. I encourage you to have a look at that to make sure that we have not misrepresented you in any way, because ultimately those transcripts will be part of our report but also will go up onto the committee's website.

We are really pleased that we are able to meet with you today. Sorry we cannot be with you today, but if you would like to make some opening remarks, then we will open it up to the committee discussion. Thank you.

### Visual presentation.

**Cr O'ROURKE:** Thanks very much, Fiona, and thank you to all of the committee for being able to allow us to come in in this model. That is obviously the way in which we are all doing our work at this time. But it is such an important opportunity for us to speak to you, so I really thank you.

I will move to slide 1. I will not read it all, line for line; you have got that there in front of you. But just to highlight some of the, I think, interesting things around the undercount, we believe it is due to the difficulty in counting homeless individuals as part of the census. We know that the government-funded specialist homelessness services are provided to people who are at risk or experiencing homelessness. The data there for people accessing specialist homelessness—in 2018–19 for us it was around 2809. For the DHHS social housing waiting list in the northern division of Loddon—that includes Loddon, Campaspe, Mount Alexander, Central Goldfields, Macedon Ranges—we understand that most social housing dwellings are provided in Greater Bendigo. The data obviously comes through at various times, but as of June 2020, so six months after the 2019 data, this has increased to 2373, so through COVID those numbers have gone up 190. So Greater Bendigo has actually got comparable numbers to some of our metro regions in homelessness—so in the inner-eastern Melbourne-Box Hill area and Bayside-Peninsula-Frankston—so it is significant for us here in Greater Bendigo.

So it is estimated to be 4887, or 9.5 per cent, of total dwellings in terms of need for social housing. Bendigo experiences homelessness—on the ABS data, as I said, estimating, it is around 318. But we know that that is likely to be underestimated. So our social housing waiting list is at 2183 and existing social housing dwellings in Greater Bendigo—our database is 2386, and that unmet acute need for social housing is estimated to be 2501. So the acute need for our social housing is considered relatively conservative, given the likely significant undercount of those experiencing homelessness. As I said, in that northern division—noting that it is Loddon, Campaspe, Mount Alexander, Central Goldfields, Macedon Ranges and Greater Bendigo, but the highest percentage is in Greater Bendigo.

Move to slide 3. Thank you. So how is the city already responding to the issue? There is a lot of work that has been going on for some time and will continue, and that is about providing in-kind support to local homelessness programs. There are a couple that I will mention in more detail. The Bendigo Winter Night Shelter for 2020: that will end on 31 August. They used the Koolamurt scout camp in Spring Gully, and the venue meets COVID requirements. So four of the guests were able to be accommodated in temporary accommodation, which was really good, and two of the guests were able to organise sharing rental accommodation together whilst being supported by the winter night shelter. So that has been amazing work that that group has been doing.

The HeyVan is a program that seeks to facilitate early intervention to prevent homelessness, access to emergency accommodation and access to specialist services, such as mental health, drug and alcohol support, allied health and more—and the case management to address and support the complex needs of Bendigo people experiencing homelessness and sleeping rough. So the early intervention strategies are aiming to really reduce those psychosocial impacts of rough sleeping; there is ongoing support for people to be relocated off the street and into safe and permanent housing, and there are innovative responses and support to people who may not engage with the more traditional services.

Haven; Home, Safe obviously have got significant support there too and responses to the coronavirus pandemic, and we have been working with them closely through that as well. So those programs are needed, but we know that that is really not covering as many as it could.

I might finish there, and I will hand over to Vicky Mason, our Director, Health and Wellbeing. Thanks, Vicky.

**Ms MASON:** Thanks, Marg. We thought we would just take you through a range of challenges that we experience day to day in our work to give you some insight into the issue of homelessness and access to housing in our community.

The first one is dealing with illegal dwellings. Like most councils, we have a building team, and we often get contacted by other members of the community about people living in buildings that are not meeting the minimum building standards—as the slide talks about, sheds, shipping containers, caravans et cetera. Our approach is to try to work alongside people when we are doing a compliance matter and see if we can get them to a point where they do comply. But unfortunately in some cases the legislation means that we do have to end up sort of evicting people from these dwellings, and that in turn then turns into people who need social housing or become homeless.

In trying to manage the safety of people, we have also created an issue with creating homelessness, which is really unfortunate. So one of the ways we are trying to do it is at least to take a common-protocol approach across council about the way we deal with these owners who are struggling to get into formal housing markets, because it is a big issue—perhaps a bigger issue in country Victoria than in metropolitan Melbourne because of the rural nature of a large part of our shire and the region, so they can be sort of hidden out in the community and people are not so aware of them.

The next one is rooming houses. As you would probably know, the rooming house regulations were changed in the last few years, and the intent of that legislation was really good—to look after the tenants in those rooming houses. But what we have found is that it has become very complicated for the rooming house operators, and as a result in Bendigo a number have left the marketplace. So you can see on the slide we have gone from 21 down to 15. So we are trying to support our local businesses—as is one of the roles of councils—to help them understand the regulations and navigate their way through and think about how we can advocate to inquiries

like yours about how we get the balance right for both the landlord and the tenant so that we do have this opportunity provided to our community in a safe way.

The other one Marg has mentioned was the temporary homeless shelters, so the winter night shelter program. I am very lucky that I have got a very competent municipal building surveyor who can see the end, who works with the end in mind. So when the winter night shelter first started we were looking at—pre COVID of course—using churches and halls and other places that are not designed to meet accommodation standards under the *Building Act*, and he was able to navigate his way through the regulations to allow the program to happen in Greater Bendigo in a safe way. Unfortunately that did not occur across Victoria, and in some places building surveyors probably went to the absolute letter of the law rather than trying to find a way through. Of course as we are coming out of winter now it is pretty darn cold in central Victoria if you are homeless and out on the street. And we have a fantastic community that wants to support people. This came particularly out of the religious sector, and yet for some areas it was impossible to happen. So we would like to advocate to you to create a ministers guideline for crisis accommodation in non-residentially classified public and private buildings as a way forward to help some people in our community.

Obviously there is never enough funding, and we do find with our staff who are out on the street, like our local laws officers and parking officers and, as I said, building surveyors and others, that they will have interaction with people who are rough sleeping. We try to connect them with our local services, but they often relay back to us that they are on waiting lists or the service providers cannot or will not help. That becomes a bigger problem over time, so we do advocate for the community to have more funding for homeless services. But at the same time we are trying to do our bit, so the city's new economic development strategy is really trying to promote inclusive growth, recognising there are members of our community who are doing it tough from a financial and economic point of view and if we can get people into employment and education then obviously they are going to have the resources to be able to get their own housing.

So we do see housing in the bigger picture of our health and wellbeing work and our economic development work because it is, as we know, the thing that you need first in life—shelter—but to do that you need resources, particularly financial resources. But we will always advocate for funding for additional services because we do know that in Victoria we are running a little behind on availability of housing services.

The other issue that we are coming across more and more is the change in the way people are living in caravan parks and residential villages. A number of caravan parks of course are on Crown land, and those caravan parks are now moving away from accepting permanent residency. So that makes it quite difficult for people, whilst on the other hand there are residential villages being established which have lower levels of regulation around the quality of the housing in those places. As a result, the people who move into them have buildings that are not energy efficient that end up costing them more money to live than it would be if they were in a house that was built fit for purpose under the current regulations. I was reflecting on the story about the rich man who buys his \$200 pair of boots and they last for 10 years and the poor person who can only afford the \$50 pair of boots, but they fall apart every two years and in the end they spend \$250 for their boots over the same period. It is the same sort of issue here. We recognise the tension in that pushing the standards up for these facilities will push the cost up, so we are sort of between a bit of a rock and a hard place here, but it does leave some people very vulnerable. We do note that these villages are increasing across rural Victoria.

The other issue with them is that they are quite hard to buy into, and then if you want to move or you need to be admitted into aged care, you cannot redeem those costs in an easy fashion. So that creates financial hardship as well.

The other thing we experience is a fair bit of people camping in public rest stops. A number of years ago we did actually realise that there were some housing agencies giving people a swag and a train ticket and putting them on the train to Bendigo when they did not have anywhere to put people. So we do have a number of places across Greater Bendigo where this happens quite a bit. Unfortunately there is sometimes some antisocial behaviour, so again staff are put in a difficult position where they need to move people on because technically they should not be there but they also recognise that they are in need of services. So again, we do try to refer people on, but sometimes because of their transitory nature it is hard to connect them with services.

Finally, the challenges around smaller housing: like most parts of Victoria, our average household size is decreasing, but because of the nature of people's expectations and the capital value of their homes they are

building large homes. We have got, like other places, a real mismatch between the size of the housing and the size of the household. I think that is a conversation we need to have with our community about this, because it does mean that the pricing pushes it out of affordability for a lot of people.

We also have challenges with the planning permit process about second dwellings. We are very pleased that at the moment we are part of a trial in Greater Bendigo to try to smooth the process and make it more efficient for applications for secondary dwellings, and we hope to promote that quite hard to see if that can help as well. We are just about to start a managed growth strategy, because the growth of Bendigo is expected to be even higher than its normal just under 2 per cent as a result of the COVID pandemic. But we do not want a sprawling greenfield development; we want to adopt contemporary strategic planning processes and have people live in affordable areas and have access to all the resources and facilities that they need. So we are looking for some changes in the *Planning and Environment Act* and the planning schemes to encourage and allow smaller and secondary dwellings as well. Back to you, Marg.

**Cr O'ROURKE:** Thanks very much, Vicky. As you can see, and you know this as well, it is very complex and it cannot be viewed in isolation. One of the challenges, I think, for Greater Bendigo also is that we are a municipality that is over 3000 square kilometres, and so we have got 14 small towns and villages. So our urban area is where you would expect to see and do see more people that are in these situations, but we know in our rural towns it is very much there as well but probably more hidden. So it really does need to be seen as part of a broader social-economic system for us, and the needs of the whole government and that legislative approach are really important.

Competing legislation, I think, really aims to eliminate all risk rather than accepting some of the level of risk, and it places the responsibility with local government and forces many people into homelessness—you know, the competing legislation around the *Building Act 1993*, the Building Regulations, the *Residential Tenancies Act* and the *Residential Tenancies Act* regulations from 1997 and 2019. You have got the Residential Tenancies (Caravan Parks and Movable Dwellings Registration and Standards) Regulations from 2010 and the *Planning and Environment Act* of 1987 and then the Planning and Environment Regulations of 2015. It is so competing and so confusing. As a local government, it is like, 'Where do we go? How do we sort this?', and like many things we end up being that last place of resort in many ways. Vicky mentioned it earlier—the staff are incredible. When they see people that they feel are in a position of their safety being risked and so on, they actually go out of their way. They go out of their way to work with the agencies and to help where they can. You know, we can only do so much, so this inquiry is really important.

The following changes to the legislation really do need to be considered. I know you will be working through all of this reflecting on health in all of the policies, integrating social benefits into those decision frameworks and accepting risk management approaches that minimise that risk rather than the no-risk-is-an-acceptable-risk approach.

Thank you again for allowing us to speak. It is really important. Vicky also mentioned our economic development strategy. We have just launched that only recently, and it is really different to what we have ever done before. It is a community-driven strategy, and the community is at the centre of this. It is about a stronger Greater Bendigo into 2030 and how we all can thrive. It has really taken many elements of our community and the vulnerable in our community into it as well, which is something that we have never done before. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. We have got until 10.45. Martin, did you want to make a couple of brief comments before we open it up?

**Mr COLLINS:** Yes, if that is okay. You know, I recognise virtually everything that Vicky and Margaret have outlined for Greater Bendigo as really similar to sets of circumstances that we face in Central Goldfields shire. But I could probably go into just a little bit more detail on some of the things that maybe set us apart as being more of a rural area as well.

I think Margaret already said—look, a lot of our homelessness is hidden. We do not have an issue with rough sleeping in the centre of Maryborough, for example, and that is very typical of small towns. But in speaking with the homelessness services we continue to see a rise, and that is people sleeping out in the bush and that kind of thing. In the 10 years between 2006 and 2016 we saw a 20 per cent increase in people in the shire living

in caravan parks. We also saw a 20 per cent increase in people living in motels and guest accommodation on the night of the census. I think that speaks to the kind of changing nature of the community that we are seeing, where we have much higher levels of domestic violence, for example, being recorded. Again, we have seen that increase by 20 per cent in the last two years.

The other thing I want to point out that has not been touched on just yet is the significant proportion of people we are seeing who are fleeing domestic violence and who have children. In speaking to our homelessness services this morning, roughly 50 per cent of the caseload are women with children fleeing violence. So the issue speaks to the provision of accommodation and support services specifically targeted at finance and accommodation, but it also then speaks to all of those other things that go along with it—access to education, access to the networks that help you to thrive, especially for children. We know that every single house move for a kid reduces their lifelong prospects in education and later employment and health.

The other interesting point that I want to pick up on that we have experienced is that in the last 10 years we have seen the proportion of our population aged over 60 grow by 20 per cent. We have an ever-increasing ageing population. Particularly in our smaller towns, when people get to that older age there is a real limitation on where else they can go. Often they have to move outside from their community or they are faced with having a house that they cannot manage and they cannot afford.

So there is something about: how do you support the establishment of smaller tenancies and investment in much smaller sites than you might normally expect? Often the economies of scale are such that we can see investment maybe in Bendigo or certainly in Melbourne. It is much more difficult to pull together the capital you need for smaller tenancies in smaller towns. But the benefits of that in terms of community coherence and social wellbeing are huge. It is something that, I think, requires imagination from all of us, and certainly from council in terms of our investment, but I think from government too.

When I think about the opportunities that we have through social finance investment, and looking at the social impact bond the Victorian government is already running looking at ending chronic homelessness in some areas of Melbourne, I reckon there is a really strong opportunity for us to be looking at an approach like that—long-term investment to build a much greater framework of social housing that really reflects the communities we serve over a longer term period. And when we see interest rates sitting so low, the investment actually probably makes economic sense as well for us.

The last thing I want to just pick up on specifically is the emergency accommodation and also then some of the options that people have. We were recently involved in a piece of work with a caravan park in our shire where the living facilities were really poor, and we had to work through a process where we were left with a choice of: do we spend the money that is required in order to bring that up to a point where you can at least say that the residents are going to be safe, or do you make the call to end the licence? The bottom line with that is that there is nowhere else for these residents to go. Speaking to the range of support services, they all told me the same thing: ‘You know, we can provide financial counselling. We can provide access to mental health services’. What they cannot provide is accommodation that is affordable, and ultimately, these conversations always end at the same place—that there is not enough social housing available to meet the demand and that there is not enough emergency accommodation to meet the demand, and that really is the bottom line in this conversation. It is where it always lands, and for us to address this, we really need to take that on and think about: how else might our investment between us help to address that issue?

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Martin. And you are right, it is a wicked problem. If our report was one page and it just said in capitals, ‘MORE HOUSING, MORE HOMES’, that would probably encapsulate what an awful lot of people have been quite rightly saying to us. I really was struck by your presentation, Margaret and Vicky, around, ‘Don’t let the perfect get in the way of the good’. This was on how you are managing those illegal dwellings and how you are doing that, and I think that is really interesting.

In the brief time that we have got, I will just quickly ask one question. Residential villages—this committee last term actually did an inquiry into residential villages. In a few words, what should we be doing now to ensure that they meet a certain level, a certain standard, but are still an option for people? And obviously it also can often mean people can stay in their communities.

**Cr O’ROURKE:** Vicky, do you want to take that one?

**Ms MASON:** Well, I can certainly start. I think, somehow, we have to make the quality of that housing more particularly energy efficient. We had quite a long conversation in council about whether we would do an affordable housing plan or an affordable living plan, because the problem is that council does not have a lot of power in that area—housing; it really sits with the state. In the end we went with housing, but it is this living thing. It is about the total package; it is not just about the cost of housing. It is a very difficult question you are asking, Fiona, because if we push the standards up for the quality of that housing, it will push the price up. We know that. So I do not know whether there is, at least in the short term, some sort of retrofitting grant-type program. I mean we have this same problem with a lot of elderly people living alone as well in highly energy-inefficient housing. Even to improve the energy efficiency of the current social housing that we have got is a real challenge. I think there probably does have to be a slight lift in standards but some way of businesses being supported to invest in bringing their residential housing up to standard.

**The CHAIR:** That is a great idea. Thank you. I will move to Kaushaliya.

**Ms VAGHELA:** Thank you for your presentation today. There are two documents that you have provided: the *Affordable Housing: Background Paper* and the *Draft Affordable Housing Action Plan*. I wanted to know in terms of the action plan how are you travelling in terms of, keeping in mind that we are facing the COVID-19 pandemic, what sort of impact your action plan would have, because that is a four-year long plan and it highlights some of the short-term and long-term actions that you will take. So I just wanted to know how you are travelling with that plan. Do you see it finishing in over four years?

**Ms MASON:** Marg, did you want to say something first?

**Cr O'ROURKE:** We would be very optimistic—I cannot see it finishing in four years. I think this will be something that will be continuing on for a long time to come. It is in making sure that we hit those key areas that we can make the most significant difference, I think.

**Ms MASON:** We do have Haven on our community relief and recovery committee for Greater Bendigo, so we are keeping a really close watching brief on the homeless and housing issues that are occurring across Greater Bendigo. The other thing we have done—it is a small matter, but we have opened access and worked with our housing provider partners to be able to allow people to use some of our facilities, showering and toilets and various things, because a lot of councils have closed a lot of them down, because we had to. But we have worked with Haven, for instance, to make sure that we have got places where people can go to maintain good hygiene in a safe place. As Marg said, the numbers have already gone up. There are a couple of hundred people on the waiting list, and we expect that to happen more. The local providers have been using some of our tourism accommodation to house people, but obviously once the economy opens up and the tourists start coming back, then we will need to find another place for those people, so there is a real tension there at the moment.

**Cr O'ROURKE:** I would also comment: in terms of our relief and recovery pandemic meetings that Vicky mentioned, they are now happening fortnightly. They were happening sort of weekly. That has been huge for us to be able to get even a closer eye line of what is happening around homelessness, like as the agencies are all sitting on that. Some of the things that have been able to be done so quickly—it is just that whole cooperation and collaboration with key people, I think, in any of our communities, and local government are often the ones that will pull people together. That has just helped us on a myriad of things, but particularly around this.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Thank you. Tania.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Thank you, Chair. Just really quickly—and fantastic presentation by everyone; thank you, very informative—we have heard time and time again social housing is a real issue. Would you agree that for those who are placed in social housing there would need to be a condition that there is actually a case manager that works with those people in order to be able to maintain and sustain that housing? Because often we see people going into housing and then, through various reasons, they are actually unable to maintain that tenancy. I would sort of like that to be an agreement—that that opportunity is still there for that ongoing case management.

**Ms MASON:** I would certainly support wraparound services for people. We are doing a lot in the food relief space, and the food relief agency talks about 'These people need support, other wraparound services'. I think nobody experience disadvantage in one area; they experience disadvantage holistically. So absolutely we need

wraparound services around these people to help them, because they often have comorbidities: mental ill health, drug and alcohol issues. Martin has talked about the impact on their children. We need to bring all the service providers together to support these families.

**Cr O'ROURKE:** I would agree, too, Vicky, on that. I was just going to say I agree with where Vicky is coming from. If I think of the example of Haven, for instance, with the Sidney Myer Place facility in Bendigo, that is more specific, but it has got wraparound services but also education embedded in it too. And you cannot be part of that program unless you do these other elements, and you have got those supported services. It sort of takes it that step further, and there are some great outcomes that have come from that model of those younger people that have been seen there. But I think that is a model that could be spread across various age groups as well.

**The CHAIR:** That is probably a very good segue to ending.

**Cr O'ROURKE:** I think Martin wanted to say something.

**Mr COLLINS:** Can I just add one thing? Is that okay? Because this question reminds me of back in 2008 when I was still in Glasgow and we had the global recession and the meltdown. We put so much effort into employability for young people because our youth employment levels went up so high. Our focus was on employability skills, but there were no jobs. We had 250 applications for every job. So I think the question about wraparound services is a good one, but without the actual bricks and mortar, building all these other life skills without the actual place for somebody to anchor themselves becomes almost an exercise in looking up the wrong tree. And without the housing itself, the whole thing becomes really, really difficult and you do not ever get to the solution.

**The CHAIR:** Of course. Thanks, Martin, for pointing that out. Wendy.

**Ms LOVELL:** Fiona, I can speak to Marg and Vicky any time, so I will let somebody else have a go, but just to say: keep up the great work in Bendigo. We are lucky to have Haven there, and I was very proud to be the minister who funded the Sidney Myer Place.

**Cr O'ROURKE:** Thanks, Wendy. We would really welcome the opportunity to talk to you further on this too. So that would be great.

**The CHAIR:** Rod.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you, Chair. Margaret, last year I caught up with some of the team from the winter night shelter. I was up there, and one of the things that sort of surprised me a little bit was the amount of people—I am only going on the basis of that particular time when I was there, and Vicky mentioned before—how many people are travelling into Bendigo. And I think on the night that I was there, if my memory serves me correctly, more than half of those people were not Bendigo residents. This must be a massive burden for the council. How are you handling that, for instance?

**Cr O'ROURKE:** Yes, it is a massive burden, and it does fluctuate. There is no doubt about it, and Vicky mentioned it in her presentation. There was a period of time that was pretty hectic because people were getting train tickets and swags and sent out of Melbourne. So this whole process of moving people on just means you move the problem somewhere else, and we had one chap in Bendigo who was one of those. He was actually a Swan Hill resident. He had been in Melbourne, got the ticket, got the swag, came to Bendigo and thought, 'Oh, I think I'll stay'. He actually was sleeping every night at the fountain, and he was doing extremely well, because everyone was looking after him. He did not want to go anywhere, and so you had that problem where you had residents that were ringing me and ringing council and saying, 'Get rid of this man', and yet he was getting so many things and well looked after. I think he was there for 12 months. But many of those transient people definitely were coming from Melbourne—and that was the feedback that we were getting—and some from our smaller towns too, because of I think the wherewithal of the staff being able to make that program work, because there were other places it was tried and for whatever reason building surveyors went down a different path, so the word got out as well. But this year I know that there are not as many that are travelling. Obviously COVID has stopped the ability for that to occur, but that is not to say in the new COVID normal that that will not happen again.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you—really fascinating, and I think you actually have provided us with quite a different perspective from other regional areas. This has been very interesting, and I was really impressed with the affordable housing action plan that you have progressed. Thank you again for your input today. We will just reset for a couple of minutes, so stay tuned. We will be back in a minute. Thanks, everyone.

**Cr O’ROURKE:** Thank you. Fiona, can I just finally touch on the affordable housing plan?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Cr O’ROURKE:** One of the things around that I wanted to say is we had homeless people in those conversations. They came to the workshops, they sat with us, they talked it through. It was so real. It was heartbreaking in actual fact, but gee, the feedback was really good from their perspective as well. We had a number of workshops where they participated, so it was pretty amazing actually.

**The CHAIR:** That is fantastic to hear, and I actually think it is really reflected in the document. The document seems very real. It is sensible, and really, looking at it, it is achievable. Thank you, Martin. Thank you, Vicky. Thank you, Marg.

**Cr O’ROURKE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** We will be back in 2 minutes. Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**