

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Melbourne—Friday, 22 November 2019

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WITNESSES

Ms Emma King, Chief Executive Officer, and

Ms Karen Taranto, Policy Adviser, Victorian Council of Social Service.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for giving us your time this afternoon. As you are aware, this is being broadcast. We are also recording this with Hansard here.

I know that you have given evidence at these types of inquiries, but in this Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria the evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege through our *Constitution Act* and through the standing orders of the Legislative Council, so any information that you provide here today is protected by law. However, any comments made outside this hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading information to the Committee could be considered a contempt of Parliament. You will be given a proof version of the transcript in a few days time, so please feel free to look through that.

Some opening comments, and then we will open it up for questions.

Ms KING: Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak here today. It is very much appreciated. When we talk about homelessness there is one key thing that we are really keen to acknowledge, and that is that we can end homelessness. Homelessness is preventable, and homelessness is solvable. Be under no illusion; homelessness has been created by choices made in the past and choices that will continue to be made today—choices about how society is structured, about how our economy is run and about how services are funded. Homelessness exists because of the choices that we as a community and you as parliamentarians make every single day about what is a priority and what is not. These choices have led to the fact that tonight in Victoria nearly 25 000 people, including around 5000 kids, will be without a home—that is tonight alone. The good news is that because homelessness has been created by us, it can also be solved by us. By making different choices we can end homelessness in Victoria.

A lack of knowledge or ideas is not the problem. We know what works in Victoria and we know what does not work. We also know what has worked overseas. What is lacking in general terms is a broad, a deep and a sustained commitment to pursuing what really works and doing so on the scale and for the length of time required to really make a difference. I want to be really clear here; ending homelessness up-front will cost money. Yes, there are smart things we can do that cost very little, and I will speak to some of those shortly, but the big, seismic things that we have to do to end homelessness will cost money now, and they will generate savings later—savings in the crisis services that we will no longer need to fund and the prisons that we will no longer need to build; and savings from the economic benefits of having more people in study and more people in work.

The first thing we need to do is to dramatically increase our public and our community housing stock. We need at least 6000 new public and community homes to be built every single year, to be exact. Victoria talks a lot about the Big Build. We love to see cranes on our horizons, we love to see boring machines tunnelling below Melbourne and tradies, builders, engineers and architects in work. But what we need now is a big build to end homelessness. We will never genuinely end homelessness if people do not have homes to live in; it is as simple as that.

In terms of what does homelessness look like, homelessness does not always mean rooflessness. I already mentioned that there are most likely 25 000 people who are experiencing homelessness on any given night in Victoria. In Victoria the most visible form of homelessness, rough sleeping, is just the very tip of the iceberg. Much more common in Victoria is what we call 'hidden homelessness'. This is where people may have a roof over their head but have no security and no private or social space. These are the elements of what makes a house a home. They may be in registered or unregistered rooming houses, be living in severely overcrowded dwellings, couch surfing, staying in a motel or sleeping in their car.

In terms of looking at the scale of the problem that we are facing, some of our members, as you know, have funded homelessness services. I know you have heard from some of them today. They provide support to people who are at risk of or are experiencing homelessness. Almost 117 000 people used homelessness services

between 2017 and 2018, but every single day at least 90 people are turned away from these services. When we say ‘turned away’ we do not mean that people asked for support and they did not get the support that they needed; we mean that people cannot even talk to a worker about the support that they actually need. That is just the official reported figure. In an event last week that we held to discuss this issue with our members, one of them responded, ‘Ninety? Well, that’s how many people we would turn away just from our service alone’. This is a bit like walking into a hospital emergency department with a gash in your arm and a nurse saying, ‘We can’t help you now; come back when it’s infected’. Thirty-seven per cent of people who presented to a homelessness service were already homeless when they sought support. This is just one example of how our current system is set up for crisis. Waiting until people are in crisis is the same as a nurse saying, ‘Come back when you’ve got an infection’.

Because of our critical shortage of affordable housing in Victoria, once people are homeless it is so much more difficult to help them. In terms of looking at how we end homelessness for good, we sat down to think about how we would comment on the terms of reference of this Inquiry. We realised that we could have written different, separate submissions about the many experiences of homelessness. Because there is no single experience of homelessness, there is no single solution. Our submission to this Inquiry is going to deep-dive into the policies, the programs and the initiatives which we think will work to end homelessness. Namely, we think the way to end homelessness in Victoria is to stop relying on services, especially homelessness services, to respond to these crises.

The way to end homelessness is to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. We to make change in five key areas to prevent homelessness: structural reform, systemic reform, early intervention, eviction prevention and housing stability. We can prevent homelessness through structural change—that is, do something about the economic, environmental and social conditions that affect people’s opportunities. The main structural change we want to see is a dramatic increase in public and community housing, as I already mentioned. Other structural changes are already happening, such as the residential tenancy reform. We should continue to explore planning and land use solutions like using government land and inclusionary zoning. By inclusionary zoning I mean that big developments should be required to include some housing for people in need. We absolutely need to do something about poverty. A good place to start is obviously by raising Newstart, and we would encourage all of you to join the call to do so.

Mr BARTON: Done.

Ms KING: Thank you. That is great hear. We could do more to improve access to the service system. As things stand, there is a hodgepodge of underfunded, narrow and disconnected programs that work if and when people can access them. The help the people get depends strongly on where they turn. Everything that we are doing to intervene early to prevent life’s disruptions from escalating into crisis makes a difference, but there is much more to do. Early intervention services include legal assistance, advocacy, financial counselling and emergency financial relief, flexible funding packages, negotiations with landlords and real estate agents and more. When people have housing, the easiest thing we can do is to support people to actually hang on to it. This means resourcing services which support people as soon as their housing comes under stress, rather waiting until they are on the brink of homelessness. We can prevent people from being turned away from homelessness services if we fortify the safety net in other parts of the service system.

So Committee members I will leave you with this thought: what if we were to shut the gate, what if we were to make a pledge that from today the State of Victoria would not allow one more person to become homeless? Now, that will not solve all of the challenges facing people who are already homeless, and it will not fix our chronic shortage of public and community housing. That all still needs to be done. But we have to start somewhere and we have to stop the bleeding, and what better way than putting a stake in the ground and saying, ‘No more, not any longer and not on our watch’. So thank you for your time, and we very happy to take your questions.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Emma, and thanks for the challenge. I am interested in the fact that you have had this conversation with your other members, and certainly we have been meeting with a lot of them. You are right about shutting the gate and preventing anyone else from falling into that homelessness. We have done some of the tenancy reform that will come into place shortly. Yes, we have to increase stock. But have you come across any other innovative programs that you or your members are doing now that help people from moving into

homelessness, so other systems or things that you would recommend that we do, whether it is some sort of information that must be provided when an eviction notice is delivered, for example?

Ms KING: Yes, and there are some parts of this, I guess, that are systemic and there are other parts that are the kind of practical now. Would you be able to give an indication—are you looking for a little bit of both?

The CHAIR: That would be great, thank you.

Ms KING: I think in terms, and Karen will feel free to jump in here at any point, of structural reform and looking at legislation, policy and investment where we build assets and increase social inclusion and equality, certainly the social housing construction pipeline, and that is public housing and community housing overall, and land use and planning policy, I do think there is some very low-hanging fruit there. We have talked about inclusionary zoning for a very long time, and I just feel like it is a no-brainer and we can actually start to deliver on some of that pretty quickly. We have seen some other programs working very well, which are probably more holding patterns. So for example, looking at the work that involves using VicTrack land with units of housing, which I suspect you have heard about earlier today—

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms KING: with the sort of short-term housing opportunities that have provided options for people. There are other options there—but again I have not listened to all of the transcript from today, I apologise; we had our AGM this morning. Looking, for example, at some of the work that has been done to assist victims of family violence; noting that, of course, I would always acknowledge that women and their children should be able to actually stay in the home rather than having to move out. I do want to put that up-front. But looking at some of the really strong programs that have been put in place to make sure that people have somewhere safe and secure to live rather than being left living in their car and moving from place to place. In that, I also want to draw the connections—and I know some members of this panel have very deep connections with early childhood education and others—and note the importance of keeping people in their homes, keeping them connected to their other services, whether they be early childhood services, whether they be schools or whether they be the broader community as well. We know that that is critically important.

I suspect Karen might want to touch on a little bit more in terms of some of the very specific things we have seen our other members do, but I did want to draw on that because we are mindful at VCOSS, we can look at all of these issues in a very siloed way, whether it be homelessness, whether it be education, whether it be transport et cetera, but the reality is, as citizens, for us are all interconnected. So, yes, we need a house first and foremost, because it is part of keeping us safe, but we need all of our services to stay connected in terms of being able to live a good life. Karen, I might not hand over to you in terms of some of the specific programs that perhaps I have not mentioned.

Ms TARANTO: Emma mentioned that there are a range of things that are already in place around early intervention and eviction prevention. Justice Connect are one of our members, and they run amazing programs that combine legal and social supports to keep people in their housing. What we have seen is, as Emma said, the help that people get depends on where they turn. So one example is that a lot of funding came into the homelessness sector following the rough sleeper action plan. One of the key initiatives coming out of that was that the assertive outreach teams which go out and assist people into supported housing. They are multidisciplinary teams of legal services and social supports. They only went into six areas, but it is something that is really working. The funding has hit these services at the start of the year and it is having really good outcomes, but these are things that we could see more in places.

I met with one of our members a couple of weeks ago to talk about homelessness prevention in the west, actually Westjustice, who you might be aware of. One thing that they have seen is that people who are on the brink of homelessness having taken out risky mortgages and taken them up at a time when finance is good and they are in work, but a circumstance might occur where they might get sick, they might lose their job or their job may become unstable, which puts their mortgage at risk. So what they have implemented is a mortgage-stress program, which combines legal and social supports to keep people in their housing—negotiations with the banks and with councils to keep those bills at bay.

Ms KING: Just to touch on one more thing which I neglected to mention, noting that I think this is where we look at solutions that often can be quite specific for individuals, I would want to acknowledge youth foyers as well in terms of looking at a beautiful example of where we are able to combine young people that are really significantly at risk—in homelessness or on the verge of. We know that they are very much designed for place and actually around: ‘How do we set people up for success, rather than letting them drift into homelessness and lose the opportunity for education and work as well?’.

Dr KIEU: Thank you for your presentation. It has reinforced a lot of different ingredients and elements of the problems and some of the suggested solutions and some of the other issues related to homelessness. You have mentioned the will and the priorities set out by policymakers in terms of how to end homelessness. I would like to learn from you: what is your thinking about the present system of services providing for homeless people in terms of whether they are fragmented, they are overlapping, they are wasteful—the efficiency and the effectiveness of the present system?

Ms KING: What I would start on in terms of the present system, I think the example we gave of the member who Karen met with a couple of weeks ago who said, ‘Well, gee, 90 people turned away a day. Our service would do that alone’. That means there is not even time to speak, if you like, to those 90 people; they just cannot meet demand. ACOSS did a survey a couple of years ago now where they were able to show that more than 80 per cent of services currently cannot meet the demand that is coming their way. So we know that in fact there is chronic underfunding in terms of services. I think we all know in walking around this is not a party-political comment; it is just the reality. We talk about rough sleepers as being the tip of the iceberg. I think for any of us who walk around this area we are seeing it become more and more pronounced in terms of the number of people who are homeless.

Ms LOVELL: The iceberg is getting bigger.

Ms KING: Yes. We have done a lot of work with people in regional communities, who are also talking about the fact that for a number of them they are seeing this for the first time as well—so they are seeing it in Bendigo, they are seeing it in Shepparton, in Mildura et cetera—in a way that they probably had not seen that before. So going back to your question, we hear from services, and our experience would be, that they are actually desperately underfunded. We know what it means. So looking, for example, at Bendigo, when we met there with our members in the lead-up to the election, we wanted to have a deep understanding of what did homelessness mean in each area, because the reality is the picture is different in each geographic area. We wanted to have a deeper understanding of that. Bendigo are very clear about saying, ‘Well, it’s a different picture if you’re in town to if you’re 5 kilometres down the road, to 10, to 15, to 20’. People will often move out of a central area because it is cheaper, and we see the same replicated in a way in central Melbourne. It is cheaper if you move out of town theoretically because the housing is cheaper, but what you then find is a whole lot of other expenses that come with it. You need a car to travel. Generally people do not have a lot of money, which is why they are having housing issues in the first place. They are pushed further out. They are relying on a whole lot of other additional costs that actually make what looks like cheap housing not particularly cheap at all.

Dr KIEU: And a shortage of employment to support themselves.

Ms KING: Yes. And what we find is our services, the housing services and the crisis services that are set up, are simply not funded enough to meet needs. So going to your point around duplication et cetera, we do not tend to hear of that being an issue so much. I think often the part we hear about is, again, the sort of ‘no wrong door’ being used, whether it be in child protection or whether it be in other areas as well. It is: how do we make things easy for people if they are at risk of becoming homeless or if they are in the early stages? How do we make it easy, so that when they do ask for help or when they are given help, they are able to actually achieve it and achieve something realistic, because we know at the moment that that is not happening. If we have at least 90 people being turned away every day according to official figures, we have a really big problem, and when we check in about that with our members, we believe that the number is far bigger than that.

Ms TARANTO: On your point about the efficiency and effectiveness of services, the model that we have talked about and the five key areas—and we will go deeper in our submission—that we mentioned earlier, this is not new. Workers in the sector will know that early intervention and prevention is what works so that people

do not fall into homelessness. But when we are talking about this level of demand—that 90 people are turned away every day—and someone has two files on their desk, and one person is housed and one person is already homeless, you know who they are going to choose. So when workers are put in that position where they have to triage people who are the most in crisis, I think that is where we need to do something about that churn.

Ms KING: Just to touch on that, what we hear time and time again is that people often cannot get any assistance until they are actually homeless.

Dr KIEU: Too late.

Ms KING: So it is that part, as you mentioned. It is a bit like going to the hospital and saying, ‘Well, I’ve got this cut’, and someone saying, ‘Come back when it’s infected; we can’t actually help you until then’. It is nonsensical.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thanks for your submission and for all the work that you do. Dr Kieu actually stole my thunder with the previous question, but that is okay—I will deal with that later.

Dr KIEU: In the car park!

Mr GRIMLEY: My question is: what do you think is the key focus of the Government in addressing homelessness and housing? So I suppose, and this was asked before of somebody else, if you were the Minister, what would be the number one thing that you would do to begin?

Ms KING: The first thing that I would do, I would change the focus of the state budget first and foremost to a wellbeing budget—I would move away. One of the challenges we have got is that we are focused very much on the economics, and I am not shying away from the economics. Victoria is a AAA-rating state, and I know the Government is very proud of that—any government would be proud of it—but it does not pick up the ‘who is left behind’. The first thing I would do is a wellbeing budget. So irrespective of whichever part of government, whichever ministry you have et cetera, everyone is focused on actually, ‘Who are we not leaving behind?’. Because we can have a AAA rating, but we have got over 80 000 people waiting for a roof over their head. On current projections by this time next year we are going to have 100 000 people who are waiting for a roof over their head, and we know that that is more people than are going to fill up the MCG.

So we have got to actually find a way to stop the tide. I think some of it is that actually we look at the way we currently govern, the way that we currently fund, and look at how we are funding economic outputs rather than, ‘How do we make sure that we do not actually leave people behind?’. So I would start with a wellbeing budget that looked at actually, what are the outcomes that we want from every single department, whether it is transport, whether it is housing, whether it is DHHS et cetera? I do not want the infrastructure departments to look away from that, which is why we mentioned the Big Build. Why can’t we have a big build for housing? We have got one for trains, we have got one for inner metro; let us have one for housing. If we actually invested in that, you might not see your savings, if you like, within the first term of government, but gee, you would see your savings down the track and we could actually solve homelessness.

Ms LOVELL: Hi Emma, how are you going? Hi, Karen. Emma, as you know I have always been a strong supporter of the Child First policy and keeping women and children who are evicted from properties in their own communities so they stay connected to those services but also keeping women and children who are victims of domestic violence in the home, so that is why I originally wrote that interim intervention orders policy. We just had the Salvation Army, and when I asked them about their success with Child First they said that one of their greatest barriers to it is domestic violence, because when keeping kids in their school, the perpetrator of that violence knows where the school is. And we know, even with the intervention orders, that people break intervention orders. How do we break that nexus so that we can keep women and children in their homes in their communities and not have them still under threat?

Ms KING: We might pick that up further in our submission in terms of working with our member organisations, particularly those that work within the domestic violence agencies. I guess what I would want to do is reiterate the point that you just made, and that is the critical importance of actually keeping women and children in their own homes and safe and secure and connected to community, and it goes to the part around

being connected to your current workplace, children connected to early childhood services and connected to the home.

I think there is a multifaceted answer probably to that. I am thinking about the different programs. I am thinking about one for example, and I am trying to think of the name of it—sorry, I am having a blank in terms of the member who provides it—and looking at the security et cetera that they provide around a woman and children so that they can be safe in their homes. There is a range of programs, and I do not want to do any of the member organisations that we have got working in that area a disservice by talking about it. I have not looked into that deeply for today. I can touch on that, but I feel like we will do better in our submission if we actually go and have a more detailed conversation. My key part from that would be wanting to really reiterate the fact that women and children should not have to be the ones moving by virtue of being the victims of family violence. That is really important. I think it is more complicated in regional and small towns; having grown up in a small country town, I think it is much more complicated, to be frank. Where everyone in a community knows one another and they know where you are living, how do you stay safe and connected?

I would want to commend the Government for the significant investment that they have made in terms of family violence and looking to really address that. Karen, I do not know whether there are any specific programs that you would draw on or whether you think it would be best to go to our submission?

Ms TARANTO: Yes.

Ms KING: I think that would be best. I am just mindful in terms of looking at the family violence agencies that we specifically work with and wanting to name up and make sure that we have really named up the detail of the programs that they are working on, because there are a number of very successful programs, but in saying that also I think that we would be united in saying there is more work to be done in that space.

Ms LOVELL: Yes, okay. My second question is about inclusionary zoning, which I know all of the sector is very keen on. But there is a perverse outcome of that too, and that is pushing up the cost of housing because obviously developers will just cost-shift that. How do we balance that out, a cost-shift from government to those who are going to be purchasing the private housing, and particularly locking first-home owners out of the market because it pushes up the cost of housing?

Ms KING: I think our developers are doing all right. I do not think that—

Ms LOVELL: The developers are doing all right, but they will not want to do any less all right, so they will just cost-shift that to their other customers.

Ms KING: I think it is interesting: when you look at the levers that government has around some of that work in terms of looking at some of the procurement-type practices that government has got in place, we have seen some really effective work around that in other places. The reality is a number of these developers want to potentially pick up other contracts et cetera. I think that there are things that we can put in place that actually protect that. As a general rule I think we would all have some degree of security in knowing that developers are doing incredibly well. They make an awful lot of money out of the developments that they make. I do not think it is a big ask to suggest that, for example, 10 per cent of that should be put aside for looking at housing for poor people. I think that is actually a really easy thing for a community to do.

I do think that there are protections that can be put in place. I think that it probably would require legislation, and I think that a number of politicians that I speak to are really up for that discussion. I think it is a really great opportunity for this Committee in terms of looking at something that could be recommended. I do not love the argument in terms of saying, 'Well, it's going to push up the prices for everyone else', because if we thought that, we would actually kind of never do anything.

If I go back to looking at the investment that we need in the Big Build and all those other things, it is saying, 'Well, actually let's look at what the issue is here that we want to address. We don't want 80 000 people or 100 000 people who are actually homeless'. There is a really strong opportunity for us in terms of looking at inclusionary zoning; let us look at how we make it happen. Let us look at how we limit, to whatever extent possible, developers being able to push that price on to other people, so they are able to buy in. But the problem

we have got here is homelessness in the first instance, and I think that there are some really strong moves that we can make in that, and inclusionary zoning I do think is low-hanging fruit in how we can make that happen.

Mr BARTON: You have got all these different groups doing fantastic work and doing awesome stuff, and you are dealing with governments across all different levels of government. Do you think it is time we have a commissioner for homelessness?

Ms KING: I think that is a really good question. I think there are two options here. One is that that could happen, and having a commissioner for homelessness I think could be a really good idea. The one reservation I would have in respect of that is I would not want that job to then only be seen as sitting with the commissioner for homelessness, because we sometimes see that. This is partly why I was talking about the wellbeing budget, because this should be everyone's business. So I think it is about: how do you make it everyone's business and where does the accountability sit? That is one of the reasons we are pushing hard. When we release our state budget submission it is going to be around the state of wellbeing. We want a wellbeing budget for Victorians.

Mr BARTON: I think that is great.

Ms KING: On a commissioner for homelessness, I can understand why that is an attractive idea. I think in many ways it is a good idea because you would have someone who continues to pursue that agenda and push that agenda and we have seen that work very well, for example, in terms of the Commission for Children and Young People, which does an extraordinarily fantastic job, so we see those jobs as being really vitally important.

So I think that it could be a fantastic idea. My key thing to sit around that is still about saying: it is everybody's business. So I would not want that then to be seen as going, 'Well, okay, let's just sit that over with the Commissioner for Homelessness, and not worry about how everyone else is accountable'. If it sat with giving them the power—the sort of power, for example, that the Commission for Children and Young People has around actually keeping governments accountable—then I think that that is a really interesting idea and one that is worthy of further conversation.

Mr BARTON: Thank you. There has been a lot of success in Wales. I cannot remember: was it like an 80 per cent improvement or something in homelessness when they made a serious investment about keeping people in their homes? Clearly we all think—well, certainly some people on this Committee think—that is what should be happening. How do you think we could work that here and achieve those sorts of results? Some things come down to be as simple as paying the rent, which is in arrears, but then they obviously need to have that social support to see that they do not get themselves into trouble again until they get on their feet again.

Ms KING: Yes, as Karen mentioned earlier with the Westjustice program, often it comes to when people come to points in time where they are in high mortgage stress. So we see that often in areas too where people would not predict that it would be the case, to be frank, when we look at where the areas of mortgage stress are. As you say, it is around: if we can step in early and help people when they are in difficulty and help them stay in their homes, I think that that is a very worthy prospect. It would cost the State less money at the end of the day. Rather than having people dislocated from their homes and looking at then how you help them through a service that costs—where, to be frank, we haemorrhage money—we could be doing other things that are so effective. You talked about looking at programs in Wales. There are others in other international jurisdictions as well that Karen might want to touch on. But we know that some of them are no-brainers in terms of looking at what would be relatively low cost—so covering rent for a period of time until someone can get back on their feet. And noting that as well, as I mentioned earlier, we do not always look at things in silos; at VCOSS we do not look at things in silos. The fact that someone is having issues with their home often means they are having issues in other parts of their life as well. So it is part of that 'How do we help you?' approach rather than 'How do we punish you?', 'So you're having a hard time. Well, see you later'. You are out of your house and you are going to have issues with other parts of your life as well. In terms of fines—actually, I will get distracted if I talk about fines. I was interested in the conversation you had about fines. I might hand over to Karen rather than take us down another rabbit hole. Karen, did you want to touch on that?

Ms TARANTO: Yes. I think the model you are referring to is the 'duty to assist' model, which I think is where whoever comes into contact—the first responder, I guess—with the person who is at risk of or

experiencing homelessness needs to assist in some way. I caught the tail end of your conversation with Justice Connect around where police are the first people to come into contact with rough sleepers and it relies on the discretion of that police member to assist or not, so it is an interesting model in that way. It is definitely good in principle, but I suppose the question is: what does that person need assistance with? If it is support, as we have said and as we know from our member base, all of the good supports do exist. If it is about housing, then that is kind of where we have the problems. People are churning through homelessness and the broader social system because they cannot exit into sustainable housing. So it is definitely something we have looked at with interest and may be something for us to explore in our submission.

The CHAIR: Fantastic.

Ms VAGHELA: Thank you very much. You have given us a lot of information today. I think the question was already asked about the Minister, but I am going to go a little bit further. What are the three things that you think any government can do that will address the problem of homelessness?

Ms KING: A big build—I would do a big build. So rather than focusing on only a big build for transport—and I am not wanting to take away from that for a second—let us see a big build in terms of looking at housing and homelessness. If we know that we need 6000 new properties a year for the next 10 years to actually solve our homelessness problem, well, let us do it. So I would do that to start with. I would look at investing strongly in some of the other protective factors that we know make a really big difference to people's wellbeing at the same time. Sorry, I am just thinking 'three'; you asked for three. I would do the big build. In terms of homelessness, if it would actually build people's homes and if we had enough homes for everyone, to me it would then be about actually saying, 'Well, what are the services that we need to make sure that people can access so that they're not at risk in terms of other parts of their lives?'. I guess that is why I am going to that first and foremost, because fundamentally if we had enough houses, we would not have a problem. So maybe I would look at that as the number one priority. I do not know if you would add anything, but I just feel like in one way it is almost a no-brainer to say, well, it is a challenge in relatively short electoral cycles—I think we have got four years here—because we do not see the return in one electoral cycle around saying, 'Well, let's actually have that investment and agree to actually put that amount of money into addressing homelessness by a big build and the supports that need to sit around that for people'. That is what I would do. I would be very mindful at the same time of knowing that where we build houses or the way that we construct that we would have to make sure that people are strongly enough connected to community and connected to the other things that matter, be it transport, be it jobs, be it education, because otherwise the risk is people are so far down the line that actually they cannot access any of those things.

In terms of looking at housing as well, we know there are so many different layers in terms of looking at people who are homeless and so many different reasons why they are. We know that for a number of people they are going to need a strong number of supports that are going to assist them in terms of, 'Yes, you've got a house, but now actually that might be something that you haven't had for a long period of time. How do we help you connect back to community?', because we know that community is a really huge protective factor. So I would be looking at a big build. I would be looking at the really strong protection factors in community, because we know that matters not only for housing but actually for things like keeping people out of our prison system and those sorts of protective factors overall as well. We know that works. We have seen people invest in that overseas and we know that it makes a really big difference. So I would actually look at protective factors and really significantly investing in terms of our community.

There is a raft of other things I would touch on because I think they make a difference in terms of looking at the degree of homelessness that we have. Justice Connect touched on some of those before, looking at our bail reforms and other things, where people at the moment, when they are exiting jail, do not actually have a home to go to. So let us make sure every Victorian has a home to go to and the support that they need to stay there.

Ms VAGHELA: You mentioned three key strategic goals in your plan that you had for 2015 to 2018. How many of them were directly related to homelessness, and how far are you in terms of getting some positive outcomes for those actions?

Ms KING: I am just thinking the three key—

Ms VAGHELA: I have got here your strategic plan, which mentions three key strategic goals of a fair and just Victorian community, a thriving community sector—I just wanted to know if any of them are directly related to homelessness, and if they were your goals in the last three years, what sort of policymaking did you do or were you planning to do? Did you achieve anything through those three years in—

Ms KING: Just to clarify, that is our strategic plan for VCOSS, so that is around our organisation. We advocate for a fair and just community, a thriving community sector and a healthy organisation, which is about our own internal governance and finance and those sorts of things. Sorry, I misunderstood the question at the beginning. Our fair and just component of that would be really around looking at our advocacy work, and a thriving community is about advocacy and our policy work and looking at how we work and influence government and work alongside others. The thriving community sector is so that we have genuinely that—a community sector that is thriving.

We were reflecting on this actually in the lead-up to our AGM today. We have worked really hard around looking at actually how do we provide some really good socially progressive policies that are going to make a difference to people on the ground, noting that some of them are short term and some of them are longer term. Some of the things that I would point to that we have seen in recent times that do interact with homelessness, whether or not they may look like it in the first instance, are things like minimum rental standards. They are things that we have advocated for for a long while. I am just trying to think of all the other things that we have put in—say, for example, about election strategy and policy last time. But that really goes to our broader overall advocacy work. I think that one of the challenges that we continue to have actually is around housing and homelessness. I think you could argue, for example, one of the announcements that was made in the lead-up to the election was the 1000 new public housing properties over the next term of government, and as we said at the time, that is a down payment. It is a down payment.

I would say that, for us, we know that there is still more work to be done. Every announcement, if you like, that we have had that we have worked towards, generally some things are bigger than others, some things are a good start. The 1000 new homes is very much a down payment on what we have named up today—that is to say that at the time we said we need 3000 new homes every year for the next 10 years. We called it the Whittlesea declaration. It was basically saying we need the size of Whittlesea. That is just to meet current demand. We know that, if we are looking at future demand, it is actually 6000 homes, so that is what we need. I wish I could say we had achieved that, but we have not.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you so much, Emma and Karen, for your evidence today and your strong advocacy for the Big Build and inclusionary zoning, amongst a number of other things, which I totally concur with. On that note, in terms of the Big Build and looking at some of the international precedents as well, I would be keen to hear your thoughts on the housing first model, which the Big Build kind of inherently has within it as well. We have seen the example in Finland. I think they have reduced their homelessness rate by 35 per cent and all but eradicated street homelessness with a housing first approach. I just wondered if you have started to think about that and what you are ruminating about that to inform the Committee.

Ms KING: I might throw to Karen on that one.

Ms TARANTO: I might throw to you on that one.

Ms KING: I can start, if you like.

Ms TARANTO: Yes.

Ms KING: We are very much looking at the international examples. We are looking at how do we make them fit for purpose in terms of the Victorian context. We have learned a lot, as you mentioned previously, in terms of looking at the program in Wales. We have been very focused on the program in Finland, and also in naming that I also want to call out our fantastic member organisation and colleagues, the Council to Homeless Persons, who I know have presented before the Committee today as well. We work with CHP, with CHIA and a number of our other members around saying, 'Well, actually let's look at a number of the programs that are working internationally and how might we make some of them fit for purpose'. That is work that is currently underway, and I am looking at one of our other colleagues who is sitting in the audience at the moment for the

reason that we are currently working together as a group to look at what we bring together as a joint platform for the next key advocacy work that we do going forward and also to inform the work that you all do and everyone in government does as well.

We are very mindful that as a group of organisations it is really important for us to work together so we are coming forward with one clear set of directions rather than eight or nine different ones, which actually is not terribly helpful for anyone sitting around the table. Each of those organisations has particular expertise in their area, whether it be public housing, community housing or homeless people more generally, and looking at how we bring our collective wisdom, research, advocacy et cetera together so that we can have the strongest and most informed collective voice, which I think is the most important component of that. There are some really fantastic examples overseas that we have seen drive a huge difference. We are very keen to see: what can we learn from those, what can we take and what can we adapt for the Victorian context? That is work that is actually currently underway. Very happy to share that with you as we continue, and we will explore that further in our submission as well. Karen, do you want to add anything?

Ms TARANTO: Yes. The only other thing that I would say is housing first is definitely something that we support. We recently told the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System that any of the outcomes that emerge from that royal commission would not stick unless we did something about housing. We told it to the Royal Commission into Family Violence as well. Yesterday I talked to my colleague at DV Vic and asked if there was anything she wanted me to raise today, and it was that everything is progressing well from the royal commission except that things are not sticking because people do not have housing. That is definitely something that we support.

Just touching on something that our colleagues at Justice Connect raised earlier about people exiting from prison into homelessness, that is a housing first model as well where people have housing to exit to. I just wanted to also note that when they talk about people exiting from prison into homelessness, that is already bad enough, but the other outcomes that people have if they exit prison into homelessness are things like overdose and death. They are not able to continue whatever programs they were on when they were in the forensic system out in the community system if they do not have housing. One of the really practical reasons for that is if someone is on a drug treatment program in prison and they need a prescribing doctor, if they do not have an address and a local doctor to be prescribed to, they are not going to get on the program and they are not going to have their continuity of care from prison into the community. So we are seeing some really poor outcomes for people who are using drugs in prison and then are not able to continue their programs. I guess the bottom line for me is that all these other risk factors and protective factors require housing as a bottom line.

Dr KIEU: I know we are pressed for time, but I cannot pass up this opportunity to ask Ms King a question. From the previous witnesses we have learned that a high percentage of the homeless people are children, up to 15 per cent. Knowing that you have a background in education, and particularly early childhood education, what would happen to those children as a result of being homeless at the very early stage of their lives, in your view?

Ms KING: I am looking at a Member of the Committee here because I know we share this very passionately, having worked across this space before. It is just devastating—it is just devastating. When you look at your kids when you are doing this work, you think, 'What if your circumstances were different and you didn't have anything?'. We see kids living in abject poverty with their families. It means that potentially they are not seeing their maternal and child health nurse. They are living in poverty; they do not necessarily have enough food, and they do not have anywhere safe and secure to belong. We know, for example, that by the time a child starts school, if they start from behind basically they do not catch up unless there is really significant intervention. The path of a child's life is set so, so early, from the time a mum is pregnant with her child to the importance of that first thousand days, which is critically important, let alone having access to affordable, appropriate and high-quality early childhood education. If you do not have that, it sounds really dire, but the evidence shows you do not catch up. So basically we are consigning kids to a life of poverty and disadvantage by virtue of the fact that they are born into circumstances where they do not have a home in the first place. It is really devastating, and it is a real indictment, I think, of our whole society that that is what happens.

We do know that some kids do catch up by really, really significant intervention, but that is pretty unusual. So if you think about it, at the moment we have got over, I think, 5000 kids that are going to be homeless tonight—it

is just horrifying. For all of us, we sit there and we look at our own kids or our nieces and our nephews et cetera and we think, ‘What if that was you?’. We have all these dreams and hopes for our kids—well, what if they have got nothing because they were born into circumstances where they do not have a home? It is actually horrifying. There is such strong data to show that there is every reason why we have got to be investing in giving our kids the very best chance in life, because not only is that about their economic wellbeing but it is about their health and it is about their lifelong trajectory, and the only way we change that is by helping mums from the time that they are pregnant and kids from the time that they are born and investing and investing early and going in really hard to address that.

Ms LOVELL: My question is just on the inclusionary zoning. We could do inclusionary zoning and require developers to have 15 per cent of everything and have it all sitting their empty because there is no-one taking up the opportunity. So do you think there should be a mutual obligation for local government and state government to have some contributing factor to this? So there could be local government with perhaps no rates or discount rates and a guaranteed funding stream from the State that community housing providers will be able to take up those opportunities.

Ms KING: I think it is hard as well, isn’t it, that when we look at the fact that we have got our three levels of government it is really easy to turn around and say, ‘Well, you haven’t done that, so that’s why you’re not being delivered to’. We see really great opportunities, if you like, in terms of looking at how local councils and the State Government can work together. Karen, I do not know whether you have got more and you would like to jump in there. Karen has recently come from local council as well.

Ms LOVELL: There is no point having hundreds of empty blocks of land.

Ms KING: I just think there are different models. There is a program that is a different model; I am thinking of the example that is on VicTrack land, where you have got local council, state government et cetera working together going, ‘Well, we’ve got to do something. What is it that we can do? What’s the very best example that we can come up with here?’. We do know that there are different examples. Karen, I do not know if there is anything you want to touch on with state and local government working together.

Ms TARANTO: I would agree with you. I think the main thing with local government and state government is that it is something we should explore, because at present it depends on the local government taking up affordable housing, and they have to negotiate on a case-by-case basis with developers. So we should explore anything that we can do to support local governments to make that process easier, whether that is through changes to our planning policies or making it easier for local governments to compel and to incentivise developers to build in their areas. I am definitely not a planning expert, but as Emma said—

Ms LOVELL: Not all developers build, though. Developers might just subdivide. You could end up with empty blocks of land.

Ms TARANTO: Yes. It is definitely something to explore. We have a number of local governments in our member base, so it is something we can look into.

Ms KING: And they are very passionate about wanting to address homelessness.

Ms LOVELL: Is there a model of inclusionary zoning we can look at that is working well?

Ms KING: We will explore that further in our submission. I think that is probably the best way for us to address that, because I think it is probably about looking at what models are working well but also what might be possible for Victoria that we perhaps have not explored in the detail that we would have liked to before. That is one of the great things about this Inquiry—it gives us a chance to do that as well.

The CHAIR: I agree. Thank you both so much. Thank you, Emma, and thank you, Karen. That was fantastic, and we really look forward to your submission later. As I said, the transcript will be sent to you in the next few days for you to have a look over. Again, thank you so much for your contribution.

Ms KING: Thank you for the opportunity. We really appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.