

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Melbourne—Tuesday, 23 June 2020

Hearing via videoconference

MEMBERS

Ms Fiona Patten—Chair

Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

Ms Jane Garrett

Ms Wendy Lovell

Ms Tania Maxwell

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

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

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Lee Tarlamis

WITNESSES

Ms Elizabeth Thomas, Chief Executive Officer, and

Mr Sean Quigley, Manager, Dandenong Homelessness Services, Wayss.

The CHAIR: I would just like to declare the Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria open again, and a very warm welcome to Liz Thomas and Sean Quigley from Wayss.

Just a little bit of housekeeping before we start. Can I just let you know that all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is under our *Constitution Act* but also under the standing orders of the Legislative Council. Therefore this means that the information that you provide to the hearing is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside may not have the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee could be considered a contempt of Parliament.

Again, thank you so much for coming today. Obviously, given my announcement earlier, we are broadcasting this—so welcome to everyone who is watching at home—and we are also recording it. Hansard is there. They will take a very accurate transcript of the proceedings, and we will send that to you in the next little while. I encourage you to have a look at it and make sure that we have not mistaken anything that you have said. Ultimately that will then end up on the committee's website, that transcript. So if you would like to make some opening comments first, and then we will open it up for discussion with the committee.

Ms THOMAS: Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, everyone. Let me begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet. I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

Wayss is the largest provider of homelessness and family violence services and transitional housing in the southern Melbourne area. It is a service area that is the most culturally diverse community in Australia, with 157 different languages and 70 per cent of our community speaking a language other than English at home. Each year, Wayss provides crisis response services to more than 15 000 highly vulnerable people in our local community. Crisis response is what we do at Wayss. We have been doing it in our area for more than 50 years—we are sick of it.

That is why we welcome this opportunity to make a genuine contribution to an important discussion into ending homelessness, and we sincerely welcome the chance to be a part of a meaningful dialogue to identify sustainable solutions to ending homelessness. The impact of COVID-19 on homelessness is exacerbating what for Wayss was already a challenging situation. From April to May this year we have responded to almost 1000 more inquiries for our homelessness services. In increasing numbers we bear witness to stories of homelessness that extend beyond the stereotype. We meet older women experiencing homelessness for the first time in their lives, and we are meeting families who are homeless with up to nine children. Compared to the same time last year, in May we supported almost 100 families escaping family violence. The underlying challenge during the pandemic and afterwards remains: what needs to be done to create sustainable solutions to ending homelessness?

Thank you for the opportunity to highlight what we believe to be a number of matters for your consideration. In our area we believe in the first instance we need to develop more appropriate housing options. Rising property and rental prices and an unprecedented population boom have impacted heavily on our region. The trends have placed pressure on all forms of housing and especially on secure housing options for low-income and vulnerable households. Within the outer south-east suburbs if it is not just a matter of a lack of affordable housing, it is also a lack of appropriate housing for young people and people living on their own. There is a chronic shortage of affordable one- and two-bedroom properties, and quite simply rooming houses and caravan parks are not sustainable or suitable housing options for vulnerable older women and young people.

The second suggestion we have is for inclusionary zoning. Across the local government areas of Dandenong, Casey and Cardinia there is a distinct lack of diverse affordable housing that reflects the needs of the local community. We contend that local councils can play an important role in ensuring housing stocks are built into new developments within their municipalities. We support incentive-based inclusionary zoning for new housing developments, and we propose that if 10 to 20 per cent of properties in new developments were set

aside and purpose-built for social housing, it would make significant inroads into addressing the affordable housing shortage.

We truly believe in the need to foster collaboration and partnerships. The blight of homelessness is to our collective shame, and it will not be resolved through working in isolation. We believe the days of government funding going to community service organisations as their one-step approach to ending homelessness are gone. Creating sustainable and affordable longer term housing strategies is a whole-of-community responsibility. It relies on genuine collaboration between all levels of government, the business and community sectors, philanthropic and social investors and our local community. Wayss manages the Main Street Project, an example of the possible, that has created 10 purpose-built townhouses for women and children surviving family violence. It is a collaboration of the local council, a philanthropic donor, a private developer and two specialist community service providers, who have all worked together to create permanent affordable housing with onsite family support services to address the trauma these families have experienced in enduring years of family violence. The collaboration has now expanded to the local community, and we have developed partnerships with a local hairdresser who has supported the installation of playground equipment at Main Street and a school that is ready to embrace the Main Street families, and importantly those children, with increased access to education and mentoring support.

Wayss also supports purpose-built registered rooming houses with wraparound support services as a permanent affordable housing option for some members of our community. For many people rooming houses represent affordable and sustainable housing, and yet the people who live there are often our forgotten people. Wayss has taken the initiative recently to partner with the City of Casey to actively support tenants in rooming houses through our mutually funded assertive outreach program. The program responds to what we have identified as a need to provide rooming house tenants with support to address the issues that led them to access homelessness services in the first place. Tenants are supported to engage with primary health services and to develop independent living skills, reintegrate with their families and even access community work, education and training opportunities.

The other partnership we have recently had a lot of success with is the headleasing with private landlords. We have achieved significant success with over 30 headleases and strongly support their continued expansion as a means of supporting vulnerable people to access the private rental market. Under a headlease, tenants who may struggle to even get an interview with a real estate agent have under the banner of Wayss been able to access that private rental property market with a staged rental. It starts at 33 per cent, it moves to 66 per cent and ultimately, at the end of the 12-month lease, to the full rent, and the tenant is encouraged and supported to take over the rental lease in their own name. It is an access to independence that simply has not been available, and we do not believe that public housing is the only option that should be available for people in need of housing.

The fourth option we sincerely promote is the need to focus on sustaining housing. We believe it is not just a matter of getting people housed—that cannot be our key outcome; it is about getting people housed and keeping them housed. We are committed to the concept of congregate and scattered-site supportive housing based on a Housing First approach. Case-managed support, including financial brokerage, provides a valuable first step to people who need to access homelessness support entry points and significantly increases the opportunity of a sustained tenancy. A discerning approach to support can disrupt the cycle of homelessness, and we regard the combination of housing and support to be a crucial piece in the key to disrupting homelessness. In conclusion, we believe there is currently a significant opportunity and impetus for a housing-led economic recovery that can be of substantial and lasting benefit to the health and wellbeing of our local community. Wayss looks forward to bringing the benefit of our local experience to the discussion, and we very much welcome the interest of the committee members. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Liz and Sean. It is great work that Wayss has been doing, and it certainly sounds like you have found some very effective solutions that are working. I was interested in your comments around rooming houses. I suppose I am conscious that this southern area has more rooming houses than anywhere else in Victoria, from what we are hearing. The idea of a purpose-built rooming house—who does that suit? Is that sort of another word for supported accommodation? And are you looking at this as transitional housing, or still as crisis housing?

Ms THOMAS: I will ask Sean in a moment to comment. Sean manages our intake and assessment program, and rooming houses, we believe, are in some situations an option for permanent supported housing. Sean, would you like to elaborate?

Mr QUIGLEY: Absolutely, Liz. Thank you. Look, I think, in its current form, COVID-19 has let us know that the design is not the answer. However, purpose-built, regulated, well-designed rooming houses with support do have a vital role to play in accommodating people, especially those people who are priced out of the private rental market and are going to be on a long wait list for public housing. Predominantly we are talking about probably recurring homeless single males—40-plus, multiple complex needs, very challenging behaviours at times—and their access to the service system has been restrictive over many years. They fall through the gaps, and there are a raft of reasons around that. It is around alcohol and drugs, mental health and antisocial behaviour. So we need to acknowledge that, and they do require referrals for those wraparound support services.

However, you know, we believe that there is an opportunity with support—as long as they are purpose built. In their current form, you know, there are 89 rooming houses roughly in the City of Greater Dandenong and less than 10 per cent are purpose built. They are usually converted existing dwellings, which are not ideal. There are shared bathroom facilities and laundry facilities. Everything is shared, which is not ideal. You know, ideally we would want to build something that is purpose built with an ensuite, your bedroom, and possibly the only shared facilities would be the main living areas.

The CHAIR: We certainly heard from Launch earlier today just commenting on some of the rough sleepers being housed in hotels as opposed to rooming houses and the quite dramatic improvement in those people's wellbeing from being in a place with their own bathroom and feeling much safer. I will move on to some of the other committee members.

Dr KIEU: Thank you for your presentation and your submission today. You are dealing with homelessness, particularly in family violence. Particularly during the COVID pandemic there are a lot of issues with family violence because people have to stay together and field all the issues as well. So just very quickly, have you seen a surge in the need for housing because of family violence, and is it localised or identified in some particular communities—that could be ethnic, it could be otherwise—in your experience with dealing with the people who are seeking refuge and a place to stay because of the family violence that has occurred to them?

Ms THOMAS: Sean, do you want to take that one from IAP?

Mr QUIGLEY: Look, from an IAP perspective there is no doubt during COVID there has been an increase in motels across the board—300 per cent from the corresponding period from last year. So from March through to May we had a 300 per cent increase in people in motels, and look, there is a vast range of reasons why that is the case. We are not using rooming houses as an exit point—that is one of the reasons. There have been restrictions around viewing private rental properties, definitely an increase in family violence reported and an increase in job losses, so all that has contributed. Our L17 referrals have increased from the corresponding period from last year, and there has been higher complexity of family violence cases. The risk factors are more complex as well, and by 14 per cent, under COVID, alcohol has increased as well. So that is another reason that has contributed to the rise in reports of family violence.

Ms THOMAS: Can I just add to that? I think one of the things we have seen during COVID, as Sean mentioned, is an increased complexity in family violence. So we are seeing it is not just partner-to-partner, but it is siblings towards siblings, it is children towards parents and it is a form of elder abuse as well. And the other general observation we would make is that in many cases the violence is more sustained, which is all adding to the trauma and the complexity of the response.

One of the things I think we need to be careful of during the pandemic is the benefit that motels have provided, because ultimately it has been very challenging for us to provide support to people living in motels, and that is what I talked about before. It is getting people housed, dealing with their trauma and then supporting them to stay housed and that is very difficult in a motel situation. One of the things that is worth highlighting is that Ways manages the two crisis centres for the whole of the Casey-Cardinia and Greater Dandenong areas. So that is a population of over 600 000 and we have 18 crisis units available for families. There are eight rooms in

our women's refuge and 10 rooms in our emergency youth accommodation service. Our first response is always for the woman and her children to remain in the family home if that is at all possible. If they—

Mr QUIGLEY: Sorry, Liz, just on that, I was going to say it is also worth mentioning that we know the devastating effects family violence has on the family unit but, as we know, the perpetrator is also displaced. So we will see the perpetrator come to the access point seeking alternative accommodation also, which just compounds the complexity of the situation.

Dr KIEU: The state government in particular has put some substantial investment into housing, but of course there has not been sufficient to satisfy the demand. Going forward, the federal government has also tried to invest in housing recovery but in a very different form—renovation rather than building new houses. Rooming houses, for example, are not suitable for families. The shared facilities of the environment may definitely not be suitable for children and families. So I commend your efforts in getting headleases. But then how would you say you could improve the uptake of either the owners or the sectors getting more involved in headleasing to organisations like yours so that you then can help people who by themselves individually cannot get that lease?

Ms THOMAS: I think we probably approached headleasing when we first became involved in it last year with rose-coloured glasses and underestimated the need for a cultural shift amongst real estate agents and amongst landlords. In the first instance, to be frank, we really saw private landlords seeing us as an opportunity to cut out real estate agents and property management fees and so direct leased to Wayss. That was not the model we chose to pursue. After that initial hiccup we looked at really working a lot more closely with real estate agents and educating them about the benefit of a headlease with an organisation like Wayss so that the landlord had the security—so Wayss is the landlord—and an ongoing rental arrangement where someone was supported to maintain the tenancy. It was a real struggle to fill our 15 initial headleases—it took us probably twice as long as we thought it would. But ultimately we focused on developing relationships with local real estate agents who understood what this was about and understood the concept. So my view in relation to what we can do is that I think we now need to work at promoting this relatively new concept to the market as an opportunity for people to access the private rental market and educate real estate agents, educate landlords and educate local government authorities on the need to promote this to their ratepayers as well.

Mr QUIGLEY: Absolutely, and further to that, Liz, we do have an arrangement with the City of Greater Dandenong in regards to the headlease properties where they will send out a notice to all their ratepayers and encourage them, if they have a property that is vacant and would like to help out the community and address homeless issues, to contact Wayss and see where we can go from there. So that is a good arrangement we have as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Yes, we certainly heard from Ashish at the City of Greater Dandenong about the activation there. It sounds very innovative.

Mr TARLAMIS: Just following up on that same area of questioning, have you thought about approaching any of the other municipalities in the region, like Casey, Frankston or Mornington, about similar approaches to their ratepayers to look for interested people that might want to participate in that program as well, or is that something you are not ready for at this stage?

Ms THOMAS: We have now successfully filled our second headlease program, working in collaboration with Casey council, with the opportunity for them to fund as a part of their response to homelessness in their region a headleasing program. So I think with headleasing, Lee, we can actually go from strength to strength, and there is an economy of scale for us as well. We understand the pitfalls. What we did with that first program is we looked at what went wrong, what we could learn from that. Certainly we see there is an opportunity to expand into other areas, and I think there is also an opportunity or a danger with a new initiative that if you go too quickly, too fast, and it fails, it affects not only this program but the next one like it. So we are taking baby steps, and I think if we can get another success in Casey then that is something that we really want to own in our local municipality as being good property managers. It is that collaboration model again. It is not about cutting out local real estate agents. It is not about ripping properties out of the private rental market. It is supporting tenants to gain the skills of tenancy and then move on to an independent tenancy.

Mr TARLAMIS: Are there any additional things that would assist you in rolling out that program?

Ms THOMAS: One of the things we have done is as part of our headlease agreement we use our contracted gardening services as a sale point to the landlord and say, 'We'll maintain the garden'. That is part of Wayss' contribution. We tried to think of what we could do to get these landlords over the line. So I think that is trying to be creative in thinking of what might appeal to more of these properties coming into the market. We also, as Wayss has rebuilt over the last couple of years, are now attracting more philanthropic donations, and one of the things we are exploring is the opportunity of combining all of our discretionary donations—so they range from \$1000 from a local club to one we received for \$30 000 today—into a Wayss-managed headlease program, because I think crisis accommodation, transitional accommodation, is fine but it is permanent accommodation people need. That is what I mean about we are sick of being in a crisis situation. Headleases: if we can provide sustainable at least 12-month housing—Main Street, because that was not reliant on DHHS funding, we were able to move beyond a transitional housing model, and the families living at Main Street have a two-year lease. That is what I mean. For me, partnerships and collaboration open up the opportunities for creative problem-solving.

Mr QUIGLEY: I think Liz is right on that. We want to try and avoid the revolving door. All the strong evidence will say that once people are in secure housing they can start addressing those issues that have contributed to their homelessness or being at risk of homelessness. And it sits across multiple sectors, not just the housing sector; it is the alcohol and drugs, the mental health, the primary health services, the justice system. So it is about getting that cross-sector design and working, as Liz said, collaboratively all together with the same goal.

Mr TARLAMIS: I just have one quick question a slightly different topic. It is to do with caravan parks, and I know you said that they are not really appropriate accommodation and you prefer not to utilise those. But I am just thinking in terms of the situation with longer term residents, because I know there are a large number of longer term residents that are in caravan parks, usually of an older age and lower income, and I know that there is a changing environment where a lot of those caravan parks are now closing down. Part of that is because the land value is going up and they are being redeveloped for other things. I guess that is an area of potential homelessness where we are not there yet—they are not homeless yet—but they are at risk of being homeless. Is there anyone doing any work in that space in terms of planning for what might happen down the track in terms of that?

Ms THOMAS: A couple of points, we do believe that caravan parks have a place in our community but we do not believe they are suitable for older women or young people. And in fact we have seen some of the older women accessing our homelessness services returning to couch surfing or sleeping in their cars rather than go to a rooming house. For me, the importance, Lee, is that sense of community, so if a caravan park can create a sense of community, we know that community and reduction in social isolation reduces the incidence of dementia. We know that meaningful use of time and a sense of belonging reduces antisocial behaviour. But we can build on that knowledge. Ideally what we would like to see—we have worked in this area, as I said initially, for 50 years. We know this community. Our clients live here, our staff live here. When something like the closure of a caravan park is planned we would like someone to bring us to the table at the beginning of the discussion, not the end, and I think that whatever we can do to be part of that—it is a side issue. We support incentive-based inclusion rezoning rather than mandatory inclusion rezoning. Because I do not want to have unwilling partners at the table, but if it is in the developer's best interest to come to Wayss and say, 'Listen, I can get a rate reduction if I get 20 per cent and the higher the number—what do I need to do?'. And we actually do have a developer, a local developer, Sienna Homes, who actively reaches out to us often to say, 'Tell us about Housing First. Tell us about wraparound support'. That is the way of the future.

Mr BARTON: Afternoon, Liz. I am just a bit curious about the headleases. I know it is very early days, but I love the idea of different horses for different courses and all that sort of thing. Just the success rate of keeping people in the home, because we know it is really important to try and keep them there, what was your sort of success rate? Were you achieving more than 50 per cent in that first-off?

Ms THOMAS: We started our first headlease program, Rod, in July-August last year, and we have had two experiences. One is we have just had our first tenant take over the lease successfully. What we are seeing is a significant reduction in rental arrears during the course of the headlease as well, and I think that is another great thing because Wayss has a vested interest in supporting the tenant to maintain their rental plans and establish a positive track record. That is the other thing that happens there.

Interestingly in another case that we are currently managing the landlord does not want the tenant to take over the lease. They want Wayss to continue the lease. And we are just trying to get our head around that one. Does that matter or not? Is the point to sustain the tenancy? What is the risk to Wayss if that happens?

Mr BARTON: And I guess, reading between the lines there, the owner of the property wants that security from Wayss.

Ms THOMAS: Yes.

Mr BARTON: That is it. And if the tenant is meeting their obligations, hopefully Wayss will say, 'Okay'.

Ms THOMAS: Well, that is it. That is what we are just trying to go through at the moment, as I said. Ideally what we would really like to see is collaborative discussion around this. We know that there are other organisations—we share our experience openly. We had one tenancy that did not go so well. We were more focused on: what could we have done differently? And from that one, just for your interest, what we observed was it is really important to fully explain to the tenant the purpose of the headlease program. It is not public housing. And so what we saw in some cases was people would want to break the lease fairly quickly, so it is explaining those concepts. I think we can do a lot more in education at the front end because all of us need to embrace new ways of viewing permanent housing options. So helping people understand there are more options than public housing, I think, is part of the puzzle.

Mr BARTON: Nice, like it.

Ms LOVELL: Liz, it is good to hear some of the innovative thinking around the ways that you are getting people into the private rental system et cetera. I was really interested in what you said about inclusionary zoning, because it is something that has come up a fair bit in our inquiry. But it is also something that does worry me—that it could be a cost shift away from governments providing the social housing to driving up house prices in local areas because developers are expected to provide that, but what you mentioned about local governments incentivising by rate reductions et cetera is a good way of getting the developers to do it of their own free will rather than making it an actual mandatory thing. I was just wondering if there were any other suggestions that you had, other than rate reductions, that would be incentives for developers to participate in it.

Ms THOMAS: When we did the Main Street Project—Cardinia council provided the land for that project, and that is where we first met Sienna Homes—that was the discussion we first had; they just were against inclusionary zoning, full stop, end of story—'Don't tell us what to do'. So that is where that started. I am really committed to the idea of, and we are really committed at Wayss to the concept of, partnerships—true partnerships—and what would make it in their best interest. I think we do have an opportunity at the moment, Wendy, where as a community—and Wayss is receiving more approaches for direct donations—people genuinely want to help. I do not think the community sector has some sort of monopoly on compassion. I think there are developers who want to do the right thing. We, as a sector, need to do more than ask them for a cheque. One of the things that we have spoken to that developer about—they were successful in getting a new development, and they wanted to include social housing in it and asked our view, and we said, 'Don't put them on the worst lots at the end of the street, all together. That's not what we're talking about'. Rates was just an immediate one that came to mind. Again I think it is a matter of bringing those local government community service providers and developers together to say, 'What would work for all of us?'.

One of the things we have been talking to Sienna Homes about was that I drive through those new developments down past Pakenham and Officer and all of those areas and see all of those four-bedroom houses cheek by jowl, and I think that often those families there are two years or four years away from being empty-nesters. What are we going to do then? We need to start thinking ahead to that extent. There is very little one- and two-bedroom accommodation in those areas. I would really like those councils to be talking about things like the ability to quickly adapt housing to move from four-bedroom to two-bedroom so that people can stay connected with their communities, because if they are not going to stay in those areas, where are they going to go and maintain connections with family?

Ms LOVELL: Yes. Innovation in that way can go the other way too. People do not have to start out with a five-bedroom house just because they are a young couple getting married. There can be designs where it is a two-bedroom house, but it has the capability to have build-ons that are cheap. So there are good ways to design things, but what was it that got Sienna Homes to change their minds?

Ms THOMAS: I just think through Main Street we built a really good partnership with them, and I have got a private-sector background. I got where they were coming from: they are a business. They are running a business and they need to make a profit, but they also want to look at opportunities to do well and do good. I think that, as a sector, it is up to us to make those suggestions rather than just demand them. I probably now speak to the managing director of that company once a month. I flick him opportunities I see come across that may not be directly beneficial to Wayss. We are looking at the opportunity now of developing a small rooming house for women—so potentially 10 to 12 rooms. I said, ‘Look, we’ve learnt through COVID: don’t do shared kitchens’. Make a shared meal an option, not a necessity. Do a small kitchenette and a small ensuite because—and Sean will attest to this—we had a devil of a job trying to maintain and protect the health and wellbeing of our tenants where those shared amenities are. I think that is one of the learnings we take forward.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Time is fast creeping upon us.

Ms VAGHELA: Thanks, Liz and Sean, for your time and submission. Liz, you mentioned about how over the past few months there was an increase in inquiries about safe housing—more inquiries. I just want to know whether those inquiries were new inquiries or the existing clients who are using the services, who are returning because of the pandemic?

Ms THOMAS: So Sean, do you want to—that is the thousand increase we had in IAP from April to May.

Mr QUIGLEY: Look, I guess it is a mix of both. We had quite a number, of an increase in people, who were presenting who had lost their employment at that point in time. We had people who were listening to the newspaper reports and hearing that they may be eligible for assistance, so there was an increase in those inquiries. Word got around that community services are providing motels, so people were ringing up and requesting motels. There was that element as well. So, look, it was a raft of reasons, and the main ones were around people losing employment, people presenting who were getting off the streets and people experiencing housing stress, unable to pay their rent. As Liz was saying before, we have seen an increase in single women 55-plus, which is a real shame. They have separated later in life. There has been a family breakdown, not necessarily family violence. They do not have a work history—no superannuation, and they find themselves homeless for the first time in their life. They are the fastest growing cohort in the country.

Ms THOMAS: With limited knowledge of how to access support systems as well. And particularly during the pandemic those women were often the most affected by the job losses, and their jobs will be the last to return as well.

The CHAIR: Sadly we have come to the end of our time. Thank you so much. Again, some really innovative work that you have exhibited here, but also some insights into how we make those changes work, and as you say, how we incentivise the private sector I think is crucial in finding solutions to this, so thank you very much. As I mentioned, you will receive a transcript of this session in a little while, and if you would not mind just having a look and making sure that we have not made any errors and that you are represented correctly, that would be great. Thank you very much, Sean, and thank you very much, Liz. We appreciate it.

Ms THOMAS: Thanks.

Mr QUIGLEY: Thanks.

Witnesses withdrew.