

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Shepparton—Wednesday, 11 March 2020

#### MEMBERS

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Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

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Ms Melina Bath

Mr Rodney Barton

Ms Georgie Crozier

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

## WITNESSES

Cr Seema Abdullah, Mayor, and

Ms Kaye Thomson, Director Community, Greater Shepparton City Council.

**The CHAIR:** I am declaring the meeting open. This is the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues, and it is our public hearing into homelessness in Victoria. Again, if I can just remind those in the gallery to please keep your phones on silent. Just before we start, all evidence that you provide today is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is under our Victorian *Constitution Act* but also under the standing orders of our Legislative Council. Therefore any information you provide today is protected by law; however, any comment repeated outside may not receive the same protection, and any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. All evidence, as you can see, is being recorded by Hansard, and you will receive a proof transcript of that. We encourage you to have a look at that and see if there are any corrections. Ultimately it will go up on the Committee's website, and obviously, as your submission will, it will form part of our Inquiry and, I very much suspect, our recommendations.

If you would like to give some opening remarks, and then we will open it up to the Committee Members. Thank you for making the time to see us.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** Thank you so much. First of all, good morning, respective panel members. As the Mayor of Greater Shepparton I welcome all of you to our region—and also thanks to Wendy, for always being a really strong voice for our region. I am joined by Kaye Thomson, who is the Director Community at Greater Shepparton City Council. We would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land which now comprises Greater Shepparton, and we pay our respects to their tribal elders past, present and future.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to make a written submission and for our presentation in today's hearing. As you know, Greater Shepparton is home to a vibrant and diverse community, located in the heart of regional Victoria approximately 160 to 200 kilometres to the north of Melbourne. It encompasses a central urbanised area, focused on Shepparton, Mooroopna and Kialla, and a number of smaller townships as well as extensive rural agricultural land, creating a broad range of contexts and needs. Now, with regards to the homelessness issue, let me start by saying that as the Mayor of Greater Shepparton I am worried and deeply concerned because of the extent of this problem in our municipality.

The issue is complex and pervasive, and it is clear from research and data on this topic that many long-term homeless people have other issues as well, such as ongoing care for medical conditions, addictions and mental health issues. It is said that homelessness is the most important marker of social exclusion, so naturally Greater Shepparton having one of the highest rates of homelessness in regional Victoria makes us very anxious. We are anxious that many of our community members may be left behind. Addressing homelessness and affordable housing is important for council's aspirations for healthy communities and a thriving economy that contributes to Greater Shepparton being an attractive and livable region, a regional city which is safe, and a harmonious place to live, work, learn and play. Council's ask of government advocacy document is here. It is *Creating the New Face of Regional Victoria*. It includes homelessness as one of the priority policy matters to be addressed. It is because those who are homeless are not forgotten and they are not left behind, so it is very much on our agenda.

I will now respond to the Committee's three main questions regarding what homelessness looks like in our region. Greater Shepparton has the highest level of homelessness in regional Victoria, estimated at 5.56 per cent per 1000. There are 355 persons identified as homeless, and when you also account for another 459 people who are marginally housed, that number rises to 12.6 per cent per 1000. As estimated, 3315 low-income households required affordable housing in 2016, with only 1564 of these households supported into social housing, and 1704 households were recorded as clients of homeless service providers in Greater Shepparton in 2018–19. Of these homeless people we have seen that 61.3 per cent were female, 41.8 per cent were single and 23.1 per cent were single-parent families. Talking about age, 59.3 per cent were aged between 26 and 45 years old. With respect to their cultural background, 89.7 per cent were born in Australia and 27.8 per cent identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

The Committee will have heard so many statistics around homelessness of course. Community consultation and personal experiences have also provided these examples. In Greater Shepparton I will tell you what homelessness looks like. Homelessness looks like families sleeping in tents on the riverbanks in winters. Homelessness looks like people sleeping in council-owned bike lockers. Homelessness looks like kids dropping out of school, living with unknown and unsafe people, not having enough food and developing mental health conditions. Homelessness also looks like women staying in situations of domestic violence because they have no alternative. Homelessness looks like grandmothers with walkers sleeping in cars. Homelessness looks like futility after having more than 20 rental applications knocked back despite having a good rental history interstate. Also homeless look like fear, violence and discrimination for too many of our residents.

Now, you have asked what is the scale of our problem that we are facing. Council has been preparing its affordable housing strategy, as we have mentioned, over the last 12 months, with the first stage and the first broad research across the municipality finding that homelessness and related issues of housing insecurity are widespread and pervasive. The causes of acute homelessness are complex, as we all know, often arising through the cumulative effects of deeper issues such as domestic and family violence, mental health, addiction and relationship breakdowns. These are increasingly also the effects of homelessness, hence there is a vicious cycle.

In Greater Shepparton there is an unemployment rate of 4.7 per cent, youth disengagement of 30 per cent and almost twice the number of young people leaving school before year 11—that is, 20 per cent—compared to the Victorian average of 10 per cent. That is part of our story. We also have one of the largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations outside metropolitan Melbourne, who are twice as likely to be renting and half as likely to own their homes. We also have the largest multicultural population in regional Victoria. New arrivals have significant difficulty in acquiring and maintaining secure housing, though evidence is anecdotal. We also have an above-state-average rate of family violence. Family violence, according to the commission's report, is the number one reason for women to become homeless. The fastest growing group of homeless people are older women, who may have raised families, completed tertiary education, held well-paid jobs but who retire with less superannuation. Our figures are understood to be understated. There is an increasing number of people who feel that asking for help is futile, with those on the Victorian Housing Register waiting as much as 10 or 15 years to be placed. Our research also identified an at-risk level of housing need. So we have 2716 low-income households in housing stress.

In the longer term we have substantial issues arising through the built form. The mismatch of housing size and type to the housing needs of our people is adding to the problem. For example, 25 per cent of our households are single person but only 3 per cent of our housing stock is one bedroom. So people are forced to pay higher housing costs due to shortages of suitable housing stock—again, precipitating heightened vulnerability to homelessness. Housing is a fundamental need, so our whole municipality feels the effects of the loss of productivity and lack of participation and potential as people are reduced to the pursuit of such a basic need.

Homelessness impacts on our economy. Residents have less discretionary spending. Reduced spending equates to, of course, reduced viability of businesses and empty shops in the CBD, compounding perceptions of disadvantage for our region. We have difficulty in filling key employment roles, such as staffing our new hospital development, as people are reluctant to move to Greater Shepparton or cannot find appropriate housing, reducing the feasibility of essential services. Homelessness also impacts on children. Moving frequently develops a pattern of vulnerability in later life as well as having poor health and education outcomes in the present. We have seen in our region we have increased vulnerabilities when we look at the AEDC data.

So how do we end homelessness? Well, some housing issues are inevitable. We understand that, but rapid and effective responses prevent accumulation of the problems. Greater Shepparton City Council is focusing on the Housing First approach, exemplified in Finland, which has the only declining homelessness rate in the European Union, as we all know, falling by one-third between 2008 and 2016. As the name suggests, Housing First provides stable accommodation as a starting point, reinstating a degree of control and choice by enabling people to live successfully in the community and encouraging improvements to health and wellbeing and social integration—all of that. A dwelling becomes the foundation on which the rest of their life is put back together, so it is easier to focus on solving other problems with a secure roof. There are several key contextual differences, however, that inhibit the application of the Finnish model to Greater Shepparton. Approximately 76 per cent of housing stock in Helsinki is comprised of townhouses and apartments, in contrast to us, where we have a dispersed nature of the three- and four-bedroom houses that comprise a similar proportion of housing

stock in our municipality. Of course nor does Australia operate under the same principles of governance and provide the same social support programs, so there is a difference. Further, in Greater Shepparton cultural understandings that regard housing as an investment are entrenched. Fundamentally they conflict with the requirements for affordability.

So council's approach includes a few things: number one, focus on providing shelter as a minimum. Even a small secure space can make a world of difference. This means increasing both crisis accommodation and long-term options to reduce vulnerability. Number two is advocacy to institute mandatory inclusionary zoning, which would ensure a number of affordable housing dwellings in new developments to motivate innovation. Number three is advocacy for funding. Although legislative changes have charged council with facilitating affordable housing, funding remains limited. Accordingly, council will continue to advocate strongly for external funding. The strategy has been developed to address a range of ways in which council can encourage broader provision of affordable housing.

We have a disappointment, though. Despite the demonstrated level of homelessness in Greater Shepparton, council is extremely concerned that other regional centres with both lower prevalence of homelessness and better, safer index scores have been prioritised for funding allocations before Greater Shepparton as recently as in October 2018. Funding from the State and Federal level is critical to make a significant impact on reducing homelessness in our region.

Of course homelessness is ended when a person acquires a secure home and the power and dignity to make their own choices, so Greater Shepparton needs more affordable houses. Our ask is to provide funding for a ladder of housing options with an innovative variety of housing types at each step. It motivates aspiration for improvement and the belief that this is achievable. Some of those options include crisis housing, short-term emergency rooming house-model programs or longer term transportable housing model programs; and BeyondHousing, a domestic violence escape model. Another option includes offsetting housing costs by cohousing, like the foyer model for youth—such a successful model. The same model can be used for other specific cohorts, such as older women. And of course there are common equity models. Then subsidised rental and ownership is another approach, whereby we are asking to support programs such as shared equity, first homebuyers and all that.

Now, ending homelessness requires some elements to achieve maximum efficacy, and these elements include the promotion of community involvement and partnerships to increase local resilience and the provision of additional programs and support workers to ensure people get the help that they need managing poverty, drug and alcohol addiction, mental health issues and family violence. So it is a very holistic approach that is needed. Raise the Newstart payment to allow the most vulnerable people the dignity of being able to rent a property, feed their children and keep their children in education, which is so important, and increase training and job opportunities that break the cycle of poverty and reinstate pride and health. So they are some of the approaches. Thank you so much for giving us the time today. Happy to take any questions. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Seema, and thank you, Kaye. Thank you for your presentation but also for your very well-rounded submission that you provided for us. Lots of questions came to mind last night when I was re-reading it, but I will open it up to other people first. Rod, would you like to kick off today?

**Mr BARTON:** Yes, thank you. Housing First is a very interesting model, and I think it is a very positive model. If we get that bit first—keep them in their homes—we will deal with the other issues as we go along. From a council point of view, mandatory housing, have you got a view on what sort of—not mandatory housing.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** Inclusive.

**Mr BARTON:** Inclusive housing, yes. Have you got a number in your head that you would like to see happening in this area? Because as I drove in yesterday—and I had not come up the highway that way for a little while—all the new homes I saw going up coming in from Melbourne are by a very good local builder up here, a rural and regional builder. I can imagine you do want to see some compulsory affordable housing built into all these models, and have you got a view on what that number should be?

**Cr ABDULLAH:** Yes, definitely a view that it needs to be mandatory because that is what is going to make developers do it. At the moment, despite all our efforts and incentives and motivations, we are not getting that

result. In terms of what numbers, perhaps that needs a bit more review because the end outcome that we are trying to achieve is to close the gap. So in terms of the specific numbers, perhaps Kaye, you have some more information. But at this stage it is about making it mandatory and then we go from there and then we work out the numbers. Because once it is there, then perhaps we will have the power.

**Mr BARTON:** Just before Kaye answers that question, can I ask you: how many new homes were built in the Shepparton region in the last 12 months? Do you know that number?

**Cr ABDULLAH:** I do not have that handy, but we can get it for you.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you would be great. Thank you.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** As you have seen yourself, development is happening—lots of development—but I think there is nothing in terms of low-density houses.

**Mr BARTON:** But it creates an opportunity.

**Ms THOMSON:** It does.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** It does—definitely.

**Ms THOMSON:** I think you could choose a number and you could fill those houses very quickly. I think what we are keen to have is this as an ongoing process. We were involved in a development in Mooroopna, and we did get some Federal funding to assist with inclusionary planning for that development. I think around 50 houses were built, and BeyondHousing was a partner in that project. So they filled those homes really quite quickly. They used a model where they salted and peppered the low-income houses in amongst the development.

**Mr BARTON:** That is right; we do not want to build ghettos.

**Ms THOMSON:** It has worked and it has been very successful. We can actually show an example of how it has worked. I think with any of our developments we could show any developer that we have had an example of where it has worked so that we could perhaps downgrade any fear they may have in taking on that type of development. We could say, 'We'd love 700 new houses', but we could fill them really quite quickly. So I think the number—

**Ms LOVELL:** We would still have 597 families waiting on a waiting list.

**Ms THOMSON:** That is it. I think if we can understand that each development had an opportunity, then that would be a good flow-on effect for the people of Greater Shepparton.

**Ms LOVELL:** I am sure you were here before when I read in the social housing waiting list numbers of 1297 families now, an increase of over 116 per cent over the last five years. What advocacy have you had or what engagement have you had with the State Government about delivering more social housing in Shepparton? One of the things that I have a concern about with inclusionary zoning is that that is just cost shifting from the State to the private developers and will actually drive up the cost of private housing in Shepparton as well, and it is letting the State Government off the hook. So what advocacy have you had or what engagement have you had with the State Government around increasing the public housing properties here in Shepparton?

**Cr ABDULLAH:** Yes, you go first, and then I will refer to the advocacy document.

**Ms THOMSON:** In the 2018–19 budget we actually wrote to Richard Wynne just expressing our concern that we were not party to the opportunity of \$208 million—wasn't it?—for 1000 houses.

**Ms LOVELL:** Yes, 1000 new homes, but the only ones in country Victoria were in Bendigo and Ballarat.

**Ms THOMSON:** Bendigo and Ballarat. We did write to Richard Wynne and just said that our statistics show that that was very disappointing for us to miss out on that opportunity. We always partner with BeyondHousing when we write those letters so that Celia and the team at BeyondHousing are very aware of

what we are advocating for. We got a reply letter from Richard Wynne saying that we have not been forgotten, but no promises. That is sort of where it sat. But we also have the advocacy document, so Seema can talk about that.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** So, as I was mentioning before, this is our advocacy document ask of Government, *Creating the New Face of Regional Victoria*. Obviously it has lots of our priority infrastructure projects. But this time around we have also included social policies, and homelessness is one of them, with the title of ‘Leaving no-one behind’, because that is our focus, that is our emphasis. What we are saying here in our ask is that council will continue to advocate for and support the specialist service providers in Greater Shepparton and is currently asking the Victorian Government to provide funding for at least 20 new public housing properties in the Greater Shepparton local government area; also further increased Housing Establishment Fund money to be allocated to BeyondHousing to enable them to meet the demand for crisis accommodation; and further support and resourcing for essential homelessness services and broader prevention measures. These have been very explicitly highlighted so they are not forgotten and are visible. It is definitely here. We have sent this advocacy document to nearly all the members of Parliament and ministers. That is the message that we are continuously relaying.

**Ms THOMSON:** I think we also are very keen to continue our networking within our local space. We participate in the Hume Region Homelessness Network, but we have strong partnerships with BeyondHousing, Rumbalara housing, SalvoCare, the Bridge Youth Service, VincentCare and Wintringham Housing. So we want to be well informed by those that are front and centre in this space, and we want to be able to—

**The CHAIR:** You are not the provider.

**Ms THOMSON:** Yes. I was just talking to Melanie from the Bridge Youth Service about how we can help them with their COSS program. It sounds very exciting. Advocacy is what we can do, and we speak to our local politicians and our State and Federal Members a lot. So the more knowledge we have the better we can advocate.

**Ms VAGHELA:** You mentioned that your focus is on the Housing First approach. Through that I understand you provide stable accommodation and all the other things that you mentioned. You own three- or four-bedroom houses. How many houses does the council own?

**Cr ABDULLAH:** We do not own. What I meant was that here in Greater Shepparton we have a shortage of low-density houses, so one-bedroom houses. How do we bring that housing stock into the market so that it is available, so that we can follow the model? That is where it is.

**Ms VAGHELA:** So the service that you provide is through the private organisation or the other housing service providers?

**Cr ABDULLAH:** Yes. We are not directly providing.

**Ms VAGHELA:** How does it work? You do not directly get involved?

**Cr ABDULLAH:** No. We do not have any council houses, we do not provide direct housing services, but we support the organisations that provide these services.

**Ms VAGHELA:** But you are looking for 20 new houses? Is that what you are mentioning for the record?

**Cr ABDULLAH:** That is in our ask-of-government document, yes. We have mentioned that the Victorian Government provide funding for at least—that is a starting argument—

**Ms THOMSON:** And that is on behalf of BeyondHousing.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** Yes.

**Ms VAGHELA:** Okay. So the data that you are providing is on the basis of the other service providers or private organisations?

**Cr ABDULLAH:** Yes; that is right.

**Ms MAXWELL:** I love the way you have done the graph for the main reasons for presenting. As we know and as we have continued to hear from other people who have presented, homelessness is not just about housing, and you have certainly identified that in this graph. I think it would be absolutely remiss of us as a Committee to overlook the factors that are contributing to homelessness. I think that is a very important part. So given that and given some of the numbers that you have got here, and domestic and family violence is something that continues to come up in our conversations, do you as a council have roundtable conversations with all the organisations—whether it is mental health; I know that you do provide funding for some organisations within—so that this can be looked at from a holistic approach? What is your process as a shire around that?

**Ms THOMSON:** Like every council, we have a municipal public health and wellbeing plan. We actually call ours the health strategy. We have a working group that meets monthly, and 30 organisations come to those meetings and they cover the complexity of all social issues within Shepparton. Our health and wellbeing plan talks about all the wellness indicators, and having a roof over your head is certainly one of the high indicators of wellness, and then the rest follow after that. We meet on a regular basis, so we do believe—

**Cr ABDULLAH:** Our partnerships are very strong in that area, and also they talk about our Best Start Early Years partnership, because this issue is also impacting our early childhood data and the outcomes for our children. So one thing that is very heartwarming for me personally is that the community, all agencies and stakeholders work together in a partnership, so that engagement is definitely there.

**Ms THOMSON:** And we certainly understand that having a roof over your head is one thing, but like the foyer, I think that is one of the success points of it. It wraps around the young person; it is not just about having somewhere to stay. They have a wraparound service and they have somebody that they can go to, someone to help them with life skills, someone to help them with a part-time job, someone to make sure they stay in schooling—so that wraparound service.

If I can just tell you a little story about a young lady that was living in one of the bike lockers at the back of our building. Only a couple of weeks ago my team and I had a chat to her. Now, this young lady had travelled here by bus and went to a funeral—from a Yorta Yorta family—and she had got herself involved with some people that lived here and got back into a little drug scene and ended up living in our bike locker for a number of nights. We have good connections with both SalvoCare and BeyondHousing, so we were able to put her in touch with a few people. Eventually she had an appointment to go into crisis care. She got a taxi voucher that brought her back to the office, picked up her belongings and she went into crisis care. But she did talk to us about the fact that she has been in and out of crisis care because of her drug issues and that the wraparound services are not quite there just yet for her. I hope, and my team all hoped, that this time she may make some other decisions. But the complexity of her circumstances is vast, and those of us that do have a chat to people who do end up living at our back doorstep—and we all do; my team, the community team, is probably the first that start to try and put some services in place for the people that we find at our back doorstep—understand the complexity of how her life circumstances have brought her to this point.

We talk about lots of houses, and we need lots of houses, but we also need those wraparound services, and those wraparound services need to be very patient because this is not a one episode fix. It takes a long time to bring somebody back into feeling good about themselves, wanting to maintain the roof over their head and then looking for a job.

**The CHAIR:** And it is much easier to do that when you have got a safe roof over your head, rather than trying to deal with that while you are living in a bike locker. I was really interested in some of the areas around planning. I thought it was very interesting how, when you were doing your portable strategy, you thought you would be going down one direction, which was to work with the developers, realised that that was not going to give you the scale that you needed, so you started looking at other areas.

You talked about the three- and four-bedroom stock that you have got here, that you actually need that smaller stock, that one- and two-bedroom. Now, can council do anything about that in directing it in some of your planning regulations, and are you?

**Cr ABDULLAH:** That is why it is important, that inclusionary zoning, because we try to give all kinds of incentives and all, but we have not got the results. So in terms of legislation, I am not sure. I do not think so. My understanding is that—

**The CHAIR:** I am thinking more of some of that densification too, where you can put more suitable housing on some of those bigger house blocks.

**Ms THOMSON:** In talking to the planning team, they tried influence, but they can only influence. They can only say, ‘We do have a shortage of this, this and this’, but the developer might say, ‘The best bang for our buck is to build the standard four-bedroom property’, because that gives it saleability or it futureproofs the sale of the house. So our team do talk about what the need is, but we can only influence. We cannot force.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** We cannot force, because it is not mandatory.

**Ms LOVELL:** But you can put it into your local planning scheme.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** We have not looked at this as an option.

**Ms THOMSON:** At the moment it has not come up as an option.

**Ms LOVELL:** It is possible for councils to include that.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** We will note it down. We are still waiting to finalise our affordable housing strategy, and of course lots of recommendations and ideas will come out of that. So we will make a note of that.

**The CHAIR:** You also noted, ‘Promotion and protection of developers’ interests discourages the construction of needed housing stock’, and I think that is going back to that one- and two-bedroom. ‘Promotion and protection of developers’ interests’, which I thought were really interesting words, and I wonder if you could maybe expand on what you were meaning there.

**Ms THOMSON:** I think it is a little bit about what we have just been discussing, that those that are building houses for the rental market or for on-sale believe that their best market is for the family-type home. So until we can convince them otherwise that is where their thought processes are.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** Yes, it is the challenge.

**The CHAIR:** So you cannot say, ‘We’ll expand that’. Just one quick question. There was ‘Explore a reduction in planning application fees for public housing providers’; could you do that now?

**Ms THOMSON:** We cannot reduce statutory fees, but we can reduce local government fees.

**The CHAIR:** Is that something?

**Cr ABDULLAH:** Something that can be looked at, can be considered.

**Ms THOMSON:** Once the document is finally presented to the councillors, all of these things will then come back to council.

**The CHAIR:** Great. And that is coming in in—

**Cr ABDULLAH:** April, hopefully.

**Ms THOMSON:** We have tabled a final document, but we are just trying to make some final changes with the consultant. So it has been written by a consultant before it goes up to council, and we hope that will be in April.

**Ms VAGHELA:** I will just go back to the mandatory legislation for the developers to have affordable housing in their development. What proportion of that would be an ideal? Would there be any percentage that you would think would be good? Wendy mentioned about the cost and everything, because basically you are passing the cost. If the developer is doing that, then the purchaser is probably going to pay higher costs for that.

But in case it becomes mandatory legislation, what do you think would be a percentage? Is it like 5 per cent of the development that happens? What sort of percentage?

**Ms THOMSON:** The Mooroopna development was somewhere between 5 and 10. It is quite small.

**The CHAIR:** You also mentioned—it was very interesting—as an opportunity, looking at:

The release of a framework of potential actions and/or resources to accompany the amendment to ‘facilitate affordable housing’ in the Planning and Environment Act ...

You say that the opportunity would be to provide more information and resources to council in this area, so not ‘reinventing the wheel’. I am just wondering what sort of resources and information you would like from the Government in that regard. It said:

Council officers estimate that development of the Greater Shepparton Affordable Housing Strategy could have been expedited by 4–6 months through the availability of additional resources and information.

**Ms THOMSON:** That is the development of the strategy.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. So they are saying, ‘We could have done that a lot quicker if we’d had more resources’. I wonder—maybe take it on notice if you would like—if you could maybe elaborate on what those resources were that would have assisted in that.

**Ms THOMSON:** We had to apply for a grant to get the money to develop this strategy. And because we have our planning team busy doing planning processes, to take anyone away from your day-to-day planning processes is a resource that we do not have. We had to apply for some money, a grant, to actually develop this and then employ a contractor to help us develop this document. So I think that is what—

**Cr ABDULLAH:** That is what, in terms of resources, we meant here.

**The CHAIR:** Resources and information.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** And had it come earlier or had it been even sort of easier, things would have been expedited.

**The CHAIR:** Right; yes. So the application process was difficult.

**Ms THOMSON:** I think we have failed a couple of times.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** Yes, I was going to say that I have felt that.

**The CHAIR:** You were not successful in getting the grant.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** I could speak for longer, but I know we are running out of time. Thank you so much. Again, it was really interesting. What I noticed is that Shepparton seems to have double of everything or half of everything.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** That is a good way of putting it.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. It certainly is an epicentre. Your submission has greatly provided us with some really good evidence and information.

**Ms THOMSON:** I think we have high need, but we also have high energy to improve.

**The CHAIR:** That is right.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** And the commitment.

**Ms THOMSON:** And commitment.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, and I think everyone seems really willing to do things differently.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** That is right.

**Ms THOMSON:** The service providers that you are hearing from today all have high aspiration for change.

**The CHAIR:** I know. It has really been wonderful listening to them and meeting them. Thank you very much. As I said, you will receive a draft of the transcript of today, so please correct anything we got wrong there.

**Cr ABDULLAH:** Thank you so much, and thanks once again for the opportunity. Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**