

# LOCAL GOVERNMENTS, ADVOCACY AND ENDING HOMELESSNESS

## Why does local government advocacy around homelessness matter?

Homelessness is increasingly an issue of strategic importance for local government. **Individually and collectively**, local councils have a key role to play in ending homelessness within their communities, for reasons which include:

- of all levels of government, councils are closest to the community they serve.
- councils have a deep understanding of the needs of their community, meaning they are well-placed to advocate for resource allocation and policy-making based on local priorities and needs.
- councils – *individually and collectively* – have the ability to/are positioned to advocate across multiple levels of government, as well as influencing other internal and external stakeholders.

Local government also has an important role in creating and maintaining the right enabling environment for efforts to end homelessness, with roles and responsibilities for the regulation of space and the built environment and driving community development and wellbeing in ways that communities desire.

## What role can local government play in advocacy around homelessness?

All local councils already undertake advocacy, working to secure meaningful outcomes for their communities. Many councils also facilitate or participate in regional and statewide networks with advocacy functions.

The roles councils can play here are manifold. Churchill Fellow Leanne Mitchell summarises many of them in the report on her research into local government responses to homelessness in the UK, US, Canada and Australia:

*'Councils are in a strong position to use local information and expertise to **educate** community, businesses, partners and elected members, **breaking stereotypes, raising awareness, framing issues and leading the conversation**. Councils can also **use their local knowledge and data to advocate for change, direct goodwill efforts and ultimately influence how a community responds to homelessness**' (Mitchell 2023: 33, emphasis added).*

# Key considerations in advocacy

Key considerations for local government and local councils when planning and undertaking advocacy are:

- understanding priorities and motivations of state, federal, local government and elected members, as well as understanding the political environment.
- prioritising actions based on agreed community needs and investment in building inclusive communities.
- determining clear messages and asks based on the key audience and desired outcome.
- developing an advocacy/engagement strategy and ensuring resourcing and organisational capacity exist to deliver on it.
- building and sustaining partnerships and allies to walk alongside or lead actions, for example, from the for-purpose, business and community sectors.
- activating other organisations and networks within the community to do the advocacy work or co-advocate.
- aligning with existing campaigns and efforts in the ending homelessness or allied spaces, such as the *Advance to Zero* movement and *Everybody's Home* campaign.

## Forms of advocacy

Local government advocacy in the homelessness (or any) space can take a number of forms or directions:

- **internal advocacy**, i.e. working with, influencing and building organisational understanding and capacities of all staff, other divisions, senior management, elected members and mayors in a range of ways. For example, council staff can act as internal champions/touchstones for the cause, holders of knowledge and network connections about the services landscape, homelessness data analyst or friendly face across the service desk (among other roles).
- **external advocacy**, i.e. using 'local information and expertise to educate and mobilise community, businesses, partners and elected members, breaking stereotypes, raising awareness, framing issues and leading the conversation' (Mitchell 2023: 33). Such advocacy is about listening as well as acting, positively agitating, and mobilising networks and resources.

Advocacy can also be proactive or reactive (Figure 1).

**Proactive advocacy** involves longer-term and planned strategies, for example, coordinating support for and/or being an active contributor to a joint venture to deliver more affordable housing for the community. Proactive advocacy is often about linking councils' planned actions with strategic priorities, ensuring visibility, transparency and building broader council and community buy-in.

*'Advocacy is where Council speaks or acts for and on behalf of the community to influence, raise awareness and/or seek support from politicians, various tiers of government, policy makers and other decision makers'*

(Glen Eira City Council 2022: 3)

**Reactive advocacy**, on the other hand, is about maximising presenting circumstances, opportunity and resources, including community interests. Reactive advocacy for councils in the ending homelessness space could be lobbying government to resource local code red or code blue responses to keep people sleeping rough and at risk of homelessness safe from extreme weather. Reactive advocacy requires parties to be agile and responsive.

For broad and sustained impact around a challenge like homelessness, councils need to be involved in all of these forms of advocacy, in different ways and to different degrees. The rest of this fact sheet details some of the ways councils can and should be involved in advocacy to end homelessness.

**Figure 1: Examples of proactive and reactive advocacy for local government**



Source: Alexandrina Council 2017

# What could advocacy in the ending homelessness space look like for local government?

In developing an advocacy strategy or process, councils should consider the value of having:

- a formally endorsed advocacy position in relation to ending homelessness. This should be adopted across council to ensure alignment between portfolios (and stakeholders) on advocacy activities and the ultimate goal of ending homelessness.
- a formal council-wide advocacy strategy or policy on homelessness. See 'Resources' for links to examples.
- a mechanism or mechanisms for the involvement of people with lived experience of homelessness and local service providers in advocacy efforts (see case study below).

Councils should also:

- understand how existing actions align with end homelessness efforts locally and beyond. For example, how service delivery, policies, regulations and regulatory responsibilities impact on people experiencing homelessness and on community perceptions of homelessness, and how they enable or hinder efforts to end homelessness.
- understand their multiple spheres of influence: local, state-wide and federal, e.g. through council-wide and intra-council networks and National Cabinet.
- support and bring together existing efforts, aligning them with their own position while also strengthening other advocacy work.
- facilitate or participate in the sharing of data and learnings to understand and end homelessness.
- monitor and evaluate council activities to ensure their value and relevance.

Councils must understand their local homelessness situation, asking key questions like:

- Who is homeless or at risk of homelessness?
- What are people's needs?
- What does the local service system offering look like?
- Where are the gaps and opportunities in the service system?
- How can local government help?

Importantly, councils must understand their local homelessness situation. Key questions to ask to build such understanding are:

- who is homeless or at risk of homelessness in our community?
- where are people staying?
- what are people's needs, risks and vulnerabilities?
- what supports do people need to move on from homelessness permanently?
- what does the local service system offering look like?
- where are the gaps and opportunities?

Telling the community's homelessness story provides the evidence to support opportunities for advocacy and action, including where councils can and should help and how resources should be allocated to end homelessness (whether such resources are the domain of councils or others).

## The Newcastle and Hunter Ending Homelessness Pledge (see page 4)

*I/we support and pledge to do our part to end homelessness. I commit myself/my organisation to working towards ending homelessness by avoiding actions that contribute to homelessness and promoting actions that help to end homelessness.*

*I/we will advocate for change and enlist the support of my colleague, business partners, family, friends and neighbours to join this important effort, and let my local leaders know that I support The Newcastle and Hunter Ending Homelessness Pledge.*

## Case study: Housing with Dignity Reference Group, City of Hobart

In 2019, the City of Hobart (Tas.) formed the Housing with Dignity Reference Group (HWDRG), a response to calls for action from the community and elected members on rising levels of visible homelessness. The City facilitates the group, which comprises self-selected community members with lived experience of homelessness or severe housing stress, along with two elected members. Centring the voice of lived experience, the HWDRG's community co-chair is its designated spokesperson.

The group advises Council on a range of issues. They review relevant plans and strategies, help identify priorities, 'participate in promotional and media opportunities, develop submissions and strategic documentation and deliver initiatives' and community awareness projects. According to the Manager of Community Programs, City of Hobart, the HWDRG is 'a powerful mechanism for these often-ignored voices to be heard and it provides an opportunity to advocate and lobby for improved housing and support' (Parker in CCCLM 2023: 25).

# Local government advocacy in action

## **The Regional Local Government Homelessness**

**and Social Housing Charter** (Vic.) is an example of advocacy based on a unified local government agenda. The 13 signatory councils are committed to collective action to address urgent need for social housing and a well-resourced homelessness service system. Acknowledging the importance of community education and service and crisis responses, their agenda prioritises the most 'impactful strategic levers available to the local government sector to achieve large-scale change' (City of Monash 2020: 1). Areas of joint advocacy/action include identifying under-utilised assets to be 'repurposed for adaptable housing needs' and working to embed mandatory inclusionary zoning.

**The Council of Capital City Lord Mayors (CCCLM)** advocates for policy priorities aimed at addressing homelessness and housing issues in Australia's capital cities and metro regions. In August 2023, the CCCLM and Local Government Professionals hosted the first national Local Government Community of Practice: Housing and Homelessness event. Participants considered actions 'councils can take in their own areas' and how they can 'be a voice of change together' in efforts to 'influence state and national policy and practice' (CCCLM 2023: ii, 56). The CCCLM's work offers key learnings for councils in terms of advocacy, asks and actions: the importance of harnessing existing local government advocacy efforts, sharing data, using executives to highlight issues to government, write collective submissions and advocacy pieces, establish local/regional working groups and develop and champion a collective voice and collaborative approach to ending homelessness (p. 59).

**The Newcastle and Hunter Ending Homelessness Pledge** (NSW) offers another example of collective advocacy, by stakeholders from councils across the region. Collective advocacy springboards off a pledge (see page 2), with activities to date ranging from advocacy for a Common Ground establishment and mental health assertive outreach, to collectively resourcing a homelessness services resource card (Big Ideas Homelessness Network 2022).

## **Asks...**



Some asks from local governments to state/territory and federal governments in relation to homelessness and affordable housing have included or could include:

- investment in the supply and improvement of social and affordable housing (various types/configurations) and infrastructure to support residents to live well in their communities.
- increased resourcing for local crisis services, partnerships to end homelessness and community infrastructure, as well as recognition of council's role at the front line of support for people experiencing homelessness.
- planning measures/reforms, including enforcement of inclusionary zoning, better utilisation of council land for developments/joint ventures, prioritisation of affordable and social developments.
- systems reform, including development and implementation of a national plan to end homelessness and, locally, working with other councils on integrated solutions to housing and homelessness, development of comprehensive strategies, rallying community support for ending homelessness and ensuring responses are rights-based and not criminalised.

*'Advocacy in all its various forms... represents a deep ongoing process of social transformation in consultation with communities and residents'*

(Hussey n.d.).

The **Local Government Homelessness Network** (SA), a forum of the Local Government Association of SA, provides a supportive forum for representatives of all local councils in SA to share experiences about homelessness in their community contexts, and to brainstorm solutions/approaches to ending homelessness. The Network takes advice from the LGA South Australia about upcoming opportunities for advocacy and appropriate pathways for developing position statements, accessing decision makers, and developing and sharing relevant resources and learnings around understanding and ending homelessness.

The **City of Adelaide** uses its advocacy levers in many ways to support the local effort to end rough sleeping homelessness, as do many other communities. The City of Adelaide has engaged in joint advocacy with the **Adelaide Zero Project** governance bodies, with involvement in, among many other things, securing resourcing for the Project and in gaining a multi-agency focus on actions to support the needs of Aboriginal visitors from remote communities while in Adelaide.

## **Relevant resources** (see also References)

Pearson, D. (2023) *Homelessness is solvable: How we can end it in Australia*, Winston Churchill Fellow research report.

Mitchell, L. (2023) *Everybody's Business: What local government can do to end homelessness*, Winston Churchill Fellow Research Report.

Examples of local government advocacy platforms and supporting documents on homelessness and housing include:

- City of Port Philip (Vic.) [Greater supports for people experiencing homelessness](#)
- City of Port Philip (Vic.) (2021) [Housing and Homelessness Profile](#)
- City of Darebin (Vic.) (2022) [Advocacy Platform](#)
- Mornington Peninsula Shire (Vic.) [Priority Project: Homelessness](#)

Examples of general council advocacy plans and policies include:

- The Barossa Council (SA) [Advocacy Strategy 2020-2024](#)
- Glen Eira City Council (Vic.) [Advocacy](#) (including a link to the Council's Advocacy Policy)

Looking internationally, the [Manchester \(UK\) Homelessness Partnership](#) offers a useful resource for local governments looking at how they might be involved with or structure their efforts to end homelessness.

## **References** for fact sheet 6

Alexandrina Council (2017) [Alexandrina Council Advocacy Report](#), July-December 2017.

Big Ideas Homelessness Network (2022) *The Newcastle and Hunter Ending Homelessness Pledge*.

City of Monash (2020), [City of Monash Council Meeting Agenda, 28 July 2020, Section 5.2](#) (Regional Local Government Charter Homelessness and Social Housing (Draft)).

Council of Capital City Lord Mayors (CCCLM) (2023) [Local Government Community of Practice: Housing and Homelessness](#), 7-8 August 2023.

Glen Eira City Council (2022) [Advocacy Policy](#), Glen Eira City Council, VIC.

Hussey, S. (n.d.) [Activating aspirations: Local Councils' advocacy drives social transformation](#), *The Granicus Blog*, Granicus,

Local Government Association of South Australia (2022a) *LGA Ordinary General Meeting - Agenda & Papers*, 8 April 2022.

Mitchell, L. (2023) *Everybody's Business: What local government can do to end homelessness*, Winston Churchill Fellow Research Report.

*Regional Local Government Charter Homelessness and Social Housing* (2020), various local councils.

## **About *Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government***

This fact sheet is one in a suite which together makes up *Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government*. *Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government* has been funded by the LGA South Australia as a practical resource for councils across South Australia to refer to in supporting community and council efforts to end homelessness.

The toolkit has been developed in consultation with the LGA, councils and stakeholders advancing end homelessness efforts in SA, nationally and beyond. The fact sheets synthesise what we know from the ever evolving academic and practice evidence about homelessness and how we can end it. The toolkit has been designed with both regional and metropolitan councils in mind. The fact sheets are sensitive to the different contexts in which councils operate, the ways in which homelessness presents for people and within communities and knowing that councils and communities are all at different stages in their ending homelessness journeys.

## **Other fact sheets in *Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government***

**Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government** comprises nine fact sheets that work together to provide a practical guide for councils interested in or working towards ending homelessness with their communities.

Fact sheet 1: Understanding homelessness: A guide for local government

Fact sheet 2: Ending homelessness: Why and how?

Fact sheet 3: Partnering in efforts to end homelessness: Making and having collective impact

Fact sheet 4: Ending homelessness brightspots

Fact sheet 5: Ending homelessness: Culturally safe practices

Fact sheet 6: Local governments, advocacy and ending homelessness

Fact sheet 7: Local government, disaster resilience and homelessness

Fact sheet 8: The role of local government in preventing homelessness

Fact sheet 9: An ending homelessness glossary

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