

The Australian Government Homelessness White Paper: Bold Targets, Can We Deliver?

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Introduction

After considerable policy discussion and debate, the Rudd Labor government released its historic White Paper on Homelessness in December 2008. It is historic as never before has a national government produced such a prominent document on homelessness, promoting the issue to a higher level on the political agenda. The public awareness of homelessness in Australia has not been as high, perhaps, since the Burdekin Human Rights Inquiry in the late 1980s. Given the current and historical significance of White Papers in general in national political discourse, this document should be a major reference point for governments and the community in responding to homelessness. It should also act to generate increased national discussion and debate about our understanding of homelessness, service responses to homelessness and how homelessness can be prevented, alleviated and reduced.

However, whilst the significance of the White Paper is considerable, it is a limited

resource document and its major purpose is in providing a framework for examining the issue of homelessness and setting policy targets for a specific time period. The document is only a glimpse of the considerable knowledge about homelessness in Australia gathered by community agencies, advocates, researchers and public servants over many decades. The hope is that the national policy action committed to in the White Paper can use and harness this knowledge, combined with political and community will, to achieve lasting outcomes.

The paper has been written with an established framework and template with key areas of government action and investment. These are preceded by an articulation of homelessness as an issue and the setting of a vision with targets and back-ended by guidelines, principles and tasks related to research, implementation and governance. There are three broad service delivery and policy action areas. They are:

- 1. Turning off the tap:** related to early intervention and prevention
- 2. Improving and expanding services:** concerned with the specialist response to homelessness

- 3. Breaking the cycle:** focussed on ensuring that homelessness does not reoccur.

Whilst the creation of these discrete areas is a useful way of defining and categorising the response, the document does not appear to describe how these areas are inter-related. For example, many of the initiatives outlined in the document could be located under more than one of these themes. A recommended action could meet the objectives of early intervention, service improvement and expansion and assist in preventing homelessness from reoccurring.

This article will make some broad and general points as a basis for contributing to discussion and debate about the White Paper.

Clearer articulation and description of homelessness

The White Paper has a tighter and clearer description of the extent of, causes and impact of homelessness compared with previous government documents, particularly the Green Paper. This reflects a greater use of research and data and input from many community submissions. The text on the impact of homelessness is very important as this is often not adequately referred to and recognised.

Over emphasis on rough sleeping

However, the major concern with the paper's commentary on homelessness is the over emphasis on rough sleepers. It is not necessary or helpful to have a data table on rough sleepers in Australia as it confuses the reader's understanding of homelessness and potentially creates a narrower perception of the issue. Rough sleeping is a circumstance and not a category of homeless people. Most people experiencing homelessness are moving between tenuous and temporary forms of accommodation and are not rough sleeping. Some people only sleep rough for very brief periods of time. Only in a small number of areas in Australia have significant numbers of rough sleepers been recorded. The text on rough sleeping and subsequent policy recommendations requires considerably more policy discussion and definition.

Target setting important

The setting of targets is a positive and welcome development. The global target of halving homelessness by 2020 is ambitious particularly as the document also recognises that homelessness may



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increase in the short and medium term. However, targets provide benchmarks to work towards, a mechanism to monitor and quantify progress and a way to keep stakeholders accountable. It is clear that while state and territory jurisdictions will have substantial scope to shape the nature of service delivery, the paper alludes to strengthened reporting and accountability requirements regarding outcomes and meeting targets. There is still considerable work to be done by all levels of government and community partners to further develop the strategies to meet the stated targets and establish more micro policy detail. The involvement of community sector representatives in this process is highly desirable to ensure effectiveness, a collaborative approach and to fully use external expertise. The transparent use of data and evidence is essential to determine how targets will be defined, interpreted, measured and met, to develop a clear methodology and its application and to establish how clients will be tracked over time.

Reference to a broad range of other government reform processes and strategies

Whilst there is a distinctive relationship between the White Paper and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Partnership on Homelessness and services funded through the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA), the document also relates to several other Australian government reform and policy strategies. These include the National Mental Health Strategy, the National Child Protection Framework, the Women's Safety Agenda and the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children. There is also reference to the Assistance for Care and Housing for the Aged program, welfare policy through Centrelink and a link with specific measures for indigenous people. This is reflective of a key government objective, outlined in the paper, of both supporting a specialist service response to homelessness and incorporating homelessness more significantly into the service delivery of mainstream services. How service delivery responding to homelessness is changed through this process and where more investment priorities are located is yet to be determined. An on-going challenge in relation to this is of ensuring national consistency whilst allowing for state level interpretation and diversity.

About reform as much as investment

The actions of the White Paper refer as much to reforms, new practices and the re-shaping of approaches than to additional investment. This is some what offset by the reference to current funding as a 'down payment' indicating that there will be future and on-going funding commitments. New payment mechanisms, regulation, legislation, reviews, application of new policy principles, accountability, planning and new partnerships are all important. These recommendations may require resources but may also be resource neutral.

Scope of current investment actions for homelessness services is limited

The list of investment actions related to specialist homelessness services, committed to at this point, is relatively limited and particularly focussed on families with children including family reconciliation for school aged young people (potential continuance of Reconnect), assisting families at risk through early intervention (continuation of HOME Advice), and the establishment of children development workers and brokerage fund for children experiencing homelessness. There is also a commitment to assertive outreach programs for rough sleepers and the chronically homeless, an opportunity for partnership between specialist homelessness services and mental health services and investment in integrated domestic and family violence services including crisis accommodation.

Recognition of a range of target groups affected by homelessness

The paper outlines the impact of homelessness on a range of target groups and recognises the need for differentiated responses. This is an important theme in the paper and acknowledges that homelessness affects people from the cradle to the grave. It is significant that the paper refers and has developed policy responses for older people experiencing homelessness as this group has been left out or residualised in some other policy discussions. The paper appears to leave open the prospect of the development of specialist support and accommodation for particular target groups whilst referring to overseas service models (e.g. the Foyer model).

Little specific reference to employment and education

What is somewhat surprising is the limited text on or specific reference to employment and education issues as part of economic and community participation. The paper alludes to more work being done particularly in relation to the employment service system but does not provide much policy guidance in this area.

No specific section relating to primary health

The paper appears to make little reference to primary health issues and the access of people experiencing homelessness to health services. The need for specific health services combined with improved access to the health system for people experiencing homelessness and living in marginal housing is very important.

Research strategy important but must include development of coordinated national research infrastructure and processes

It is timely and encouraging that the White Paper commits to a national homelessness research strategy that looks to improve data collection, examine the needs of various populations, engage in longitudinal studies and examine the effectiveness of programs. It is critical that the whole approach to reduce homelessness is

centred on a good evidence base and that research is viewed as integral to the approach and is resourced appropriately. National performance measures and outcomes will need to be informed by quality data and interpreted and analysed with independent expertise.

It is important that knowledge and evidence regarding homelessness, developed through this strategy, is not only the preserve of governments but that it can benefit all stakeholders.

The research strategy will need to develop the research infrastructure and processes to improve the coordination, collaboration, dissemination and communication of research. This is briefly referred to in the White Paper but is considerably understated. The issues discussed at the National Homelessness Research Seminar, facilitated by CHP and held in early 2007 need to be incorporated in the strategy. Whilst the use of information technology is important, the coordination and communication of research should be considerably more substantive.

Implementation and Governance critical and should include representative external input

The implementation and governance processes established to inform, monitor and guide the national approach to address and reduce homelessness will be vital. It is very important that these processes have sufficient non-government, independent and external input. Not only will the composition of the national Council on Homelessness be important but the way it engages and communicates with range of other stakeholders.

Whilst the Bea Miles Foundation is welcome, it is hoped that other mechanisms could be developed that enable a more expansive and diverse response and relationship between government, business and the community sector. This relationship is often inadequately explored and expectations are often unclear.

Conclusion

The Australian Government's White Paper entitled *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness* provides a useful and constructive reference point for national government policy. It covers most issues (with the possible exception of primary health) and outlines a framework and policy direction. The document was always intended to be broad, leaving considerable detailed future policy work and discussion. The targets in the document are a mixture of aspiration and practicality and provide a form of accountability and guidance. The action initiatives are strong on reform but also commit to investment with the possibility of further government expenditure. The implementation and governance processes guiding the work established by the White Paper will be crucial and it will be the effectiveness of these processes along with continued political will which will determine progress on reducing homelessness in Australia. ■