

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 12 February 2020

MEMBERS

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Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

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Ms Georgie Crozier

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESSES

Mr John O'Callaghan; and

Mr Nick Jahnecke, Teaching Scholar, School of Architecture and Build Environment, Deakin University.

The CHAIR: Good morning. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet us today; we really appreciate it. As you know, we are the Legal and Social Issues Committee with its Inquiry into Homelessness. Just a little bit of housekeeping prior to hearing from you. As you know we are hearing evidence in regard to our homelessness Inquiry. Any evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is provided under our Constitution Act 1975 but also the standing orders of the Legislative Council. So you will be protected by law for anything that you say here. However, any comments that you might repeat outside may not be protected, and any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

As you can see, we are recording today, so you will be given a proof transcript in a couple of days to have a look at and make sure that we did not make any errors in reflecting what you have provided for us today. We are also broadcasting worldwide today. You look great!

Mr O'CALLAGHAN: No pressure!

The CHAIR: Do not listen to what they say about the cameras! But if you would like to provide some opening remarks—I see that you have got a video set up as well, which you provided to us earlier—and then we will open it up for some questions from the Committee.

Mr O'CALLAGHAN: Just in opening, thank you for inviting us to speak. Firstly, I am a magistrate. I just want to make it clear that any comments I have got are not so much speaking for the Magistrates Court but are essentially from my experience as a person but also as a magistrate. I have been a magistrate for 10 years and a lawyer for some 30 before that, so that is where my comments derive.

I would like to thank the people from Deakin University, and not only Nick, who will give his own presentation, for the work that they have put into our little model here, which we will speak about, and also the video which they have done—all after hours, all at no cost. I just want to make that public—thanks to them. Otherwise how we intend to proceed is with a short video. I will then give a presentation, and then Nick will give a presentation on the model, the shelter which we have created, and we will invite questions after that, if that is okay with the Committee.

The CHAIR: That sounds great, John. I suppose just making sure that we have enough time for questions would be good. We have got until 11 o'clock, so there should be plenty of time.

Video shown.

Mr O'CALLAGHAN: Our model, you will see, had more trees, but we lost them going through security this morning.

The CHAIR: I have heard of them taking scissors but not little paper trees!

Mr O'CALLAGHAN: Thank you. We were asked to look at three issues: what is the scale of the problem we are facing, how is the private sector working to address homelessness and how do we end homelessness for good? We will address the third issue. Frankly, I am not an expert on homelessness and homelessness statistics. I speak from my own point of view. There are a lot of statistics which I am sure you will be given. There is one statistic I would like to draw your attention to, and that is a report commissioned by Melbourne University last year, which showed that for every dollar spent by Government on improving the lives of rough sleepers, the State should obtain a return of \$2.70 over 20 years. That is something to bear in mind when you think of not only the productivity of homeless people once they get employment, get dignity and get back into working life but the savings in terms of police time and emergency services time, ambulances and hospitals, as they get older and colder in Melbourne's brutal weather.

How does homelessness happen? In my view there are a thousand reasons: mental illness, drug addiction, family violence done to us or by us, money problems, an unexpected sacking from work, gambling, alcohol abuse, being kicked out of home, being released from jail, being a visitor from another country who was not accepted, the social crime of being unable to relate. This Inquiry is into homelessness; it is not into houselessness. What makes a home makes a person—shelter, security, sanitation, the kitchen table, bedrooms with beds to get a decent night's sleep, a lounge room of one's own where you can have someone around to talk to you. A house is a step in the right direction, but it is not the total answer.

We must stop the cycle of homelessness. We must remove this scourge from the most livable city in the world. Whilst the work of charities is wonderful, the buck of homelessness stops with the Victorian people. They are as much a part of Victoria as the rest of us are, and we are duty bound to help. I would describe the efforts of Victorians, governments and charities to be compassionate but ultimately aimless. I think there needs to be some definite direction. Governments need to know that money spent on the homeless is well spent. Victorians need to know that their charitable contributions are generally helping and in what way.

What should be done? I think the answer is twofold. First, there should be a homeless commissioner. This would be a person who is not part of government but who informs government what is going on in the homeless area; who tells them whether what is being done either by government or anyone else is working, or if it is not working, why not; who makes recommendations for improvements; who advises people and organisations who want to help how to do so; who works with the myriad charitable bodies which are active in this area and coordinates their kindness and willingness to help the homeless in the most advantageous way; who recommends legislation where such legislation is deemed appropriate; who is a person most responsible for seeing that the scourge of homelessness is eliminated or, at the very least, reduced as far as possible.

The office of commissioner is a time-honoured and respected position in this state. I have a list which I have given the members—this was my own research; there could be more—of commissioners and advisory councils, and my count is 28 commissioners and 15 advisory councils. And it is clear that the position I am advocating for fits very well within the work these commissioners and advisory councils do. I am aware that Victoria has a housing minister, and you may ask about the need for a homeless commissioner. The fact is the role to be played by the commissioner would traverse a multitude of ministers, including family violence, women, youth and youth justice, child protection, crime prevention, the ageing, education, health, mental health, planning, police and emergency services, regional development—let us not forget about the homeless in the country—training and skills and Aboriginal affairs. I believe the homeless need a trusted adviser who is dedicated to their needs. I believe the Government needs a trusted person who is their eyes and ears on a problem, which we need to fix.

Secondly, I think there should be a number of homeless shelters constructed at the points of greatest need, particularly where that need coincides with a transport hub, such as railway station and retail outlets. I have partnered with Deakin University School of Architecture and Built Environment, and I will now hand over to Nick Jahnecke to speak about that part.

Mr JAHNECKE: Good morning. So the built environment came largely from Deakin, and we had reviewed that after meeting up with John. Now, one thing that we had observed about some of the built outcomes that we are seeing at the moment is that they are often what we would start to describe as a concentrated outcome. So it would be one building perhaps in quite a large scale and it would often be in perhaps not necessarily the highest needs places or not necessarily where these people might be—asking them to essentially, 'Hey, come over to us'.

So we decided that perhaps the solution should be from a building perspective to actually build where these needs are. For our speculative approach we looked at eight of the top 15 highest-need areas in the state—we were kind of wrapping around Melbourne, down to Geelong—and so we targeted those. That was the larger scale that we started at and then worked in from there. Moving in from that, it was about, 'Right, where's transport infrastructure?', so not just relying on people to have cars to get around but public transport as well. Usually with these transport locations the stations were often near a commercial zone, and that was important to us. We needed commercial retail shopping areas and things like that. Traditionally it is a mixed-use zone from a building perspective. So we could build residential areas there that they could live in and were also in close

proximity, potentially, to work but at least life, rather than pushing these people out to the back of a suburb where the land is already vacant. That was the next scale.

The scale after that, moving in further, was that we have—and it came up in the video: the three colour codings that we used—residential, public open space and then the government services. We thought it was important that this is all hinged around the public open space, so the people that are living in these places, given that we have offered them opportunity in a place that is a commercial zone, have actually got somewhere that if there are children, they have got somewhere to kick a ball as far as they can without it running onto the road, and things like that. They were important from that scale. And then the government and health services are attached to that residential, and as the need dictates, you can have more or less residential as required.

Now, assuming that a home could solve the third point, of ‘How do we end homelessness?’, these residential buildings are already in good locations that could perhaps be sold off in, hopefully, the very near future that it was successful. What has happened in the past, and we have looked overseas at other projects for social housing, is they often become dilapidated and they are often too big or too small. So this approach was about saying, ‘We can build at a scale that’s appropriate for all the communities that need it, and we can repeat this model quite simply’—where the high needs are, basically.

The CHAIR: Thank you both, and thank you for the submission that you have also provided for this. I just have a quick question, because I know that we have got quite a few members here today. Reading the submission, my understanding was that the shelter was only transitional housing, as it were, to really provide that almost emergency housing. I am wondering if you have given any thought as to how you transition out, and I know this is what we have been hearing from a number of organisations—that we can provide them with emergency housing but then we have got nowhere to transition, to place them into. And that is where we can keep building emergency spaces, but what we really need to be doing is creating that permanent home with the table and the bed and the neighbourhood.

Mr JAHNECKE: So in our scheme we provided some residential buildings, and they were studio apartments and two-bedroom apartments initially. The approach was that we could add more and more of these kind of sized footprints as required and they could become, because of the way that they are sized, easily something that someone lives in medium to longer term as required. That was the intention.

Mr O’CALLAGHAN: The whole idea would be that a person can safely go to a shelter thinking, ‘I’m not here for a week. I’m not here for a month. They’re not going to throw me out if I don’t do a course or something’. I cannot overstate the role of the commissioner, because otherwise you guys are going to be having another inquiry in another five years and seeing what is working. The idea of the commissioner is to look at exactly these issues: long-term housing, public housing, interaction of public housing with shelters, for instance. Are shelters working? Are they not? Should we have different types of shelters? Should we have vertical shelters? I see Ozanam House, for instance, has got that model. What works? What is the best—I hate to use the word—solution? So I think there would be interaction between the shelters and the commission to see how many we need and what the quality ought to be.

Dr KIEU: Thank you very much for your submission. The ideas for a commissioner and also a shelter are very interesting. I would just like to ask about the shelters. We already have public housing. We already have some emergency and temporary housing for some of the people, so what is the real differentiation between your proposal and the existing one? Particularly is the shelter housing that you are opposing going to be run by the government entirely or in partnership with the private sector? What would make it work and what would make it different from the one that we have? I recognise and we all recognise that housing and homelessness is a very important issue—it is a human rights issue—and we should put priority into that, but given some of the constraints of the government and the public purse, what would be the idea behind the shelter that you have?

Mr JAHNECKE: The first part of the question about what is the different part, I would suggest it is about the way we have dispersed it. So rather than finding one location that has got a huge empty area or somewhere we can build a really large footprint, it is about saying, ‘No, where are the high needs? Let’s build what we can there that is suitable for the needs of the day, and we can adjust it as required’. So it is more an approach to the way we roll this out rather than necessarily a building that is Buddha reborn or anything like that.

Dr KIEU: We have some encouragement for the builders to have some social housing in a new development?

Mr JAHNECKE: Yes, and there is research that is not necessarily probably exactly what you are discussing but there is research certainly in planning circles about providing those things and challenges to them and the risks that developers find with them. So this was more saying it is not necessarily like, 'Let's do this many storeys of offices and we'll tack on some residential and get a bonus and then put in some social housing'—it was not necessarily like that. It was saying specifically this is the social housing component, and this is the way it can be used.

The other part that is a little bit different was that we were fairly insistent that the residential, the public open space and the government and social health services building need to be in close proximity to each other and also to the commercial centre of that suburb.

Mr O'CALLAGHAN: I am possibly unduly optimistic but I have a great belief in the philanthropic contributions that Victorians could make if they knew exactly what was being built—that it was not partisan, it was not religious, it was not anything other than to assist the homeless. And I have got great faith that some organisations would happily contribute to the cost of what we are proposing.

The CHAIR: And I think we will be hearing from those exact organisations next up.

Ms LOVELL: You outlined all of the underlying issues of what causes homelessness in the first place, and now you have a proposal to build shelters that take into account all of the things that we currently take into account when we build public housing, like building where the needs are and building near public transport and jobs and all of those sorts of things. This is not anything new. This is something that we are already doing in this state. But you have not outlined how you are going to actually solve homelessness in these shelters, because purely providing a roof over someone's head is not going to solve homelessness. So what is your concept about what would make these shelters so special as against the type of services that we offer now, particularly amongst our youth foyers, which are homeless facilities for young people that actually provide a whole range of services to help them solve their underlying issues?

Mr O'CALLAGHAN: The third aspect is the social services, which would actually be a critical part of the shelter. Just to have a house or a roof will not cut it. Nick can explain it. It is in the plans, but the shelter will have social services. It is a third housing, the little trees and the social services.

Ms LOVELL: That is what we are already doing with our youth foyers in the state at the moment.

Mr O'CALLAGHAN: Right.

Ms LOVELL: You also said they would be quite large scale. What sort of scale are you talking about?

Mr JAHNECKE: Sorry, not necessarily as large scale as what is built. For example, Ozanam House I think is close to a 1200-square metre footprint, which is quite big. This one is significant smaller and was about responding to that neighbourhood context that we chose, which happened to be in Footscray, which was purely for the purpose of this. So it is responsive to the neighbourhood context. So we were saying we could fit 20 to 30 heads in that footprint just here and then we repeat that as required.

Ms LOVELL: And then you talked about building public housing alongside it, so it is going back to the old model of concentrating disadvantage—because you have got a shelter and you have got public housing. It is not mixing the demographics of the community that we need to mix so we do not create enclaves of disadvantage.

Mr O'CALLAGHAN: If you saw this site, you would not say it is not mixing demographics. It is right in the middle of Footscray in the central business district. There would be a melding of the two—social housing and general commerce. I agree that that is one of the great advantages I think of this—it does not say, 'That's the homeless shelter over there'. You almost would not know it is there. You would not know. There is no big sign saying 'Homeless shelter'. It actually would be part of the community.

Mr JAHNECKE: From an urban planning perspective as well there are currently no apartments on this block, so we would set that precedent through the mixed-use zone. Then there is nothing stopping other developers from coming along and saying ‘Actually, we want to provide commercial apartments there now that there’s support for it’.

Ms LOVELL: So you actually have a site for the first shelter?

Mr JAHNECKE: Yes.

Dr CUMMING: What is the site that you are proposing?

Mr JAHNECKE: It is in Footscray, not far across the road from the train station.

Dr CUMMING: So just near McNab Avenue, near Footscray station, and that is what you are proposing?

Mr JAHNECKE: Yes.

The CHAIR: Catherine, it is close to the time so if we can stick to questions.

Dr CUMMING: Thank you, John. Thank you, Nick. I was on Maribyrnong council for 21 years, so I know very well what you are proposing. I know it is really difficult. I know the Les Twentyman Foundation had much difficulty finding a site in Sunshine many years ago. With many years on my council looking for sites, it is one of probably the most difficult things to do. I definitely like, and it is very thought-provoking, your idea of having a commissioner for homelessness.

Mr O’CALLAGHAN: Thank you.

Dr CUMMING: Looking through the list that you gave me, yes, obviously you have got a gaming and liquor commissioner, a racing commissioner, a labour hire commissioner, but it would seem that if we did have a homelessness commissioner they could probably talk to all of the other commissioners: multicultural, health, small business, disability, senior, local jobs, skills and the list goes on. They could actually talk to all of those other commissioners. I think that is a very good idea.

With the proposal that you are proposing, have you actually spoken to Victoria University, seeing that they have got a university city concept of Footscray? And respectfully, would Deakin University or other universities actually take this concept on? As Ms Lovell brought up earlier, rather than just having the housing aspect, having it next to or in a university complex—with your proposal you would actually have all of those ready things available—you would be able to provide education, and there are counsellors there and the like. Obviously a lot of the universities just have student accommodation. To actually broaden the concept of actually having some housing available for the general community and ticking off the box of homelessness, I think that would be great. The vast majority of universities—

Mr O’CALLAGHAN: The short answer is no, however, great idea—a seriously great idea.

Dr CUMMING: Because finding land is really difficult. Universities have everything that you are actually saying would tick all those boxes. There are car parks and a lot of spaces, and rather than just having student accommodation—

Mr O’CALLAGHAN: If I was the homelessness commissioner, I would be going straight to VU and saying, ‘What can you do for us?’.

Dr CUMMING: Or Deakin University or Melbourne University.

Mr O’CALLAGHAN: Or Deakin University, yes.

Dr CUMMING: Or La Trobe or RMIT. Yes, homelessness is not just Footscray.

Ms LOVELL: Thank you for your submission, Catherine.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, John and Nick. I think the commissioner idea is a no-brainer. I think it crosses a number of areas, and it makes a coordinating body—

Mr O'CALLAGHAN: That is the key.

Mr BARTON: I think that is terribly important. I am conscious of time, so I am going to rush through this. Our long-term goal obviously is to have affordable housing, keep people in their housing and deal with those issues, but maybe the Chair or another Committee member can remind me what exactly the figures are. Something like only three people out of 10 every night manage to get emergency housing, so we have got mums with kids in tow escaping a violent partner and we are sending them back to their violent partner or we are sending them off to sleep on their girlfriend's floor or something like that. So I would like to explore more issues around that sort of stuff: how it would be managed, the security—

Mr O'CALLAGHAN: I am particularly conscious of the family violence uptake in homelessness. It is incredible. This would be very mindful, and a safe environment for women. It may be another shelter, for instance, for that purpose. That is to be decided, because we have not even got the first one yet.

Mr BARTON: We need a commissioner to look into all that sort of stuff.

Mr O'CALLAGHAN: A commissioner would give you guys advice, and who better to do it? Obviously with people in mind for the commissioner, I think there are some pretty impressive people out there who would do a fantastic job of this.

Mr BARTON: That is great. Thank you.

Dr RATNAM: Thanks very much for the presentation and all the thinking that has gone behind this concept and the care for the issue. I guess, from your experience, what do you think the absence of a commissioner is doing to our response to homelessness? What has led to that?

Mr O'CALLAGHAN: I think the absence is the lack of coordination. We have got so many well-intentioned people and organisations it is extraordinary. If there is coordination, I think we can get rid of homelessness, because if you look at the amount of bodies—this excludes the philanthropic people that would love to come on board if they felt there was a way—I honestly think with proper coordination we could achieve great things. I honestly believe that.

The CHAIR: Yes, and thank you both. There is some really beautiful thinking here. I think the commissioner is a very creative thought here, and it would certainly add to the very broad range. As you say, when we were collecting the stakeholders for this there were literally hundreds of organisations dealing with homelessness.

Mr O'CALLAGHAN: Coordination.

The CHAIR: Coordination. We will send you a transcript in the next couple of days so you can make sure that we have recorded you correctly.

Mr O'CALLAGHAN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Again, thank you for your time. Thank you for the work that you have put into this and the thinking.

Witnesses withdrew.