Priorities for the Federal Budget 2015-16

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Contents

Executive Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 2
Homelessness in Australia ............................................................................................................................... 4
  A complex and costly problem .................................................................................................................... 4
  The need for fast, flexible solutions ........................................................................................................ 4
Essential funding commitments ..................................................................................................................... 5
  National Affordable Housing Agreement .................................................................................................. 6
  National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness .................................................................................. 6
  Transparency, effectiveness, and accountability ....................................................................................... 7
Recommendation 1: ....................................................................................................................................... 8
Recommendation 2: ....................................................................................................................................... 8
Homelessness: we can’t afford to ignore it .................................................................................................... 9
  Cost-effective interventions ....................................................................................................................... 9
Recommendation 3: ....................................................................................................................................... 10
Recommendation 4: ....................................................................................................................................... 10
Related spending and revenue measures .................................................................................................... 11
  Young people transitioning to employment .............................................................................................. 11
Recommendation 5: ....................................................................................................................................... 12
  The shortage of affordable well-located housing .................................................................................... 12
    Reforming Commonwealth housing spending and taxation ............................................................... 13
Recommendation 6: ....................................................................................................................................... 14
Recommendation 7: ....................................................................................................................................... 14
Benefits of sector development and representation ................................................................................... 15
Recommendation 8: ....................................................................................................................................... 17
Executive Summary

Homelessness Australia affirms that the Commonwealth’s budget should be based on the values of its people; that all members of society should share in Australia, and that government has a responsibility to help people develop their strengths and their potential.

Homelessness Australia recognises that, with a Review of Federation in progress, the future of housing and homelessness, in the national arena is uncertain. Yet there is much certainty in the serious social and economic problems that cause, and are the result of, homelessness.

Homelessness Australia recognises the universal human right 25 (1) - “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services”. Homelessness Australia also understands that as a nation we make sure revenue and expenditure are sustainable.

Addressing homelessness, and the issues surrounding it, requires carefully tailored solutions targeting discrete groups of people. If progress is to be made in preventing homelessness rather than simply responding to it, we must look to long-term solutions rather than short-term patches, and the Budget must be firmly rooted in evidence.

The National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH), which funds services supporting the most vulnerable in our community, expires on 30 June 2015. We strongly urge the Commonwealth Government to renew the NPAH for at least two years to give the community’s safety-net stability until at least July 2017.

One hundred and eighty services across Australia are funded by the NPAH. Without this vital funding some 80,000 men, women and children will not receive support, and could be forced to live on the street, in cars or back into dangerous situations.

To ensure those experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness are kept safe until they are strong and able to care for themselves, Homelessness Australia recommends the adoption of the following as priority items for the homelessness sector in the 2015-16 Budget:

Recommendation 1: Renew funding for innovative homelessness services through the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) for a period of at least two years

Recommendation 2: Ensure funding for bedrock homelessness services in the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) includes adequate indexation and a wages component
Recommendation 3: Increase funding for homelessness prevention and early intervention programs with proven records of success

Recommendation 4: Restore funding for research to measure and maximise the effectiveness of homelessness spending, and to identify and develop innovations in homelessness prevention and interventions

Recommendation 5: Recomence funding for the Youth Connections program

Recommendation 6: Establish a long-term Affordable Housing Growth Fund

Recommendation 7: Encourage private sector and institutional investment in affordable housing stock through a range of incentives, subsidies and grants and by reforming housing taxation

Recommendation 8: Re-allocate funding to the Department of Social Services grants programme for Housing and Homelessness Service Improvement and Sector Support activities
Homelessness in Australia

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has estimated that there were more than 105,000 people in Australia experiencing homelessness on Census night, 2011. In 2013-14, Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) supported 254,001 clients, which is an increase of almost four per cent on the previous year\(^1\), – and more than double the rate of population increase (1.6 per cent).\(^2\) SHSs are stretched beyond capacity; 423 requests go unmet each day, most are for accommodation.\(^3\) There has been a marked increase in demand for assistance from women escaping domestic violence, and people needing support for the first time, specifically older people, and those experiencing ‘situational’ poverty.\(^4\) These services were forced to refuse an estimated 154,429 requests for support, 80 per cent of them for some type of accommodation support.\(^5\)

A complex and costly problem

Domestic and family violence remains a leading cause of homelessness: one third of people seeking assistance were escaping it – an increase of 9 per cent on the previous year.\(^6\) Most (66 per cent) were women, while 26 per cent were children under 14 years of age.\(^7\) Other reasons for homelessness are:

- poor and declining housing affordability, including because of depleted social housing,
- relationship or family breakdown,
- financial difficulties,
- poverty,
- inability of government agencies to meet all of the needs of people with mental illnesses or disabilities, or those of older people or young people leaving care.

‘Exiting’ homelessness is difficult, especially for those who have experienced it for lengthy periods. Without a stable home, obtaining and keeping a job or staying in school, staying healthy and free from violence is much harder than for people who have such security.

The need for fast, flexible solutions

Effective prevention and early intervention are imperative. Families, older Australians and young people can be saved from ‘tipping over’ into homelessness if they have access to adequate support services backed up by a strong social housing system and avenues to remain in private rental.

\(^1\) Australian Institute of Health and Welfare *Specialist Homelessness Services 2013-14*, p 6.
\(^2\) Australian Bureau of Statistics *Australian Demographic Statistics 3101.0* June 2014.
\(^3\) AIHW, 2014, *Specialist Homelessness Services 2013-14*
\(^4\) AIHW, 2014, op cit
\(^7\) Australian Institute of Health and Welfare *Specialist Homelessness Services 2013-14*, p 40.
Crisis accommodation needs to be accessible and available immediately, particularly for young people and for women and children escaping domestic and family violence. Support and assistance need to be accessible as soon as possible after the initial event to ensure that families and individuals do not slide into a homelessness cycle.

Permanent supportive housing models offer people who have experienced long periods of homelessness the chance to secure a place to call home and to participate in employment and community life. Yet such opportunities need to be established and maintained through homelessness, housing and other supports.

Accommodation and housing alone do not solve homelessness. The support required to keep people safe until they are strong and able to care for themselves includes:

- support for people to remain in education and training, and access pathways to employment,
- a national commitment to address poverty and intergenerational disadvantage,
- methods to address entrenched patterns of abuse, violence and neglect,
- timely access to appropriate mental health services,
- an income safety net for people out of work, young people living out of home with limited social and economic supports and people in housing and other forms of crisis.

Support provided by Specialist Homelessness Services to people experiencing, or at risk of homelessness includes: family and relationship counselling, job training, health and mental health services, drug and alcohol counselling, material aid and brokerage, meals, laundry and shower facilities, transport, financial and legal advice and information, advocacy as well as emergency and longer-term accommodation.

**Essential funding commitments**

The National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) and the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) represent the largest portions of ongoing funding for homelessness services in Australia. The first is overdue for adequate indexation and the second needs extension and indexation to enable the sector to keep pace with the costs of service delivery. As outlined above, there is presently considerable unmet demand for support and accommodation. Homelessness services across the country need confirmation that funding beyond June is assured. Any reduction in NAHA or NPAH funding would have profound effects on homelessness services and the vulnerable people they support, and increase the pressures on the housing, justice and health sectors.
National Affordable Housing Agreement

The National Affordable Housing Agreement has been beneficial for the homelessness sector because of its association with an ongoing Specific Purpose Payment, which provides funding certainty for about 1500 Specialist Homelessness Services. These services are the bedrock underpinning innovative and additional services funded under the NPAH; many are also embedded in their local communities through partnerships with local and state or territory governments in ways that maximise their contribution to those communities.

The current NAHA indexation level unfortunately will not meet increasing demand and the true costs of service delivery. A more realistic indexation level of 2 – 2.5 per cent is required. Adequate indexation of NAHA funding is vital to ensure that services and programs remain viable. During the current Review of Federation and the recent release of the White Paper on Housing and Homelessness, it is not suitable time to pursue the negotiation of a broader new agreement between the Commonwealth and the States and Territories.

National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness

The outcomes envisaged for National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness were that:

- fewer people would become homeless, or sleep rough,
- fewer people would become homeless more than once, and
- that those experiencing, or at risk of homelessness, would maintain or improve connections with family, education, training or employment.

The former Minister for Social Services, Kevin Andrews, identified the importance of NPAH saying that it “recognises that providing a roof over one’s head is only one element to reducing homelessness”. The NPAH funded more than 180 new or improved services, drove innovation, produced new service models and built capacity. Many of these were smart, local responses that focused on early intervention. Others leveraged private investment to address the ‘wicked problem’ of chronic homelessness. NPAH-funded programs like the ‘Street to Home’ initiative for ‘rough sleepers’ have been evaluated very favourably.8

NPAH was renewed for one year in 2013-14 to maintain existing service levels, with a continued emphasis on reducing homelessness in general and rough sleeping and repeat homelessness in particular, and on maintenance or improvement of connections with family, education, training or employment. Other outcomes envisaged by the transitional agreement were:

8 These are published on the Australian Homelessness Clearinghouse. Also refer to HA’s summary.
- a national quality system for specialist homelessness services;
- increased long-term, supported housing for particular groups experiencing or at risk of homelessness;
- continued work towards integrated delivery of services.

Again, the Commonwealth required state and territory matching of its $159 million investment. States were also permitted to make matching bids for funds for capital developments addressing the long-term, supported housing needs of particular groups. This transitional agreement was extended for 2014-15 - allocating $115 million to service delivery programs. (In this agreement the quantum of funding was reduced by $44 million by discontinuing funding for capital and research.) **This agreement will expire on 30 June 2015.**

If the future of homelessness funding remains unclear, innovative and effective services will struggle to operate. This challenging uncertain environment compromises organisational efficiency, planning and recruitment - reducing the value for money of government spending in this area. People experiencing or at risk of homelessness already have too much uncertainty in their lives and will suffer the consequences of unpredictable, fitful program delivery. **It is essential that NPAH funding be renewed immediately for a period of at least two years, with CPI indexation, so that its vital initiatives can continue.**

**Transparency, effectiveness, and accountability**

Homelessness Australia supports and encourages the Federal Government in seeking greater funding transparency and accountability for state and territory spending of NAHA and NPAH monies. We recommend intergovernmental instruments contain performance indicators and targets that measure accurately and meaningfully **whether the policy objectives of these funding agreements are being achieved, not just whether their program and capital outputs have been delivered.** Other defects in existing reporting mechanisms need to be addressed to measure the effectiveness of homelessness spending **in reducing and preventing homelessness.**

Similarly, because of the complicated nature of homelessness, it is important that funding allocated to it is not confused with housing funding. There are good accountability reasons for quarantining funding for Specialist Homelessness Services in such a way that prevents states and territories simply spending the money on buildings.

Homelessness Australia recommends four-year funding periods for the homelessness sector. A longer funding cycle would be optimal as this certainty would enable organisations to plan, build and implement programs, attract and retain high quality staff and engage in more sustainable – and thus more effective and efficient – business practices which deliver better results for a client base that already lives with far more than its share of uncertainty.
Another effectiveness measure requires including provision for payment of correctly calculated Equal Remuneration Order (ERO) amounts to staff working in homelessness services. Pay inequity undermines the sector’s basic capacity and effectiveness, and Fair Work Australia made this order for wage increases in 2012. The value of the ERO for community services workers must now be maintained in order to ensure the ongoing productivity of this vital sector. While funding agreements should be based on current rates (incorporating past ERO instalments), supplementation for forthcoming instalments should be identified in the interests of transparency and accountability.9

**Recommendation 1:**

Renew and index funding for innovative homelessness services through the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) for a period of at least two years

The Australian Commonwealth Government must commit to continuing the objectives of the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness, for at least two years to provide some service delivery security. Funding agreements should receive indexation calculated on the Consumer Price Index so that homelessness services can keep pace with demand and the true costs of service delivery. This is estimated at $160m in 2015-16, increasing to $170m in 2016-17.10

**Recommendation 2:**

Ensure funding for bedrock homelessness services in the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) includes adequate indexation and a wages component

Funding for NAHA should include CPI indexation and make provision for increasing the Equal Remuneration Order wage component to maintain its relative value. ERO should be calculated in relation to previous year’s funding, and on any new growth funding for the relevant program or the new year, plus the year’s indexation. This is estimated at $33m in 2015-16, increasing to $34m in 2016-17.11

10 Ibid, p.53
11 Ibid.
Homelessness: we can’t afford to ignore it

By providing accommodation and support services to a person who is experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness, government may to save thousands and potentially tens of thousands, per year through a reduction in the costs of health, justice and other government services.\(^\text{12}\) Recent research and cost-benefit analysis has demonstrated that savings in mainstream justice and health budgets are achieved by investing in homelessness services,\(^\text{13}\) and economies in child protection and public housing can be expected where children are stably housed. Furthermore, stable accommodation is linked to economic participation, whereas the experience of homelessness may inhibit or disrupt employment or educational opportunities.\(^\text{14}\) Resultant loss of earnings potential and productive capacity leads to lower revenue from taxation and greater reliance on welfare.

Cost-effective interventions

Significant cost savings in future budgets will result from investment in early intervention and prevention programs that have proven effective. Evidence indicates that young people who experience homelessness before the age of 18 are significantly more likely to disengage from education and to cycle through the homelessness service system in adulthood. Intergenerational homelessness is a serious issue - half of those in homelessness services had parents who experienced homelessness at some point in their lives.\(^\text{15}\) In addition, evidence indicates that people who experience longer periods of homelessness are more likely to suffer from serious mental and physical health conditions than people who have only experienced short periods or people with no history of homelessness.

Two federally funded programs, HOME Advice and Reconnect, have shown that early intervention results in positive outcomes for families and young people. HOME Advice assists families at risk of homelessness to manage finances. Reconnect, a community-based program, assists 12 to 18 year olds who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, to stabilise their living situations and improve engagement with family, work, education, training and their local communities. Independent evaluations of these programs have confirmed their effectiveness: reviewers found that Reconnect made a major contribution to family reconciliation by improving conflict resolution and communication,\(^\text{16}\) and that 72 per cent of people using HOME Advice did not experience...

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\(^\text{12}\) Johnson et al, (2014) Resolving long term homelessness: A randomised controlled trial examining the 36 month costs, benefits and social outcomes from the Journey To Social Inclusion pilot program, p

\(^\text{13}\) Zaretsky and Flatau (2013) The cost of homelessness and the net benefit of homelessness programs, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, December 2013.

\(^\text{14}\) Centrepoint (nd) Opportunity Lost: the experiences of homeless young people in accessing education, training and employment.

\(^\text{15}\) Flatau et al (2013) Lifetime and intergenerational experience of homelessness in Australia

\(^\text{16}\) Department of Families and Community Services, I'm looking to the future: evaluation report of Reconnect, 2004.
homelessness afterwards.\textsuperscript{17} It is essential that investment in early intervention and crisis management programs such as these is expanded without compromising other homelessness funding.

There are significant societal benefits that flow from homelessness interventions, including wellbeing, cohesion and inclusion, and the economic participation of people successfully diverted contributes to overall wealth and prosperity. Potential savings to government (if health, justice welfare, children in care and eviction rates were reduced to population averages) have been estimated to range from $14,712 per person to $44,137\textsuperscript{18}. Failures to allocate adequate spending on effective prevention and intervention in 2015-16, will undoubtedly become costs that burden future Federal budgets and upcoming generations.

Recommendation 3:

Increase funding for homelessness prevention and early intervention programs with proven records of success

Increasing funding for effective programs such as HOME Advice and Reconnect would strengthen homelessness prevention and intervention, consequently reducing future costs to health, justice and welfare budgets. Economic benefits would flow to government and to society. Assuming a 2.5% CPI, the cost would be approximately $30 million.

Recommendation 4:

Restore funding for research to measure and maximise the effectiveness of homelessness spending, and to identify and develop innovations in homelessness prevention and interventions

Homelessness Australia would like to underline the importance of understanding and estimating the costs of homelessness and homelessness interventions and of building a sound knowledge base through active participation of the homelessness sector and broader research community.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{17} McKenzie et al, \textit{Household Organisational Management Expenses (HOME) Advice Program Evaluation Report 2007}, Swinburne University. \\
\textsuperscript{18} Zaretsky and Flatau (2013) \textit{The cost of homelessness and the net benefit of homelessness programs}, \textit{Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute}, December 2013. \\
\textsuperscript{19} Pinkney and Ewing (2006) \textit{Costs and Pathways of Homelessness: Developing policy-relevant analyses for the Australian homelessness services system} i-iii
Related spending and revenue measures

There are a range of other policy areas in which cuts to expenditure on effective programs would likely contribute to the occurrence of homelessness, such as income support, employment services, housing and other community services addressing violence, drug addiction and other relevant problems. Budget measures that further disadvantage vulnerable people would place further pressure on services. Instead, a coordinated holistic approach is required to strengthen homelessness prevention. We will highlight some key strategic reforms, commitments and investments that would be highly beneficial.

Young people transitioning to employment

Youth Connections is a national network of community-based organisations assisting young people, who are at risk of ‘falling through the cracks’, to maintain or renew their engagement in education, training and employment. It has 65 providers nationally, and is currently delivered in 113 regions across Australia in every state and territory, in metropolitan, regional and remote areas. Service delivery is characterised as youth focused, individualised intensive case management. Services take into account the individual vulnerabilities and barriers these young people face in accessing education or employment opportunities. These barriers can include mental health problems, caring responsibilities, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, and the breakdown of family relationships.

This program has been highly effective in reconnecting disengaged young people with education, training or employment - with a majority of participants in 2013 re-engaging with more study training or work. Success rates have remained high when evaluated six months and two years after leaving the program. Dr John Falzon stated that Youth Connections is “a really fine exemplar of a very intelligent and innovative model... We are talking about a fairly modest investment with enormously satisfying returns...It is not rocket science to work out that if a program works like that it should not only be maintained but should be expanded.”

Government funding for the program ceased on 31 December 2014. As a result of this withdrawal of support, 30 000 young people are affected - these service users are at a greater risk of short or long-term experiences of homelessness, now or in the future. In their interim report, the ‘Senate Select Committee into the Abbott Government’s Budget Cuts’ concluded that defunding Youth Connections “will hurt the most vulnerable in our society and increases the risk of them falling into poverty or homelessness.” Furthermore, this program “obviously provided long-term benefits for young people
who are disadvantaged in any labour market environment and at risk of long term unemployment.”

Recommence fundin

Recommence funding for the Youth Connections program

As recommended by the Senate Select committee, Homelessness Australia recommends that the Government reinstate funding for Youth Connections immediately. The withdrawal of this funding is not only profoundly unfair but also economically imprudent, with the savings to income support alone outweighing this modest and targeted expenditure.

The shortage of affordable well-located housing

As discussed above, homelessness stems from a range of causes, not simply ‘houselessness’. However, of all the services that Specialist Homelessness Services provide, the one for which demand vastly outstrips supply is accommodation: 80 per cent of unmet requests are now for some kind of shelter. The need is equally pronounced across the community sector. Evaluations of the NPAH ‘Street to home’ program for rough sleepers concluded that the main limitation on its effectiveness was the lack of supply of longer-term housing options into which program clients could be placed subsequently.

The federal government spends a considerable amount on housing, but only a small amount stimulates affordable supply, particularly in areas where jobs and services are available. Despite the $3.6 billion spent on Commonwealth Rent Assistance, Anglicare’s Rental Affordability Snapshot 2013 showed that, Australia-wide, less than one per cent of private rental housing is within reach of people who depend on government payments. Even more limited is access to affordable housing that is well located in easy proximity to employment or education opportunities, public transport, services and amenities.

Even rents in many regional areas are high, and over the past decade parts of Melbourne and Sydney have begun to see severe overcrowding of a kind previously experienced only in remote Aboriginal communities. People who depend on low wages for income are not necessarily better off than those on benefits, not least because they have less choice about where they live if they are to remain employed. While long commutes to work are now common in major cities, prolonged

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20 Dr Cassandra Goldie, 4 Committee Hansard, 16 October 2014, p. 2.
21 Specialist Homelessness Services 2012-13, p 105.
22 ACOS, Community Sector Survey 2012, pp 12 and 15.
23 Anglicare, Rental Affordability Snapshot 2014 p9-10. (Except if receiving Age Pension and or a Couple with two young children on Newstart)
24 Almost 10,000 more people found themselves in this type of housing at the 2011 Census compared with in 2006.
parental absence from dormitory suburbs has a negative effect on children and communities and is particularly difficult for single parents to manage.

Reforming Commonwealth housing spending and taxation

Government policies could more effectively encourage private and institutional investment into public housing sector using a range of incentives, subsidies and grants, and making reforms to taxation rules including negative gearing and concessions on Capital Gains Tax.

There are possible reforms that would raise revenue and encourage more investment in affordable housing. The housing deficit occurs in the context of 67 per cent of Australia’s 1.8 million individual landlords, almost 60,000 of them in the top income tax bracket, now reporting taxable losses totalling in excess of $13 billion.\(^{25}\) \textit{Government investment in housing urgently needs to be rebalanced in favour of first home buyers and the lower- and middle-income people among Australia’s 2.5 million renters.}

While a number of options are on the table, arguably the simplest to adopt – and the one least likely to have negative social and economic consequences – would be to \textit{dispense with discounts on Capital Gains Tax}. Concessions on \textit{capital gains overwhelmingly benefit higher-income earners} (with 52 per cent of them flowing to the 2 per cent of taxpayers in the top tax bracket), and \textit{imposition of CGT at marginal tax rates would have a limited effect on lower-income people and the housing market in general}.\(^{26}\) Revenue generated has been predicted to be in the order of $5 billion on 2013-14 dollars.\(^{27}\)

The tax benefits of negative gearing are heavily skewed, providing ten and a half times the benefits to the top 20% of households (around $3,800 a year) than they do to the lowest 20% (around $364 a year).\(^{28}\) \textit{ATO’s Taxation Statistics} contain a goldmine of information about the profile and geographical distribution of individual taxpayers who own \textit{negatively-gared investment housing}. These should be analysed in a more time-real way for evidence of the extent to which these tax deductions \textit{actually do contribute to (affordable) housing supply by subsidising occupied housing at reasonable rents}.\(^{29}\) That information could assist the design of better incentives for affordable

\(^{26}\) \textit{Balancing Budgets: tough choices we need}, Grattan Institute 2013, pp 40-48.
\(^{27}\) \textit{Balancing Budgets: tough choices we need}, Grattan Institute 2013, pp 40.
\(^{29}\) Rather than, for example, subsidising the purchase of holiday homes that are rented over summer only. In HA’s view, taxpayers should not be eligible for the deduction for properties that are unoccupied for more than six months of any year.
In the current fiscal environment, there is no justification for governments subsidising home purchases that reduce the chances of low-income people obtaining secure shelter.

**Recommendation 6:**

**Establish a long-term Affordable Housing Growth Fund**

Homelessness Australia recommends that an affordable housing growth fund be established with a down payment of $750 million in the first year and sustained, increasing, long-term funding. This funding should be strictly designated for expanding the stock of affordable housing, including new social housing, a proportion of which should be allocated to people who are experiencing homelessness. The fund should support affordable housing programs providing a range of different levels of subsidy to meet the needs of households with different income levels. Program guidelines should enable housing providers to draw on a range of affordable housing programs to deliver maximum affordability and provide mixed tenure developments.

**Recommendation 7:**

**Encourage private sector and institutional investment in affordable housing stock through a range of incentives, subsidies and grants and by reforming housing taxation**

Homelessness Australia believes a mixed investment model is needed to increase the supply of well-located affordable housing. Like ACOSS, we advocate a comprehensive strategy, including: direct investment in the growth of affordable housing stock and incentives for private sector and institutional investment in affordable housing; an increase in financial support to low income renters; and sustained support for homelessness services. Options include the continuation and expansion of a revised National Rental Affordability Scheme (or similar incentive program) and trial of innovative models to leverage private investment: for instance, housing bonds.

Consideration of CGT and negative gearing is vital to Reforming Commonwealth housing taxation. As a first step to improving housing market outcomes and reducing the fiscal and social cost of certain taxation rules, ACOSS proposes that deductions for expenses relating to passive investment in housing, shares, collectables and similar assets purchased after 1 January 2016 should be quarantined to offset income received from those assets, including capital gains realised on their subsequent sale.

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30 See further, Homelessness Australia (2014) Submission to Senate Economic References Committee Affordable Housing Inquiry.
31 ACOSS, Budget Priorities Statement 2015-16 p49.
33 ACOSS, Budget Priorities Statement 2015-16 p52.
Benefits of sector development and representation

Homelessness Australia is the national peak body representing and supporting the homelessness sector in Australia. Homelessness Australia works in collaboration with homelessness assistance services, state and national homelessness peak organisations, other peak organisations, government agencies and the broader community. Representative bodies such as Homelessness Australia add great value for sectors and for governments.

Peak bodies make an important contribution to the development of inclusive and innovative public policy through the combination of knowledge and information from member agencies and application of specialist skills and expertise. Strong and established sector representation presents a unique and cost-effective opportunity for governments to access robust and innovative advice from a single point of contact, representing the allied interests of its membership group.

Homelessness Australia was formed in late 1998 as the Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations (AFHO) by the:

- Council to Homeless Persons Australia (CHPA)
- The National Youth Coalition for Housing (NYCH)
- Women’s Services Network (WESNET)

The close relationships that peak bodies maintain with services engaged in on-the-ground operations place them in a unique position to undertake research in relation to consumer and provider experiences and needs, best practice, and innovative service models. Peak bodies have the skills, capacity and flexibility to conduct research provides the knowledge base upon which to develop effective solutions.

Homelessness Australia has more than 360 member organisations, from large, national multi-focused organisations to small local specialist homelessness service providers. These services are located in city, urban, rural and remote locations. As discussed above, SHS support people from many sectors of society, including:

- families and children,
- younger and older people,
- victims of domestic and family violence,
- indigenous Australians and new migrants,
- people suffering from mental health issues or with disabilities, and
- people leaving care or exiting custodial arrangements.
Homelessness Australia’s large and diverse membership and the high levels of satisfaction recorded by the Annual Membership Survey are evidence of the strong relationships of trust this organisation has built within the sector.

Supporting member agencies to become stronger, more responsive and effective organisations is core function of an effective peak body. Effective capacity building requires an enduring relationship of trust, effective communication and some sense of common purpose. Homelessness Australia is ideally placed and well-equipped to undertake such sector development activities.

For instance, during 2013-14 Homelessness Australia worked in partnership with beyondblue to develop and implement Tune in Now. This free on-line toolkit is designed to assist services to help men experiencing homelessness, and depression and anxiety. Many homelessness workers have struggled with when to raise these issues, what to say how to say it. The toolkit arms workers with the right information, and empowers them to ‘have the conversation’ about depression and anxiety. HA looks for ways to give extra support to our member services. After conducting research, HA identified the twelve most frequent-of-origin countries for foreign nationals who were supported by services and developed an information sheet that directs services to the most appropriate organisation for support.

Peak bodies excel at sector consultation. Consultation is sometimes initiated in response to issues that member groups raise or they may be in response to specific government processes or requests. In the latter case, approaching a peak body may be much more efficient for government than instigating its own inquiries around the sector.

For instance, the HA CEO was included Reference group that assisted the Department of Social Services (then FaHCSIA) in developing the Specialist Homelessness Services National Quality Framework. HA was also a key player in working with the Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to develop a statistical definition of homelessness that reflected the experiences and insights of stakeholders. Homelessness is a complex phenomenon and the previous definition of homelessness did not adequately explore or reflect the diverse forms it can take.

In 2012-13 Homelessness Australia was part of the project reference group for the federal inter-agency research project, Connecting the Dots: Services Delivery Pathways and Homelessness. In 2013-14 we continued to represent the homelessness sector on fifteen committees/reference groups; including the ABS Housing Sector Reference Group and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Specialist Homelessness Services Collection User Advisory Group.

HA was established with a joint vision to proactively research, develop and promote national policy and action to reduce homelessness and its impact on the diverse range of people it affects. HA achieves this by consulting with homelessness agencies nationally, undertaking research and policy development and raising awareness and educating the community about homelessness. For example, during Homelessness Prevention Week more than 140 organisations participated by
holding events across Australia in 2014. Homelessness Australia engaged participants from sectors not directly related to homelessness, including schools and businesses.

Peak bodies such as Homelessness Australia also facilitate the flow of information between their members and gather pertinent information from member agencies. Homelessness Australia has played a key role in disseminating information on changes to policy, government programs or the broader environment that will impact on the sector and/or their consumers, and in gathering and ascertaining the sector’s response to such changes. The e-bulletins Homelessness Australia compiles and distributes are highly valued by members for the relevant and timely information they provide. Four in five respondents have found HA information useful, and a majority were satisfied or very satisfied with HA papers and publications.

There are economies of scale in sharing resources across the sector rather than duplicating programs and resources. Thus, the sector development role of peak bodies has grown to include the provision and sharing of information, training, and management support. In addition, well-resourced peaks are able to run and/or promote conferences, forums and other events that provide opportunities for organisations to share knowledge and resources to build their capacity.

The National Homelessness Conference is the only sector-led conference focused on homelessness, the issues surrounding homelessness and a collaborative way out. The 2014 Conference brought together five hundred delegates, over three days for more than fifty presentations and workshops. Attendees exchanged information, research, knowledge, stories and experiences. Recently at the conclusion of our 16-day "shine a light on violence against women" campaign, HA held a forum on Domestic violence, homelessness and human rights. This community forum brought together notable speakers to talk about gender issues, housing and homelessness.

**Recommendation 8:**

**Re-allocate funding to the Department of Social Services grants programme for Housing and Homelessness Service Improvement and Sector Support activities**

Homelessness Australia and other peaks contribute to the value for money of government expenditure in this area, enhancing efficiency and contributing to cost-effective operation, enhancement and representation of homelessness services. Continued funding would enable HA to continue valuable capacity building and provide support for vital front-line services that assist vulnerable Australians and reduce and avert future costs to the Nation’s budget.