

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Monday, 13 July 2020

*(via videoconference)*

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Mr Lee Tarlamis

## WITNESSES

Ms Robyn Stevens, Director, Community Life, and

Ms Janice Lane, Manager, Healthy Communities, City of Greater Geelong.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues public hearing for the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. I am sure that anybody out there watching has been learning as much as we all have. Again, thank you, Robyn and Janice, for joining us.

I have just got a quick piece of information for you that I just have to give you. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by our *Constitution Act* and subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore any information that you provide to us today is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside may not have the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. As you can see, we are broadcasting live, but we also have the Hansard team recording this. They will send you a transcript after this, and I encourage you to have a look at that because ultimately it will be part of our report and also it will be up on our committee website.

It is wonderful to have the City of Greater Geelong coming to speak to us today, so thank you, Robyn and Janice, again. If you would like to make some opening remarks, then we will open it up to more committee questions.

**Ms STEVENS:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, committee members, and good afternoon. It is great to be here and to have the opportunity to present to you. I will do a little introduction and share some of the time with Janice to give a brief overview. Firstly I would like to pay my respects to the Wadawurrung traditional owners of this land and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are part of the Greater Geelong community today. For our opening address we would like to provide a little bit of background around our local context and some of the opportunities that we think present in terms of supporting people who are homeless in our communities. I will provide a bit of background, Janice might provide an overview of our social housing plan and some of the opportunities there and then we will do a wrap-up and be available for any questions.

So in terms of the situation in Greater Geelong, homelessness in both Greater Geelong and the Barwon south-west region is actually growing at a faster rate than in Victoria. Many residents across the city may also be at risk of homelessness in the future due to increasing housing costs and subsequent financial difficulties, especially in some of our most socio-economically disadvantaged areas. So when reviewing the data around our ABS and census statistics we note that there was an estimate of around 763 homeless people within the City of Greater Geelong and the Bellarine Peninsula, and on census night a further 431 people were marginally housed and at risk of homelessness. Corio and Norlane, which is one of our city's most disadvantaged and socio-economically disadvantaged areas, has the greatest proportion of people who are homeless, at around 161 in Greater Geelong. Now, as with a lot of these numbers, they are conservative estimates and really probably underestimate the true number of people experiencing homelessness and could in particular relate around women and children who are escaping family violence and who would be seeking assistance with housing. With only 20 crisis accommodation properties in Greater Geelong, women and their children escaping family violence effectively have limited options of places to go.

In addition, housing and rental stress is increasing in our region. Approximately 9900 or 11 per cent of our households in Geelong live in housing stress, with the highest proportion of those also in Corio and Norlane at 19 per cent. The Barwon South West region also has the least number of affordable rental properties compared to all other regional areas in Victoria, although I did note the feedback from the previous presenter around increasing access to rental accommodation, given the effects of COVID and the reduction in demand for Airbnb-type accommodation, so that may have changed since our submission was first made. In March 2000, though, there were 882 affordable rentals in Greater Geelong, or 59.6 per cent of all dwellings. By September 2019 this number had decreased to just 411, or 19 per cent of all dwellings. So households or people on the public housing waiting list are likely to experience housing stress or homelessness, and there are currently around almost 3000 people on the social housing waiting list of the Department of Health and Human Services for Barwon in the Geelong office, of which 1600 are listed for priority access.

That is a bit of a background summary. I will hand over to Janice briefly to talk about our social housing plan. Thank you, Janice.

**Ms LANE:** Thanks, Robyn. Thank you, Chair; thank you to the committee. It has obviously been a long day for you, and I am sure you are ready to move off. But we thought it would be really important to share with the committee our city's social housing plan, which we developed in 2019 as a result of some grant funding from the Victorian state government, which has been a really important piece as part of our social fabric both to understand the housing needs and also to give us a futuristic view, which unfortunately is not particularly great. But our plan does give us a horizon to 2041. The main factors that came out of this plan would be no surprise to you, but in terms of homelessness they are the lack of affordable housing and that the higher demand means that people remain in crisis accommodation for much longer periods than desired. Particularly those in immediate need have very few options for them in the City of Greater Geelong.

We estimated in our plan that between now and 2041 we would need 13 500 new social housing dwellings in the city to be acquired by 2041 based on our population trajectory. That may change, of course, but as you can appreciate, that is a relatively high number and one which is beyond any local government's capacity or magnitude to try and achieve. The level of investment that is required based on those figures is around \$235 million per annum, and it is only state and commonwealth governments in partnership, if you like, committed to a pipeline of work, that can help us to remedy that situation.

One of the other key factors that came out of our social housing plan was the fact of planning controls and funding. We particularly would like to use the opportunity to reinforce and ask the state government to make inclusionary zoning mandatory and to incentivise private developers to include more social housing in new developments. As you would know by now, it is voluntary; it relies on the goodwill, if you like, and the social values that a developer has along with our planners' ability. However, if there were able to be mandatory inclusions, it would certainly create a much better level playing field. The developers would know what they are dealing with, and also the council could be reassured that social housing input is going to be particularly on greenfield sites. If you know the City of Greater Geelong, we have a number of greenfield sites coming online in order to reach this population trajectory in 2041.

Social housing at the moment too is unevenly distributed across the municipality. If you are familiar with the areas particularly of Corio and Norlane, the social housing plan definitely wants us to look at a redistribution of that going forward to facilitate supply so it is much more embedded into new communities but also our CBD. That creates the opportunity, which I noted your previous presenter discussed, to talk about how communities actually engage with those people who are less well off than others and how social housing becomes part of the important residential mix of our city.

We also would like to continue a relationship with the state government in particular. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic we were able to secure some funds from the state, \$100 000, matched by council's own contribution, and that is to fast-track some business cases and feasibilities of social housing supply using both council land and also state government land. So this has been an exciting proposition that has been able to be realised in a very short period of time in unfortunate circumstances. However, I think those kinds of agreements and partnerships going forward are going to help the City of Greater Geelong reach their absolute optimum in terms of making sure that everyone in our city has a home that they can call home. Thanks, Robyn. Over to you.

**Ms STEVENS:** Thanks, Janice, for that overview. Just finally wrapping up, obviously the house for someone to live in when they are homeless is really important, but it is not the whole solution to the problem. The provision of services and support for people experiencing homelessness is critical, and we have a range of great organisations in our municipality that are delivering services and programs to support people who are homeless. I know you have had presentations on The Geelong Project from Barwon Child, Youth & Family and others, so I will not go through all of those. But I guess it is important to point out that one of the key issues that we identify is ongoing funding required to make sure that the service system is sustainable is a real challenge.

The Towards Home program delivered by Neami Geelong, who we work with quite closely, commenced in February 2019. They have been highly successful, engaging with rough sleepers, and the last information I was provided was they had found accommodation options for over 100 rough sleepers right across our municipality.

Their funding obviously is ending at the end of this calendar year, and those types of programs that require ongoing funding are critical to the success of delivering an end-to-end continuum of care for people who are experiencing homelessness. The issues that people can experience are not short term; they are not solved in a two-year-funded program. They certainly need a range of key stakeholders and a range of longer term funding options.

We also think there is a real opportunity to improve service coordination between mainstream services and organisations as well as specialist services. So it is not just about funding to create specialist service models for people who are experiencing homelessness. It is about better linking health care, employment, education, income support and other mainstream services in with homelessness services so that there is a range of care options that are available for people to be able to access, depending on where they are in their journey towards improving their participation as a member of the community.

The other important aspect, I guess, just to highlight before I wrap up, is that the skills, qualifications and experience of caseworkers and other staff working with people who are homeless are quite specialised and really important skills. To make sure that we have those integrated into parts of the service continuum is also critically important in that aspect.

They are the key points that we wanted to flag with you, both from our submission and from our work in the community. So thank you, Chair and committee, for listening to us, and happy to take any questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Robyn. Thanks, Janice. It certainly seems that the City of Greater Geelong is taking a fairly proactive role here in social housing, also asking for inclusionary zoning to be mandated by the state. Does the City of Greater Geelong have a position on what percentage that should be? I mean, we have heard today from a number of Geelong organisations that it should sit at around 30 per cent, which seems substantial, but I am wondering whether the City of Greater Geelong has a position.

**Ms STEVENS:** Well, the council has not endorsed a position on inclusionary zoning, and in terms of an officer position I guess we have had a lot of discussions within the organisation around that. I am not sure, Janice, what your view is on your more detailed discussions than I have had around what a percentage might look like. Obviously there are opportunities and also consequences of making those sorts of decisions.

**The CHAIR:** Look, maybe if I could add to that maybe it would be a bit easier, because I get it. It is just that in your recommendations and in your report is incentivising developers, and I wondered what you meant by that.

**Ms LANE:** Well, perhaps I could try and help with that one. Incentivising can be lots of things; it does not always have to be financial, particularly in the world of planning—I am not a planner—but an understanding of planning could be whether the time frames could be perhaps lessened. You know, planning is a particularly interesting beast and it seems a lot of developers get very annoyed with local governments around it; however, it is also due diligence. So I think there are a number of opportunities there to look at, rather than just financial ones. But I understood that the state—Minister Wynne—had a particular committee that was looking at this. I am not quite sure where that is up to at the moment, but again I think it would be a great consultative piece with developers about the kind of incentives that would bring them a little bit on the journey.

I also think that, particularly for a major regional city such as the City of Greater Geelong, as I mentioned before, we have got some major greenfield sites, and that is quite different from Melbourne metropolitan, which is looking at infill. Therefore there has to be some relationship around those kind of differentiations between both regional pockets and metropolitan pockets and what is absolutely feasible. The city has a goal to increase our population in the CBD to 10 000 residents in the next 20 years. We have 2000 at the moment, so that is a long way to go in order to try to create a population that really enjoys the CBD in the same way as Melbourne does. So there are probably a number of threads to that question, Fiona, but that is just a few ideas from us at this stage.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, I appreciate that.

**Mr GRIMLEY:** Thank you, Janice and Robyn, for your submissions here today. You are doing a fantastic job there at the City of Greater Geelong, and it is really to be admired. I have just got a question in relation to the submission, which made a lot of recommendations, one of which was in relation to increasing the supply of

crisis accommodation. My question is: can you elaborate as to what types of crisis accommodation are currently available within the City of Greater Geelong? And is that sufficient in meeting the demands of those that are fleeing domestic violence?

**Ms LANE:** Thanks for the question, Stuart. There is some crisis accommodation that is full term, if you like, but there has also been crisis accommodation that has provided safe shelter, particularly for women and children, such as caravan parks. That situation is not ideal in anyone's language; it is not a good circumstance. Also there are some hotels that have allowed for crisis accommodation, but it is relatively temporary. So whilst the need continues along this path, I do not think a community can rely on relatively temporary accommodation such as a caravan park or a hotel, particularly for the most vulnerable members of our community. Our thought at this stage, particularly intertwined with the social housing plan, was to look again at the social housing mix. Depending on the size of the site and what service providers there are, there might be an opportunity to bring in crisis accommodation as part of that mix. That is going to be long term, it has to be safe, there is access to open space and transport, and people are not further marginalised by living in relatively less than ideal crisis accommodation, when in their circumstances they are dealing with so many other things at the same time.

**Ms LOVELL:** First of all, I would like to ask you a question about the 1000 homes that the state government promised two or three years ago across Victoria. The only two regional centres to benefit from those were Geelong and Ballarat, and I just wondered if you knew how many of those homes had gone to Geelong.

**Ms LANE:** Interestingly, we had a meeting around the 1000 homes on Friday and for the life of me I cannot remember the number, so I have to take that one on notice. I do not quite remember the number, and I do not want to give you an untruth.

**Ms LOVELL:** No, that is okay. Roughly less than 50, less than 20, or more than 100?

**Ms LANE:** I think, from memory, it was between 50 and 100—from memory.

**Ms LOVELL:** Terrific. You mentioned a lot about inclusionary zoning, and I have concerns about inclusionary zoning and what it may do to drive up the cost of housing for other people who are wanting to enter the market. It is recommendation 20 of the City of Greater Geelong's submission. Now, you said that it was not an approved policy of council. Has the submission been approved by council? Is this a council submission or should we be counting it as Janice Lane's submission?

**Ms LANE:** Robyn, I might hand that one to you, if that is all right.

**Ms STEVENS:** Yes, so this is an officer submission to the inquiry, not one that we have taken to council. When I say that around inclusionary zoning, we have discussed with council inclusionary zoning, but they have not endorsed any position on inclusionary zoning as a council group.

**Ms LOVELL:** Is that standard practice in Geelong that you put in submissions under the City of Greater Geelong's name and do not approve them through council?

**Ms STEVENS:** It varies. It depends on what the submissions are. We will have some taken as officer submissions and some will be taken to council. So yes, this would not be the first one that we have done under an officer delegation.

**Ms LOVELL:** All right. So you talked about having developed a strategy and you talked about working on business cases for working with state government and other people for the land components. Have you actually worked with any of the housing providers? Have you partnered with any of the housing providers? It is one of the big things that they like, those contributions of land from local government. And also, what other incentives are you already offering to developers? Are you offering them discounted rates or less requirements for having to include other things in their development for them to do inclusionary zoning? It is also not necessary that the state government actually mandates inclusionary zoning; local communities can make that decision themselves. Have you had those discussions about—if you are so keen on inclusionary zoning—just doing it in Geelong and leading the way?

**Ms LANE:** Yes, look, I will try and answer that. I think that is a good point about whether a council does it on its own, so to speak, and whether or not we wait. I suppose, if I can speak on behalf of the planning team colleagues that I have worked with, most people have said that they would prefer that it is actually done in collaboration with others, because developers are not working just in the City of Greater Geelong; they are working in other parts of Victoria. And in fact as part of the consultation for the social housing plan, the developers that we spoke to and consulted were of the same view: that in actual fact they wanted something that would be across Victoria in particular, given that this is a Victorian matter.

In terms of the community housing providers—absolutely. We have not started and embarked on those conversations yet, but our plan certainly does pinpoint that we would want to have—and should have—a very strong relationship with them. The work that we have just embarked on about a feasibility study is not live yet, but that is in the wings. Part of that will be looking at partnering with community housing providers, because we understand that the relationship between them, the management and the governance of social housing is really important and that that in fact is not local government's role per se. We are probably not the best placed organisation to do that. And I am sorry, I have completely lost your—

**Ms LOVELL:** The other one was just about any other incentives that you have offered either to housing providers or to developers.

**Ms LANE:** Yes, so there is no incentive at the moment around reduced rates. That is not on the cards. To be honest, I could not answer on any other incentives that we might have in play at the moment.

**Ms VAGHELA:** Thanks, Robyn and Janice, for your time, and thanks, Janice, for the submission. One of the recommendations in the submission is to raise the age for young people in out-of-home care, including permanent care, to access funded support from 18 years of age to 21 or 25 years of age. I just wanted to know how that came about, because we have had presenters who spoke in detail about recommendations for young people and youth, and this is something very new that I have come across. I would like to know a little bit more about it.

**The CHAIR:** There was a bill up about it in Parliament just a few months ago.

**Ms LANE:** To be honest I probably need to take that question on notice. I would have to go back and have a look at the submission; I cannot recall. We did have conversations with our youth team at the time, so I will need to go back and take that on board for today.

**The CHAIR:** I can answer that for you, Kaushaliya. The government has actually opened that up, so now for anyone who is leaving government care it has been extended to 21 as a pilot trial program for the next few years. So, yes, we can tick that one off.

**Ms STEVENS:** Well, that is great.

**Mr BARTON:** Chair, I think you might have had something to do with that 18 to 21 move.

**The CHAIR:** I did.

**Mr BARTON:** It just so happens.

Just on your greenfield sites, if we are talking about this mandatory inclusion, would you know off the top of your head how big that is likely to be in terms of homes over the next 10 years and what you expect to come onstream? Have you got a guesstimate of where you are heading in that direction?

**Ms STEVENS:** For the inclusionary zoning or for the development overall?

**Mr BARTON:** No, the actual greenfield sites, and then I can make a guesstimate of how many.

**Ms STEVENS:** We have had lots of conversations about that, but I cannot recall off the top of my head either about the sites. We have the northern and western growth areas, which will be coming online. We are still pursuing development in the Armstrong Creek corridor, and there is some development around the Bellarine Peninsula. So if you look at the increase in our submission, the population increase overall, those developments will all be progressing out through to the 2041 time frame. The Bellarine and Armstrong Creek

developments are well progressed, but the northern and western growth areas I think—do not quote them as exact numbers—would be around 60 000 population.

**Mr BARTON:** Many, many thousands of homes, then.

**Ms STEVENS:** Yes, many thousands of homes. They are quite significant developments, yes.

**The CHAIR:** That brings our hearing to an end, and sadly that brings our visit to Geelong and the south-west to an end. Robyn and Janice, thank you so much for your time. We again continue to learn a lot, and certainly your submission was very fulsome as well. As I said, this was recorded by our fantastic Hansard team, and they will send you a transcript of today, so please check it for any errors. And again, we very much appreciate the time you have given us. Thank you to everyone who has been watching online. I am sure we have all learned a lot. It is the community spirit that will solve homelessness for us all—I think that is the message to take away from today. That ends our hearings until tomorrow afternoon. Thanks, everyone.

**Committee adjourned.**