Sector Diversity

A paper by Homelessness Australia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Homelessness cuts across all age groups, gender, cultures, family types, income levels and life circumstances. In addition, people who are homeless often have other issues that add complexity to their situation such as mental health issues, disability, family violence and/or alcohol and other drug issues. It is important to maintain a range of responses to people experiencing homelessness to reflect the varying needs, people’s skill sets and life experience. With such a generic target group and many factors impacting on people’s ability to maintain safe, affordable, appropriate long term housing, it is important that homelessness services are able to take a holistic approach, employ skilled staff, have an excellent knowledge base of issues and services in the community and well developed links with other (mainstream services).

Research shows the pathways to homelessness are varied and complex. For Indigenous people, longitudinal factors (for example, influences from early childhood) can compound with situational factors, leading to homelessness. For young people, factors such as family conflict or abuse, drug use, unstable employment, participating in education and training, combining work and study, and financial pressure (for example, tension between paying rent, food and utility costs) can potentially lead to unstable housing and increase the risk of homelessness. ¹

To best meet these needs the homelessness and community sector must to be able to provide a variety of options including the provision of information, advocacy, referral, support (short and long term), case management, crisis accommodation, supported housing and independent housing. The homelessness sector has a richness of experience and evidence-based practice models to meet these diverse needs.

Services and staff have a strong set of values, broadly encompassed as ‘making a positive difference in the lives of others’ and featuring long and enduring relationships with people seeking services.
Whilst being receptive to new ideas, the sector generally knows what works and what doesn’t and is able to provide solutions, not just problems to be solved.

One of the key strengths of the homelessness sector is its diversity and capacity to meet the needs of specific client groups and innovate and adapt to change. This was shown in successive evaluations of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) and arguably services have been required to accelerate the process of adapting to change in a new funding environment under the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) and the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH). The paper traces the history and development of the homelessness sector in Australia from the pre-SAAP era through the various iterations of that program to the present day.

The development of the national compact with the community sector and the establishment of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) which is due to commence operation in October 2012 and will operate as a single, overarching national regulator for the not for profit sector is another initiative that could have wide-ranging ramifications for the sector (many of them positive). The governance standards, including the external conduct standards and the financial reporting framework will commence on 1 July 2013 with the first financial reports for medium and large registered entities beginning to fall due after 1 July 2014.

This paper also touches on the implications of the positive equal remuneration determination.

Definitions

- **Not-for-profit sector**: The not-for-profit sector is essential to achieving a productive and inclusive Australia. The sector plays a central role in enriching communities through its social, cultural and environmental contribution and in providing support to the most vulnerable in our community. The sector is large and diverse and made up of organisations that are neither commercial nor government.

- **Human services**: Those services that seek to improve individual and community wellbeing through the provision of care, education and training, and community services.

- **Community sector**: The sub-set of human services that involve a range of services that provide: relief of poverty, social disadvantage, social distress and hardship; the provision of emergency relief or support; and the advancement of disadvantaged groups. Community sector agencies might be for-profit, or not-for-profit. For example:
  - Employment/training services
  - Disability services
  - Housing/homelessness services
  - Child welfare, child services and day care
  - Domestic violence and sexual assault
  - Family and relationship services
  - Emergency relief services for those experiencing financial crisis (e.g. provision of food, clothing, transport, utilities vouchers)
  - Financial support services (e.g. Financial counselling, financial literacy education, money management services and problem gambling)
  - Mental health
  - Other health services
• Information, advice and referral services
• Legal services and advocacy
• Migrant, refugee and asylum seeker services
• Indigenous support services
• Residential aged care and nursing homes
• Services for the aged and elderly (excluding residential facilities).

Mainstream services
Mainstream services are those that frequently come into contact with people experiencing homelessness or disadvantage, although they do not specialise in homelessness. As critical ‘first to know’ agencies they can include:

• state and territory housing authorities
• Centrelink
• universal employment services
• schools and other education and training services
• health services, including hospitals, mental health and drug and alcohol services
• legal, policing, correctional and juvenile justice systems
• family and children’s services, including child protection services and immigration programs
• aged care services
• community development
• alcohol and other drugs support services.

Homelessness services
Homelessness services provide support and services to people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. For the most part, homelessness services receive some or all of their funding from the government, however there are some services that do not. They could be staffed by volunteers, and/or be funded by donations and/or faith-based institutions.

Specialist Homelessness Services
A Specialist Homelessness Service is an organisation which receives government funding to deliver specialist homelessness services to a client. There are around 1500 of these SHS, which are now funded by the NAHA.

Homelessness
The term ‘homelessness’ can be used to describe the extent to which housing needs are unmet, including people without conventional accommodation and those staying in accommodation that is below minimum community standards. The most widely accepted, broad definition of homelessness describes three categories of homelessness:

• Primary homelessness is experienced by people without conventional accommodation (for example, sleeping rough or in improvised dwellings).
• Secondary homelessness is experienced by people who frequently move from one temporary shelter to another (for example, emergency accommodation, youth refuges, ‘couch surfing’).
• Tertiary homelessness is experienced by people staying in accommodation that is below minimum community standards (for example, boarding houses and caravan parks).

The Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness has adopted tertiary homelessness (incorporating primary and secondary homelessness) as the general definition of homelessness. This definition differs from the SAAP definition of homelessness used for reporting in chapter 17, where a ‘homeless person’ is:
A person who does not have access to safe, secure and adequate housing. A person is considered to not have such access if the only housing to which he or she has access:
– has damaged, or is likely to damage, the person’s health
– threatens the person’s safety
– marginalises the person by failing to provide access to adequate personal amenities or the economic and social supports that a home normally affords
– places the person in circumstances that threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing
– is of unsecured tenure.
A person is also considered homeless if living in accommodation provided by a SAAP (NAHA) agency or some other form of emergency accommodation\textsuperscript{iv}.

**Policy context**

On census night in 2006, approximately 105,000 Australians were homeless\textsuperscript{v}.

In December 2008 the Rudd Labor government released a White Paper on homelessness The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness, which set the headline goals to halve the overall rate of national homelessness by 2020 and to offer supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who seek it by 2020.

In January 2009, the federal government together with state and territory governments, co-signed the NAHA, providing $6.2 billion over five years for housing assistance to low and middle income earners. The NAHA is supported by the $1.1 billion NPAH which commenced July 2009, with funding provided over five years for service providers to prevent and reduce homelessness.

The implementation of the NAHA and NPAH have both coincided with and foreshadowed a period of significant change in the funding for and operationalisation of the homelessness service delivery system and social housing in Australia. Both agreements are arguably more outcome focussed and are being delivered in a policy context that re-frames homelessness and government funded housing assistance in a policy context that places accessibility and affordability at its centre.

The new funding environment and the policy context in which the sector find themselves has driven important and wide reaching changes to the response to homelessness and housing insecurity and provides the foundations for a 21\textsuperscript{st} Century response to the vexing problems of homelessness and housing (un)affordability. At a policy level the changes we are witnessing and are a part of, are overwhelmingly positive.

They align well with the broader social inclusion agenda and the policy framework that aims to drive a new and improved partnership between the not-for-profit sector and Government.

Of course some providers have expressed concerns to Homelessness Australia about aspects of what has been a series of quite comprehensive reform processes. This will inevitably occur and Homelessness Australia supports feedback provided to us about the inadequacy of sector involvement in the development and implementation of elements of homelessness reforms.
That said there have been important steps taken at both a State and Territory and a national level to drive improvements in the relationship between Governments and NGOs.

The two most important overarching elements of these are the signing of the national compact and the planned establishment of the ACNC. The sub-groups progressing work around issues of importance in driving this new partnership are of importance to Homelessness Australia and our members, in particular the group examining ways in which we can reduce red tape. We welcome the commitment to drive improvements in the relationship between our sector and Government at a national level.

We welcome the extension in time granted to complete the groundwork for the establishment of the ACNC. We believe this is an exciting time for the sector and Homelessness Australia and our members welcome the opportunities these processes provide for strengthening cooperation and partnerships.

As with any significant reform processes, there are risks and potential threats to the diversity of our sector, which we believe is one of its greatest strengths.

**Sector diversity and why it matters**

The community services sector is incredibly diverse and provides various forms of assistance, care and support to more than twelve million Australians across Australia. The Productivity Commission report into the contribution of the sector found that:

- The ABS has identified 59,000 economically significant NFPs, contributing $43 billion to Australia’s annual GDP.

- Eight percent of the Australian workforce is employed by NFPs and average employment growth over the past decade has been just under eight percent.

- In addition there are 4.6 million people who are engaged in voluntary work for NFPs.

- The level of understanding of the range and types of work done by people in the sector by the wider community is poor and deserves greater attentionvi.

Given the number of people who utilise social and community services it is perhaps not surprising that a diverse sector has evolved over time to meet their needs. In our major cities, there are many social and community services available for people and they tend to be more readily accessible than in most regional and rural areas.

One of the most important statements we can make in this paper about sector diversity however is that social and community services need to be as accessible as possible in regional, rural and remote areas as well as for people who may face additional barriers to service access and utilisation.
In a nation the size of Australia, the tyranny of distance means that people in rural and remote areas must travel vast distances in order to access services which are often located in regional centres which may be hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away.

This is especially true for social and community services and specialist care and it needs to be taken into account when considering the economic costs and benefits of keeping our service delivery system diverse.

The costs of service delivery in regional and rural areas can be higher as can the costs incurred by people needing to access and utilise services including Reconnect services and specialist homelessness services. These costs principally relate to transport and the provision of material goods but also the distance of getting resources to providers and people accessing services.

Services need to be located in close proximity to where people live and while this task is not easy in many rural and remote locations it is vitally important. Services with good local knowledge and the expertise of models and approaches that work in the regional and local context will arguably be best placed to meet the needs of people in particular localities. The differences in the way that local communities are organised and operate are important to consider in the delivery of both mainstream and specialist services. This is true for homelessness and housing services but also for mainstream agencies that impact on the lives and outcomes of people who are economically and socially disadvantaged and excluded.

There may be fewer people able to provide important voluntary roles that our sector relies so heavily upon to meet the needs of those accessing our services. In addition, attracting skilled workers to regional and rural areas can be challenging. In essence having a diverse social and community services sector may mean that smaller services in multiple locations will enable greater access than consolidation and co-location. In other areas co-located services and/or so called ‘service hubs’ may enable more people to get to and utilise the services that they need.

We need to ensure that the best approaches for the localities in which delivery occurs are funded and that ‘one size fits all’ models are not seen as superior or desirable in many cases.

Sector diversity is of course not limited to the need to ensure that there are multiple services in smaller regional, rural and remote locations.

The community sector encompasses diverse beliefs and values and many services can be credited with taking steps to ensure they provide a friendly and welcoming environment to various client groups.

We know of many examples of services that have consulted broadly with leaders of particular communities and implemented changes to service delivery and even the aesthetic appearance of their shop-fronts to ensure they are friendly to particular groups. These include members of emerging communities, young people and first Australians.

It is critically important that sector diversity is enhanced and protected. With so many Australians utilising the services that community organisations offer and sharing the benefits it is vital that economic considerations are not the sole determining factor when looking at how to operationalise and organise our service delivery system.
Even within the specific specialist areas of the NFP sector (for example; disability, homelessness and material aid) there is incredible diversity. This is essential because people do not fit neatly into narrowly defined boxes of categories. There is no “one size fits all” solution.

A snapshot of issues and challenges facing the sector

We will turn briefly to one of the most important sources of evidence that we have about issues of concern to our sector and the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to sector diversity and viability, the ACOSS Community Sector Survey. Homelessness Australia contributes to this survey as a national member organisation of ACOSS.

The findings of the survey in relation to housing and homelessness and issues pertaining to social disadvantage more broadly generally mirror those of our own annual members’ survey. This is particularly true when we look at the issues of concern for our member services and the profile of their clients.

The 2011 ACOSS Community Sector Survey (CSS) showed that more people have been turning to community and social services groups for help, leaving services unable to meet the growing demand.

The CSS survey provides the most comprehensive picture of how the non-government community services and welfare sector is travelling, and this year shows a 12% increase in assistance provided by agencies. Respondent organisations (745) provided services on 6,180,282 occasions in 2009-10 compared to 5,513,780 instances in 2008-09.

Despite the overall increase in services delivered, the majority of organisations (55%) indicated that they were still unable to meet the demand for their services. People were denied services on approximately 345,000 occasions, equating to more than 1 in 20 eligible people seeking social services being turned away. This represents a 19% increase on the 298,000 people turned away in 2008-09.

This is borne out in the survey with nearly 50,000 instances in which people were turned away from homelessness and housing services, which equates to a total of 135 people turned away from these services on any given day in 2009-10 (22% increase on 2008-09).

Services experiencing the greatest increase in demand include Housing/homelessness services - 21% Services that people were turned away from in the highest numbers included Housing/homelessness services (50,000 instances of clients turned away, which represented a 22% increase on previous year). Areas of unmet need included Homelessness and housing - 87% identified as an area of high or medium need. This mirrors the results of Homelessness Australia’s members’ surveys over the past four years. Our member services have consistently reported that placing people in housing they can afford is the single biggest barrier to ending homelessness for people.
The ACOSS community sector survey draws attention to the profile of Service Users by Age. People aged 15-24 were overrepresented in service usage of Homelessness and housing services - 34% of all clients were aged 15-24. Data from the Specialist Homelessness Services collection also finds that young people account for the largest single demographic of service users, though the figures are comparable to children aged 0-10. While this is in part due to the profile of the homelessness service system, thirty four percent of services funded in 2010/11 were funded to support young people (defined as aged 15-24), it is interesting to note that the AIHW data mirrors the findings of the ACOSS Community Sector Survey.

Sole Parents were found to be disproportionately high users of housing and homelessness services, accounting for almost 35%.

Across all services Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accounted for 16% of clients, more than six times their actual representation in the Australian population and in Housing and homelessness services 19%. According to the first results from the new specialist homelessness services data collection, first Australians accounted for just under one in five people who received assistance from specialist homelessness services in the three months to 30 September 2011.

We can deduce then that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overrepresented in social and community services use data.

Conversely, people born outside of Australia and particularly people from non-English speaking backgrounds are underrepresented, dramatically so in Specialist Homelessness Services data.

Almost half of all people seeking help were not in paid work - 48% (note: most services did not record clients undertaking some amount of paid work as ‘out of work’. ) and 71% of people seeking housing & homeless assistance were not in paid work.

THE EVOLUTION OF HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

Arguably the first Australians to experience homelessness in Australia were Aboriginal people who were displaced from their traditional lands by white settlers from 1788 onwards.

The homelessness services sector has evolved over many decades in Australia to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population. It is fair to say that homelessness has probably been with us in Australia since convicts began escaping from penal settlements not long after the arrival of the first fleet. By the mid-19th Century a number of church-based welfare organisations had been established to provide assistance to people living in poverty in inner-city areas.

The role of these organisations was expanded greatly in the 1930s during the Great Depression when traditional ‘night-shelters’ and ‘soup kitchens’ were established to cater for large numbers of unemployed itinerants and their families. Prior to the 1970s, the profile of homelessness was perceived to be that of an older male sleeping alone on a park bench.

During the 1970s, Australia went through a period of social change which spawned new social movements in the areas of women’s rights, and advocacy for the rights of young people and those who are most disadvantaged in society. The women’s refuge movement and the youth refuge
movement were borne out of these social movements in response to a growing recognition of what was called “hidden homelessness”.

Women and young people make up large numbers of the “hidden homeless” (those experiencing secondary homelessness). Domestic violence remains the greatest cause of homelessness among women today and women’s refuges were created to provide women (and their children) with a safe space where they could stay and be provided with the necessary intensive support to live independently of their abusive and violent partners. After the 1974 International Women’s Day celebration, a group of women established the first ever women’s refuge in Australia, now Elsie Refuge for Women, based in Sydney. Women’s refuges operated without secure funding until 1985 when SAAP was introduced.

The youth refuge movement emerged in the late 1970s in response to growing concerns about increasing numbers of young people who were experiencing homelessness.

Joint Commonwealth and State funding for youth refuges began flowing in 1979 under the Youth Services Scheme which was a pilot program that was in operation until 1983. The then Department of Social Security (DSS) identified the “youth shelter” as a model for support programs for young people up to the age of 18. Youth shelters exercised some flexibility however and in many cases accommodated people aged 19-24 as well. The emergency accommodation offered by “youth shelters” was time limited, enabling young people experiencing homelessness to stay for up to three months. Workers at “youth shelters” also provided counseling and information services to young people and their parents, supervision of young people while in accommodation and rent guarantees to landlords and subsidies.

During the early 1980s “youth shelters” continued to operate in an ad hoc fashion without secure funding and with insufficient resources to meet the needs of young clients.

In 1985, the Australian Government created SAAP as a single national programme that provided funding for homelessness services. In 2009 SAAP was replaced by the NAHA through which women’s refuges, youth refuges and a range of accommodation and support services are currently funded.

**The SAAP models**

The SAAP was established in 1985 by the Hawke Government to provide stable funding for providers of services to people experiencing homelessness. Its establishment created, for the first time, a national system of homelessness services that provided support to different client groups. For the years 1985 – 2009 SAAP provided the primary service response for people experiencing homelessness. The program began with around 500 services, some providing support to women escaping domestic and family violence, some servicing young clients (between school leaving age and 25), some family services and some providing generalist services to adults aged 25 and older.

SAAP models continued to evolve in response to a series of five evaluations beginning with the SAAP I evaluation in 1987. SAAP II in 1990 allowed for the provision of growth funding enabling services to try and assist clients to move towards independent living. Funding however was only ever sufficient to provide for short term responses and most services only had capacity to support clients for less
than three months. In 1994, the Australian Government introduced the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act (SAA Act) which set out the following aim of SAAP which was to:

“...provide transitional supported accommodation and related support services in order to help people who are experiencing homelessness to achieve the maximum degree of self-reliance and independence...” (SAA Act 1994)

SAAP services did this by providing a range of services during the periods of time when they provided support to their clients (support periods).

Most clients who seek assistance from homelessness services receive general assistance and some degree of counseling about their situation. Clients who receive support for more than a few weeks are likely to receive more intensive ‘case management’. Intensive case management would include things like: A comprehensive assessment of needs and aspirations, strengths based support, counseling, advocacy and referral to other essential services such as mental health or alcohol and other drug services. Clients also receive assistance with other areas in their lives such as; financial/budgeting assistance, the resolution of crisis and the re-establishment of links with family and community.

**The funding instruments**

**The National Affordable Housing Agreement and the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness**

The NAHA came into effect on 1 January 2009 and replaced the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA) which had been the primary instrument that provided funding for housing for those whose needs could not be met by the private market since 1945.

The CSHA was a joint Commonwealth/state funding arrangement that aimed to assist both renters and purchasers to obtain accommodation. The first CSHA, signed off in 1945, allocated funds solely for the construction of new dwellings in the post war period with a requirement that fifty percent of those dwellings had to be allocated to ex-defence force personnel.

The most recent CSHA (2003-2008) provided $5.2 billion in funding for housing commitments primarily directed towards the following key areas; public and community housing, Indigenous housing, crisis accommodation, home purchase assistance and private rental assistance.

After sixty-four years of service, the CSHA retired on 1 January 2009 and was replaced by the NAHA. According to FaHCSIA:

“...The NAHA aims to ensure that all Australians have access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing that contributes to social and economic participation...The NAHA provides $6.2 billion worth of housing assistance to low and middle income Australians in the first five years... The NAHA is supported by National Partnership Agreements on social housing, homelessness and Indigenous Housing in remote areas...” (FaHCSIA National Affordable Housing Agreement)

Funding for homelessness initiatives, programs and services are delivered through both the NAHA and the NPAH. Funding for existing specialist homelessness services (previously funded via SAAP
bilateral agreements) are drawn from NAHA funds while new initiatives, programs and services will be funded via the NPAH.

The combined funding commitment for homelessness initiatives, programs and services under the NAHA and NPAH is $1.2 billion between 2009 and 2013. Of the $1.2 billion, approximately $400 million is allocated to existing specialist homelessness services via the NAHA with the remaining $800 million allocated to new initiatives, programs and services under the NPAH.

**Homelessness Implementation Plans**

As mentioned above, funding for White Paper homelessness initiatives and services is being delivered via the NPAH totalling $800 million over four years.

Each state and territory was asked by the Australian Government to develop an Implementation Plan detailing which programmes and services to which they have allocate their portion of funding under the homelessness NPAH.

The new initiatives outlined in the state and territory Implementation Plans included a number of similar service responses which are designed to address the four core outcomes in the NPAH:

(a) Implementation of the A Place to Call Home initiative;

(b) Street to home initiatives for chronic homeless people (rough sleepers);

(c) Support for private and public tenants to help sustain their tenancies, including through tenancy support, advocacy, case management, financial counselling and referral services; and

(d) Assistance for people leaving child protection services, correctional and health facilities, to access and maintain stable, affordable housing.

In addition to the four core outcomes, there are a series of optional outcomes that state and territory Governments could choose to support the achievement of through other new initiatives. Most states and territories have chosen to focus on women and children escaping domestic and family violence.

**THE WHITE PAPER ON HOMELESSNESS**


At the time that the White Paper on Homelessness, *The Road Home* was released, the then Prime Minister, the Hon. Kevin Rudd MP and then Minister for Housing, the Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP noted:

“...This White Paper delivers a 55 per cent increase on the current investment in homelessness. This represents an additional $800 million over four years and is a down payment on the 12 year reform agenda. It also includes a commitment to additional social housing for homeless people of $400 million over the next two financial years...”
The White Paper on Homelessness committed to improving and expanding homelessness services. This included:

- Improving the response of mainstream services,
- Improving specialist homelessness services,
- Developing a workforce strategy, and
- Developing agreed national accreditation and service standards and service charters for people who are homeless.

The White Paper identified:

- People who are homeless have contact with mainstream services that have a responsibility to identify homelessness and actively respond.
- Specialist homelessness services are an effective way to deliver crisis and ongoing support, and provide expertise on homelessness.
- Specialist homelessness services cannot deliver the entire homelessness response. The best outcomes for people who are homeless will be achieved if specialist and mainstream services work together closely.
- Services should operate so that there are ‘no wrong doors’ for people who are homeless and seeking help.
- All services that work with people who are homeless should focus on getting people into stable long-term housing, employment and training, or other community participation.
- A workforce development strategy is needed so that there are sufficient people with the right skills to work actively with clients to end their homelessness.
- A strong legislative base must remain in place to underpin the national homelessness response, set standards and deliver the best quality services possible for people who are homeless.

In the White Paper, the workforce strategy was briefly outlined and it identified issues such as:

- “low wages, lack of career progression, high staff turnover, low skilled staff, an ageing workforce, casualisation of the workforce, and significant workload stress. Difficulties in attracting young people to the human services field, and in retaining staff affect the ability of services to deliver quality outcomes for clients. In order to reduce homelessness, the workforce must be adequately trained and well resourced. The SAAP IV evaluation Report found that, in all SAAP reviews, increasing staff salaries had clear benefits for the quality of services provided.”

The White Paper also identified the possibility of developing “advanced practitioners” within the awards covering employees in specialist homelessness services, developing a National Compact, and enacting new legislation to ensure that people who are homeless receive quality services and adequate support.

Homelessness Australia’s recent assessment of the progress against commitments in the White Paper relating to workforce diversity included:

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1 White Paper, page 42
People who are homeless have contact with mainstream services that have a responsibility to identify homelessness and actively respond.

Status: Unsatisfactory to date. With the exception of Centrelink (DHS), there is little evidence that other mainstream and ‘first to know’ agencies are responding adequately or have improved their response. Small pilot programs are not good enough. Much work to do.

The $197.3 million in funding set aside for 50 new ‘headspace’ centres has been proposed as an example of efforts to improve the response of mainstream services and under new contractual arrangements ‘headspace’ will be required to report on the housing status of clients.

DEEWR has suggested that the Home Options and Pathways to Employment Project is possibly an example where learnings can be gained. An Australian Government funded partnership between Homelessness Australia and the National Employment Services Association (NESA), it aimed to facilitate effective linkages between Job Services Australia and homelessness services providers – to strengthen their capacity to work collaboratively to ensure that homeless people receive appropriate and tailored services which will enable them to progress to employment and offer pathways from poverty and homelessness.

However analysis on the effectiveness of HOPE is required to assess its relative (and ongoing) contribution to the linkages between mainstream and specialist homelessness services.

In addition, the Government has supported over $12.2 million of innovative projects in the employment services arena which have included a focus on homeless job seekers - 9 Jobs Fund projects (funded for $8.5 million) and 5 Innovation Fund (funded for $3.7 million) projects. Lessons and positive experiences from the nine Jobs Fund projects will be analysed as a part of program closure report. Under the Innovation Fund, each project is required to undertake a project specific evaluation as the final stage of the project. The program will also be evaluated during 2012 and this evaluation is likely to inform policy development around improving assistance for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in mainstream programs.

Unfortunately, from the sector’s viewpoint the funding for these Innovations Fund projects ceases on 30 June 2012 and we have unsuccessfully lobbied for an extension in funding for homelessness specific innovations fund projects.

The Australian Government will work with the states and territories to establish a ‘case-mix’ pilot trial to better quantify the actual costs of supporting high-needs clients and test whether additional outcome-based performance payments can improve both employment and housing outcomes for people who are homeless.

The trial will identify those people who have a higher level of complexity requiring longer-term and more intensive coordinated support. The trial will identify a best practice approach (including the skills needed) to providing this support.

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**Status: Uncertain.** We are told that a case-mix pilot was undertaken but no results have been made available to Homelessness Australia. FaHCSIA notes that it is an on-going item of attention and discussion at the Prime Minister’s Council and Homelessness Delivery Review Board meetings.

The Australian Government and state and territory governments will work with homelessness services and people who are homeless to develop national homelessness service standards and a system for accrediting services focused on improving quality.

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**Status: In progress.** 2 rounds of consultation around the development of a National Quality Framework to support quality services for people experiencing homelessness have been completed. A sector reference group has been established to provide on-going advice as we progress towards its implementation. People experiencing homelessness have been consulted. There was much haste in the initial stages of the development of the NQF which the sector believes has since lost momentum. FaHCSIA has a differing view and reports that it is now being progressed through the Select Council on Homelessness. Communication about the process has not been provided to the sector who remain confused about progress and timeframes.

A workforce development strategy is needed so that there are sufficient people with the right skills to work actively with clients to end their homelessness.

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**Status: Not delivered.** We are yet to see a firm commitment to develop an overarching workforce development strategy for the homelessness sector but this may be an outcome of the research. Homelessness Australia was interviewed for a project by the University of Queensland funded under the homelessness research agenda to provide advice about workforce challenges, capacity and future demands/needs. There is a good case for including the $2 billion federal funding commitment to support the Fair Work Australia equal remuneration decision in our analysis here as a positive even though it is not a White Paper initiative.

FaHCSIA notes that the University of Queensland research is being considered by FaHCSIA and has not yet been released. This is pleasing but as at time of writing we are unable to assess this.
The diversity of the homelessness sector

Location
Metropolitan
Regional
Rural
Remote

Client type
Youth
Families
Women
Older people
Men
Children
Rough sleepers

Cultural
Aboriginal
Torres Strait islander
Culturally and linguistically diverse

Size of the service
Small
Medium
Large

Mission
Faith-based
Consumer driven
Voluntary
For-profit
Not-for-profit

Focus
Mainstream
Specialist
Government

Workforce
Professional
Entry level
Volunteers

Entry point
Early intervention
Prevention
Re-occurrence
Adverse life event
Chronic/long-term

Funding
Government/s
Church
Donations
Non-funded
Community

Service provision
Supported housing
Shelter
Information/referral
Food
Counselling
Education/training
Independent living skills
Employment

Causes
Drug/alcohol/addiction
Domestic/family violence
Gambling
Mental illness
Poverty
Illness/adverse life event
Disability
Family breakdown
Complex needs
Challenging behaviours
The diversity of the homelessness sector and community sector more broadly is apparent in the range of service responses provided. Different support services are required at different times during the individuals’ journey through homelessness e.g. outreach/assessment and referral, street to home, in home services. During the individuals’ journey these support services may be required again if the cycle of homelessness continues. It is necessary for response time to be immediate.

Another key feature of the homelessness sector relates to the previous SAAP definition of ‘safety net’. This definition coupled with the diverse client group often sees the sector working with people who have been ‘locked out’ of other services; sometimes due to the multiple issues they are dealing with and sometimes due to the manifestations of these issues into behaviour. Thus the sector is characterised by dealing with people who don’t necessarily fit neatly into other services e.g. people with a mental illness and alcohol and other drug (AOD) issues will often be declined services from mental health and AOD services; each saying it is the other service’s responsibility. Additionally these issues combined with difficulty experienced by people in accessing appropriate services can lead to behaviour described by services as challenging/people who are hard to house and/or people with high and complex needs.

In addition to the 1559 specialist homelessness services funded through the NAHA in 2009/10, the NPAH has funded over 180 new initiatives, services and supportive housing models as well as expanded service options in some jurisdictions most notably, Western Australia.

Demand for accommodation and support from NAHA funded specialist homelessness services remains strong and indeed continues to exceed service system capacity. While data on the number of people assisted by programs and service models funded via the NPAH is not available, the COAG Select Council on Homelessness communiqué indicates that the 180 services provided 170,000 instances of assistance to people who were experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

The depth and breadth of service types needed and existing and the range of support provided is indicative of the diversity that the service system is built on. Homelessness is an experience that can and does happen to people across all different stages of life, therefore at the very least services need to cater for different client groups at different life stages.

**Preserving and enhancing the diversity of the sector**

A strong and diverse sector is able to adapt to changing client needs and service environments. It is essential that services are able to support different age groups, particularly if they are also accommodation providers. It may not be appropriate, desirable or safe for instance to impose a requirement on services to accommodate single adults with families and women and children escaping violence and young people all in the same locality for example as this could be expected to create issues of safety for both service users and workers. Yet this option has been flagged as a way of ‘consolidating services’. It is not supported by the sector and should not be an option for government.

Homelessness Australia’s members see this diversity of the sector as one of its key strengths. They are concerned about recent processes and reviews at a state and territory level that appear to be aimed at consolidating and streamlining service delivery which is viewed positively by economists.
and consultancy firms but less so by homelessness service providers and frontline workers. These concerns will be articulated and addressed later in the paper.

A community-wide approach is, as the White Paper on Homelessness points out, required in order for us to meet the headline goals of halving homelessness and offering accommodation to rough sleepers. At the community level, we need to work together to reconnect and strengthen community connections to support the disadvantaged including families, children and individuals e.g. neighbourhood centres, PCYC.

A strong community services sector needs to continue to grow and invest training and resources into the skills of workers at all levels to respond to disadvantaged people when they need it and ensure that there are only open doors

Some moves to centralise funding to fewer providers and standardising models can put smaller, tailored providers at risk. Larger organisations need to value diversity and model what they would hope to see from Government – support for smaller independent tailored services meeting the specific needs of sometimes smaller cohorts. Community sector services working in the area of homelessness must work together and meet on a regular basis. This provides the opportunity to discuss issues, changing trends and unmet demand. The sector must project a collective voice to Governments and funding bodies that it is not a simple matter of coming up with a standardised model which clients must fit into. History shows that this is often why individuals fall through the cracks. There is a huge risk in developing models which are economically driven rather than recognising that people have a diverse range of needs and issues.

Service providers need to adopt a global perspective to solutions and innovation that is relevant and directly linked to local circumstances – and many already do. Many services are delivered vertically from within programs funded through specific ‘buckets’ of funding. Services have already identified the need to integrate, combine and share increasingly limited resources while faced with increasing demand. Inter-agency working groups, roundtables, and the like are an effective way of addressing client needs and consolidating scarce resources. There are a range of strong and effective collaborations and partnership in place across the sector, and this has been taking place for quite some time: it is not a new concept. Services need to continue to work collaboratively to ensure a collective effort is made to meet individuals’ needs. Brisbane Homeless Service Centre, 50 lives/50 homes and Under 1 Roof are examples of how effective working collaboratively can be rather than working as silo services.

Government must be more flexible with funding. Whilst it is important that outcomes are clearly specified, funding needs to be untied so it can be more responsive to local circumstances and tailored to individual need and allow organisations more creativity in the delivery of services e.g. some large organisations deliver numerous homelessness programs with funding from one government department. Some of these programs are reasonably funded and some are barely able to achieve program outcomes due to insufficient funds. If grants were untied, dollars could be shifted from program to program to cover off shortfalls but still meet desired service outcomes. This is a complex model that would require careful planning to implement. However, the results might justify the effort.
Homelessness Australia believes that it is essential to ensure that our response to homelessness is delivered by a broad range of providers including smaller providers who have the capacity to meet the needs of particular client groups in particular localities and regions. As the White Paper acknowledged homelessness can happen to anyone and there needs to be a diverse range of responses delivered and services that provide assistance to people across all life stages.

In addition it is entirely appropriate that services are funded to provide assistance to specific groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, women and children escaping domestic and family violence and younger people.

Homelessness Australia’s members believe the current diversity of providers and service models is one of the core strengths of the homelessness sector and preserving this diversity is viewed as critically important during a period of significant change for the sector much of which has been triggered by new funding instruments for homelessness services (the NAHA and the NPAH) and the White Paper. These changes have resulted in a series of ‘sector reform processes’ at a State and Territory level that have received a mixed response from service providers.

Positive and enabling approaches to the delivery of funding for services and helping services to meet quality assurance standards could be a catalyst for enhancing sector diversity, strengthening cooperative partnership between Government and non-Government sectors and boosting the morale of the community sector workforce.

**Threats to the diversity of the sector**

The homelessness sector has experienced positive developments in recent years, largely stemming from the drive and enthusiasm generated by the White Paper and the associated injection of funds into the sector. Nevertheless, there is a degree of uncertainty in the sector, due to a range of factors, which impact on the sector’s ability to improve its efficiency and effectiveness and deliver its potential of reducing and preventing homelessness. Consultancy firms engaged to drive reform processes, consolidation and ‘regionalisation’ of service delivery, competitive tendering, consolidation, etc and government-driven processes that are not well received in the sector.

There is generally increased competition among community organisations for government and private sector financial support as well as for staff, and this encourages competition between organisations at local, state and national levels. This can be unhelpful to the longer-term health of the sector.

**Purchasing arrangements for services**

Some have argued that the shift to competitive tendering and contracting for procuring government funded services has brought greater transparency, and in many cases enhanced efficiency, in the delivery of services. Yet it has also increasingly demanded greater prescription of how agencies are to function and deliver services. While the aim has been to drive improvements in service delivery, NFPs report being swamped by contractual regulation, a multiplicity of reporting requirements, micro management, and restrictions on other activities and significantly greater compliance burdens.
Having consulted widely with service providers and peak bodies across all States and Territories in the process of compiling our White Paper Report Card, our experience has been that opposition to competitive tendering processes is both strong and widespread. Arguably there will be winners and losers in any funding processes that result in the selection of preferred providers of housing and homelessness services. Notwithstanding this it is a major concern when a consequence of these processes is the creation of a culture of mistrust of other providers that reduces collaboration and cooperation. This would seem to be contrary to the stated intent of the White Paper which was to drive joined-up service delivery and increase collaboration between mainstream and specialist services.

The sector is understandably concerned about competitive tendering processes that often follow overarching reviews. While there are winners and losers in any tendering process where a limited number of contracts are on offer and services are competing for a share of finite dollars some providers are better placed to win tenders than others. This is not always because the winning provider will deliver the best services in the local context either.

Providers with large enough budgets to employ dedicated personnel to prepare proposals in response to Requests for Tender (RFT) are often at a distinct advantage over services that have a limited number of staff who will be required to perform their regular duties in addition to tenders for services and funding.

Governments often adopt a partial funding model for a range of services, even for contracts that are deemed to be purchase agreements. This requires NFPs to subsidise service costs from other revenue sources. A significant consequence, especially for community services, has been that wages have been squeezed to the point where many NFPs find it difficult to attract or retain professional staff, with implications for the quality of services.

Contracts that require the return of any surplus mean little funding is available for investment to improve effectiveness or efficiency, such as in information technology. In addition, governments have moved away from making grants for capital, contributing only about 7.6 per cent of the funding for new capital expenditure in this way in 2006-07. This presents problems for NFPs, many of which find it difficult to access finance, or to build a surplus to fund investment.

Seemingly illogical decisions to engage consultants from far away who apply a meaningless “cookie cutter” template to local or regional problems; invite advice from locals and ignore it, base their decisions on ‘evidence bases’ that are thin or irrelevant to the place in which they are applying it, only to be thanked for their good work by Governments who appear not to understand their own service systems, is what our members tell us occurs.

While touting proposed models as reflecting ‘best practice’, too often they are actually about best practice in terms of the cost effectiveness of responses which is not always the same as outcomes for clients and in some cases could be in direct conflict. Recent examples have cited gateway models as examples of best practice. The evidence base used to justify this has been compiled from large population centres overseas which are often characterised by having a wide variety of services available for people in close proximity. This may not be the case in smaller regional Australian cities yet this has not been taken into consideration in recent papers that Homelessness Australia has canvassed.
It may be tempting to use the evidence that a particular model of service delivery has high success rates in one / some locations to then contract for that model across the State or country. This does not account for all the variables of success, such as: the local service system make up, the local connections between supports from business or community and the service delivery agency and particular demographic or geographic issues of a regional location. A model that works in one part of the State may not be adaptable to the different cultures, relationships and services operating in another part of the State.

In drawing attention to this, Homelessness Australia is not at all arguing that there is not value in looking at models that are achieving good outcomes in other countries or States. What appears to be overlooked by large consultancy firms when preparing papers that propose options for new service system models is the importance of the local service delivery context and the need to value the knowledge base and expertise of service providers that have been operating in localities for some time. This was evidenced in a recent paper that flagged the need for the establishment of a central intake number to be established when in fact a free call central intake number had been in operation for some time fulfilling the same function as that which was proposed in the paper.

In addition, while options papers tout niceties such as ‘client centred approaches’ and emphasise the need for service systems to focus on ‘outcomes for people’, their authors often do not consult with the not for profit sector and the very services actually supporting people who would be at the ‘centre’ of proposed new model until after papers have been written.

Understandably service providers can take umbrage at claims they are not focused on the needs of clients and getting the best outcomes for people using their services which they feel are implied by such statements. This is usually compounded by the fact they have not been consulted by firms engaged to conduct overarching service system reviews. They then read papers proposing what services should be doing and their workers think ‘but we are already doing that, why were we not asked to demonstrate what we are doing?’ This can lead to cynicism and mistrust about the motivations for reviews.

The feedback we are receiving is that Governments are certainly trending towards engaging consultants to come up with standardised models. Whilst there may be some examples where duplication occurs within the sector, this is minimal. As always, this is economically driven rather than focusing on best practice and achieving good client outcomes. In addition, the competitive tendering that usually results from such reviews is damaging to sector relationships at a time when Government spruiks the importance of partnerships and collaboration.

Furthermore, despite (apparently) wanting to encourage innovation from the sector, requests for tenders from Government are often prescriptive in nature and almost always devoid of the actual dollars available. This leads organisations to try and undercut each other to ‘win’ the tender resulting in budgets of successful tenders being so ‘line ball’ that unforeseen changes can leave services under-funded.

Inadequate indexation (and in some cases none) translates to funding cuts in real terms to already under-resourced services. This places pressure on the budgets of organisations and leads to constrained choices about operations and difficult decisions about “rationing” service delivery. Additionally it means that social and community services organisations often do not provide pay
increases for staff leading to lower levels of morale and contributing to higher rates of staff turnover in our sector than the Australian average\textsuperscript{xiv}.

Undoubtedly the uncertainty for staff that accompanies reviews is also a major issue and can often lead to staff seeking other positions that can offer better job security. Workers who have invaluable knowledge and skills can often be lost in times of such change which is unfortunately usually unrecognised.

As Governments move to decrease the number of funding contracts they have with CSOs (for efficiency reasons) there is a risk that small, specialised services will be lost. In addition the streamlining of services means that client choice may be lost. In the homelessness sector much of the hard (but extremely) important work can be engaging with people seeking services.

Currently in Tasmania, for example, if a service is unable to engage with a client, they may seek support/assistance from another service. If there are no other services available this will obviously limit client choice but can also limit the possible outcomes for that person. Similarly if a client is restricted from a service and there are no alternatives available, the same issues exist.

**Workforce pressure and a changing environment for volunteers**

Generic regulation, such as the new workplace safety and health requirements, are imposing disproportional costs on providers. These, coupled with more specific qualification requirements, are raising the costs of using volunteers. Such additional costs come at a time when volunteers are tending to volunteer for fewer hours on average, with younger volunteers preferring episodic and work-based volunteering.

Some providers have dealt well with the changing environment for volunteers, but others struggle. There is also evidence that increasing professionalisation also corresponds with employment growth, but also crowds out voluntary effort in community services and education.

**Cross-jurisdictional differences impose unnecessary burdens**

Regulatory reforms have assisted business to take a more national market focus, regardless of size or area of commerce. The same options are not available to NFPs. There is a focus on streamlining regulatory frameworks for not for profit housing providers and Homelessness Australia welcomes these efforts.

Differences across jurisdictions in regulatory requirements, including incorporation and fundraising legislation, raise compliance costs. The current arrangements are not coherent, are complex to navigate, do not allow for easy migration of legal form, and do not provide sufficient transparency to the public. There are multiple reporting requirements and few are proportionate to the size and scope of the NFPs.

**Workforce issues including wages**

Workers in the community services sector are expected to display sensitivity, a concern for others, good communication skills, and a non-judgmental approach to issues faced by individuals and communities.

The homelessness sector commonly utilises strengths-based approaches to case management that assist people to harness strengths and capabilities.
Developing a workforce strategy was identified in the Homelessness White Paper as a key strategy for improving specialist homelessness services. The White Paper noted that there were a number of critical issues to be addressed including low wages, difficulties in attracting young people into the field, lack of career progression, high staff turnover, low skilled staff, an ageing workforce, casualisation of the workforce and significant workload stress. In particular, the need for increased skills and competencies was identified as a priority and a necessary condition for achieving sustainable outcomes for people with high and complex needs. A number of initiatives were flagged in the White Paper including the development of ‘advanced practitioners’ within the awards covering specialist homelessness employees and a standards and accreditation system for funded homelessness services focused on quality improvement, including improvement in education and training and career pathways. A discussion paper on a National Quality Framework to support quality services for people experiencing homelessness was released by the Housing Ministers’ Conference in February 2010 and work continues on the NQF. The development of a ‘competent, trained and qualified workforce’ is one of the core principles underlying the quality framework.

FaHCSIA has commissioned research from Professor Bill Martin from the University of Queensland to provide us with some insight on what is required to develop an effective homelessness workforce. While these findings are early and not yet published, they do provide considerable insight into the issues facing the homelessness sector and there appears to be considerable transferability to the social housing workforce.

We also know that

- The workforce is predominately female (80%)
  - half are permanent full time, one third are permanent part time, 15% are casual, the small balance is made up of contract and agency staff;
- The workforce is quite highly qualified:
  - Nearly 40% have University degrees (46% of professionals, 20% of non-professionals)
  - One third have Diplomas
  - Nearly 20% have Certificate III or IV (28% of non-profs, 15% of professionals)
  - Less than 10% have no post-school qualifications (15% of non-professionals)

Homelessness Australia’s annual Members’ Survey also includes questions about the main issues that our member organisations and services have faced in the previous twelve months.

Recent results from our 2011-12 members’ survey showed that a sizeable minority (just over 40%) of respondents indicated that having difficulty recruiting and retaining skilled workers and/or the loss of expertise due to staff turnover were issues of concern for their services.

This is not an adverse finding compared to previous years but it is significant in some ways because the question does not specifically ask about workforce issues but is instead a broader question about main issues facing an organisation or service.

Homelessness Australia is looking forward to seeing the findings from the research on issues affecting the homelessness workforce funded under the National Homelessness Research Agenda. We attended a presentation of the summary of the findings at the Reconnect ‘Good Practice Forum’
and were told findings were available on the Homelessness Clearinghouse. Thus far Homelessness Australia has not been able to find them on the clearinghouse website (although that does not necessarily mean they are not there, simply that they are not extremely simple to find). We believe that this would be a sensible location on which to publish the findings of all of the completed research projects funded under the National Homelessness Research Agenda.

Workforce retention has become a greater challenge, due largely to higher salaries and superannuation entitlements paid in other sectors, such as government. Over the next eight years the gap in remuneration looks set to be largely closed following the outcome of the pay equity case which will result in pay increases being phased in between now and 2020.

The homelessness sector has a large proportion of not-for-profit providers. Wages in the sector have tended to remain relatively low, despite a significant increase in the qualifications required of workers. This could be a result of a low wage history, the predominantly female and part-time labour force, and the heavy reliance on public funding of services in these sectors. For providers in these sectors, gaps between the wages they can offer compared to similar positions in the public service (particularly) makes retaining workers more difficult.

While there are a number of dimensions to job quality, the rate of pay that is associated with a job is obviously an important factor. Studies of earning differentials suggest that pay rates are highly correlated with the level of skill required, tenure in the job, work experience and/or the complexity of tasks involved. More highly paid employees also tend to have better working conditions and greater autonomy in their work schedules. This suggests that pay rates can be used as a proxy for job quality.

The problems of workforce retention are compounded by uncertainty associated with short-term contracts, corresponding to funding agreement cycles, and sometimes with late or last minute review or extension of funding agreements. Some organisations employ staff on a contact corresponding to funding agreement terms, and when a funding agreement is not renewed in a timely manner, the employee will often seek other work, and a funding agreement is renewed too late to retain a valued employee. As demand for services rises with population ageing, workforce shortages are likely to become profound, requiring major adjustment.

This problem goes beyond the community sector and affects all human service providers. Members frequently report difficulties with recruitment and retention and this was again a major issue raised in our annual members’ survey in 2011-12.

Common reasons provided (apart from comparatively low remuneration for similar work compared to other sectors) are:

- Limited opportunities for career progression
- Workplace stress
- Demand pressures; and
- Reportedly high rates of burn-out.
Recruiting and retaining staff, particularly in regional and rural areas, has become increasingly problematic, given high rates of population mobility and shortages of skilled personnel. An ageing workforce is also an identified issue.

Homelessness Australia is also aware of a number of housing challenges facing services in regional and rural areas. These relate to difficulties finding and securing adequate housing for workers, a point made by both our members and re-iterated by Reconnect providers from the Northern Territory at a recent forum.

The problems are more acute in areas where there is significant mining activity.

Some organisations report difficulty in employing Indigenous people due to a shortage of suitable candidates for positions and high demand for experienced Indigenous workers.

**Opportunities for closer collaboration, innovation and partnerships**

Community sector organisations and peak bodies are generally proactive in identifying and developing solutions to service gaps or trending problematic issues (sometimes advocating to Government to provide funding). Unfortunately Governments are often reluctant to take up these ideas instead engaging consultants to tell everyone what they already know. Obviously this is a very costly exercise in a sector where resources (dollars) are scarce.

Partnerships have been an integral part of the way the homelessness sector has worked over the course of many decades. There are many good examples of this at a local area service level but the partnership building takes place over a period.

The sector needs to ensure they balance their service delivery responsibilities with strategic approaches at a system-wide level and continue to engage in conceptualising system-wide solutions.

This is where it is imperative that the sector work together as a strong voice. However, this should never be at the detriment of service users and should always have clients’ best interests at the forefront. To date this work often takes place by peak bodies, such as Homelessness Australia, who have to work hard to consult because of the limited time and resources that service providers in the field have available: in effect some of the systemic advocacy work can be seen by service providers as a luxury they don’t have time for, because it would come at the cost of some actual service delivery.

Examples could include:

- Organisations working collaboratively to provide wrap around services to those experiencing homelessness
- Health services e.g. nurses working with outreach teams/ mobile doctors
- Housing e.g. rental market, working collaboratively with homeless services

As a starting point it would be useful to see Government/Departments working more collaboratively with each other and community organisations. Unfortunately there are too many examples where
(despite requiring this of their funded services) they don’t even collaborate and communicate effectively within their own discrete areas. This is certainly an area where the community sector leads by example. This is the result of working within a tight fiscal environment with limited resources and trying to achieve the best possible outcomes for people using services.

Further opportunities exist for homelessness services to collaborate more effectively with mainstream services (mental health, AOD, health, education etc.). Australian and State Government directions such as ‘homelessness is everybody’s responsibility’ and driving integration and collaboration through all levels of services (and being resourced to do so) will certainly enhance this collaboration.

A confident sector and a sector willing to work together and talk openly with each other can demonstrate to Government that services are genuinely working together to address homelessness. By partnering with different sectors, we can ensure our voice and perspective becomes mainstream. For example, in Tasmania in the new supported accommodation facilities where traditional homelessness support providers have partnered with community housing providers and the business sector to provide safe affordable long term housing with a focus on developing people’s independence and social inclusion.

In addressing the future needs of the sector Governments need to recognise the great work and outcomes being achieved in the area of homelessness; as well as the passion and commitment demonstrated by workers.

This needs to be supported by Governments’ commitment to ongoing professional training for the sector. Training for the sector has been a long standing undelivered promise. Many, if not most organisations (and this may be especially true of smaller organisations) struggle to allocate the time for workers to attend training, let alone any cost required.

Homelessness is a major community issue, requiring an integrated and effective response and to a large degree the community sector have taken the lion’s share of responsibility for providing that response. Whilst Governments want to purchase services from providers with highly skilled staff, using evidence-based practice, they are unwilling to commit financially to ensuring staff remain skilled and have access to contemporary approaches through training.

We should be viewing the future response to homelessness not as a welfare response, but a series of strategic partnerships with different sectors to ensure we build a fair and equitable society where all of our citizens are provided with shelter and every opportunity for a happy and fulfilling life. There are many businesses, organisation and communities of interest who share these perspectives and therefore we have an opportunity to act as leaders to ensure we are providing ideas and pathways for these various interests to become engaged and aligned with our broader aspirations and experience.

“...In the refugee sector, community-based detention is slowly happening – the Australian government is beginning to understand costs can be saved, and that Australians are willing to support newcomers in their own homes or neighbourhoods. Might the same trend be achievable in homelessness? For one example -might community-based shared housing arrangements help to
alleviate pressures on homelessness services, and at the same time, provide Australians who have spare bedrooms, an opportunity to assist less fortunate others?…”

Community, health and housing government agencies and not-for-profit and community services need to be supported to work collaboratively. There are many examples of this happening and it has occurred as a matter of course during the development and evolution of the sector over time.

**Recommendations**

1.) Greater attention is required by governments on the particular issues faced by organisations in regional, rural and remote areas, especially in relation to compliance and staff recruitment, training and retention.
2.) The homelessness sector should be funded to develop an overarching sector development and workforce development strategy.
3.) Greater information sharing between organisations at all levels about issues affecting them and areas of commonality and duplication.
4.) Governments must provide funding that reflects the true costs of service delivery over the length of funding agreements. This must also take into account additional cost pressures that services in regional and rural areas face.
5.) Indexation applied to funding agreements must be sufficient to provide for annual incremental increases to salaries and wages of employees. Without this, the gap will continue to widen and services will continue to lose qualified staff to the Government and Private Sector which can offer annual increases in pay.
6.) Longer funding cycles are necessary to reflect long term need, retain skilled staff, and to prevent vulnerable people with long-term needs receiving only short-term assistance.
7.) Greater effort should be made to ensure the indexation of government project funding and the application of indexation in order to help retain and motivate staff.
8.) Project evaluation should occur at an appropriately early time to help to retain staff and provide greater certainty for organisations.
9.) Ideally, funding cycles should overlap to help prevent loss of staff and a reduction in the momentum of service delivery to vulnerable families.
10.) The issues of staff recruitment, retention and training are a high priority and require a coherent national approach.
11.) Services should be provided with sufficient indexation and growth funding to support annual increases in remuneration for workers.
12.) Greater publicity should be given to the value of, and opportunities available in, the community sector, to attract staff and raise awareness across the general population and within the sector itself.
13.) Greater attention is needed in relation to the recruitment and support of governance bodies (boards and committees).
14.) Additional training opportunities, including in the area of business management and new initiatives (such as new workplace health and safety legislation), are needed, especially in rural areas.
15.) Sector diversity must be protected and enhanced to provide people needing access to services with choice. This is particularly important in regional and rural areas where there are fewer mainstream and specialist services.

CONCLUSIONS

The sector is diverse and this is a core strength that should be celebrated, preserved and enhanced.

This paper provides a small snapshot of some of the issues facing the homelessness sector, specifically workforce issues. It finds that both the homelessness sector and the social and community services sector more broadly are diverse in character and composition. The client base of the homelessness sector is also diverse and the evolution of homelessness services and the response to homelessness over the past forty years reflects this.

Homelessness Australia views this diversity as positive and believes that we need to preserve and enhance the broad range of service responses to homelessness in order to achieve reductions in homelessness over time. Our mission is to create a framework to end homelessness.

It is essential that both mainstream and specialist services play a part in the overall drive to end homelessness in Australia. Our experience is that this is happening and there are many examples of partnerships between Government and non-Government and mainstream and specialist service providers at a local level that are working together to end homelessness for people.

One of the perennial concerns of the homelessness sector over many years has been finding the time to document the myriad of ways in which services engage in collaborative partnerships and harness the capabilities that providers possess in particular localities. The sector is continuously faced with very high demands for services and accommodation and this means workers are (as they should be) heavily focussed on meeting the needs of the people accessing services.

Our members have consistently informed us through our annual member surveys that would like to be given the opportunity and resources to document examples of good practice, collaboration and partnership building to highlight what they are doing well and the challenges they face.

By necessity, homelessness services engage with a diverse range of allied services both mainstream and specialist in order to bring about the best outcomes possible for clients. This is partly because resources are finite and it is essential to work cooperatively with other providers who may be better equipped or resourced to provide services that people experiencing homelessness may need to stabilise their situations and begin the process of re-establishing stable housing and a greater sense of ‘place’ in communities.

It may also be driven by the complexity of need that clients of homelessness services may have or because people find themselves in homelessness services with particular needs such as access to specialist services for mental health issues or alcohol and other drug services that cannot be provided by homelessness services themselves.

The pathways in and out of homelessness can be many and varied and workers in homelessness services utilise a wide variety of skills in their day to day roles. People accessing services also possess
many capabilities, skills and strengths and case management models utilised by homelessness services seek to harness these and help people tap into them and build upon them to re-establish independence.

Reducing sector diversity may have a negative impact on client outcomes, collaborative practice and joined-up service delivery.
Homelessness Australia’s members have raised concerns with us about potential threats to the diversity of the sector which as noted above is, we believe, one of its greatest strengths. These concerns chiefly relate to processes at a State and Territory level that pertain to the means through which services are funded and proposals for the reorganisation of the service delivery system.

The drive to improve accessibility to the homelessness service system and make it easier for people to find homelessness services when they need them is not inherently a bad thing. Homelessness and housing systems are difficult to access and Homelessness Australia is supportive of the concept of ensuring that getting access to services should be as easy as possible for people, especially when a crisis occurs.

The process of achieving the stated aim of improved accessibility to services is an issue that is of significant concern to our members however. Processes at a State and Territory level that aim to centralise access to the homelessness service system have been met with a mixed response in some jurisdictions. They have, by and large, been driven by large consultancy firms that have been engaged by Governments at a jurisdictional level to investigate and develop models of service delivery reform that are being touted as ‘best practice’ and draw on an evidence base that our members are concerned has not adequately taken into account, local knowledge or expertise.

Concerns have been raised with Homelessness Australia about the potential impact of drives towards ‘consolidation’ and ‘regionalisation’ and the establishment of ‘gateways’ on outcomes for clients. These concerns also arise from examining proposals by consultancy firms that would dramatically alter the make-up and organisation of the homelessness service delivery system. There is nothing wrong with wanting to ensure that access points to the service system are as easy to locate as possible for people who need them, when they need them.

Where Homelessness Australia and our members do have significant concerns is with proposals that ultimately result in the provision of fewer services and services that do not have strong connections with or roots within the communities in which people experiencing homelessness live. The drive towards the consolidation of services and ‘regionalisation’ is, we are informed, resulting in the direction of funds for services in regional centres and cities and requiring that services be physically located in these centres. While there are situations in which this is practical and sensible, there are others in which this makes the ‘tyranny of distance’ render service accessibility untenable for people. This can force people to sleep rough in rural towns and localities where there is no accessible accommodation or take up unsafe accommodation offers that place people at risk of potentially serious harm, in particular young women.

Homelessness Australia concludes that we need to ensure that all drives to streamline or improve access to the service system take into account the need to ensure that accommodation and support services continue to be funded in areas where if the system were operating on the basis of a profit motive, a private enterprise may render them unviable. A focus on regionalisation must not and
should not directly translate to the redirection of funding to larger regional centres at the expense of people in smaller towns and rural areas. This is why taking into account the local service delivery context and the expertise and knowledge of service providers in each locality is so important. As the White Paper notes, homelessness can indeed happen to anyone. This is why we need to ensure that there are a diverse range of accommodation and support services available to people across Australia, wherever they are living.

We need to ensure that ‘reform processes’ involve non-Government homelessness services and people who are experiencing homelessness.

This may sound obvious and straightforward but Homelessness Australia is aware of instances in which this has not happened. It is not acceptable and it needs to change. Options papers developed without the involvement of people who have experienced homelessness and workers who have assisted them to re-establish independence, raises a serious question. How can papers commissioned by large scale consultancy firms without input from service deliverers and users really demonstrate that proposed models for a reorganised service system will truly deliver improved outcomes for the people that should matter most in a client centred approach?

The homelessness workforce faces a number of challenges

We understand that some of the Homelessness research agenda projects may focus on workforce issues. However, without access to that information, our paper provides some general comments, relating to the importance of workforce training, retention and planning; funding cycles and the timely notification of projects’ continuance; and constraints to funding and organisational sustainability in general.

With this in mind, one of our main recommendations arising from this paper concerns the need for an overarching workforce and sector development strategy to be developed for the homelessness sector. We know from research conducted by the Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council that the community sector workforce is growing. It is our contention that the positive changes brought about by the White Paper in terms of driving a more integrated response to homelessness and providing funding that is arguably more outcomes focussed require an overarching strategy to equip the homelessness workforce and the sector with the skilled workers needed to deliver these outcomes and ultimately end homelessness for people.

The efforts of the current Government to make ending homelessness a national priority are to be applauded. The social and economic costs of homelessness are enormous. The benefits of preventing it from occurring in the first place and ending it as soon as possible after it occurs are equally tremendous. To ensure this happens in the short, medium and longer term will require a commitment to build the capacity of the homelessness workforce and the viability of the sector. There is work under way under the auspice of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) to ensure that TAFE and University qualifications align with the needs of the community sector workforce including homelessness and social housing going forward. This is fantastic and Homelessness Australia is involved in advisory groups providing input into these processes.

We need to see the development and implementation of an overarching sector and workforce development strategy. This should map out the needs of the sector going forward and address issues
such as service system and workforce capacity, increasing opportunities for the recruitment and retention of appropriately qualified and skilled workers, opportunities for career progression and increased exit points for people following support from homelessness services.

It would be a broad agenda. It will not be an easy task. If however, we are serious about meeting the goal of halving homelessness by 2020 and ultimately, creating a framework for ending homelessness in Australia we need to commit to doing this and doing it in the near future.

The task is enormous but the sector will commit to actively engage and partner with Government to achieve the implementation of such a strategy if it is done well. Homelessness Australia urges the Government the commit to a constructive process that will do this.

The homelessness sector and the not-for-profit sector play a vital role
Homelessness Australia believes that the not-for-profit community sector generally, and homelessness services specifically, play a vitally important role in enhancing the wellbeing of individuals, communities and the nation as a whole. We call for more work to be done to better understand, acknowledge and support the capabilities of this vital sector. The Productivity Commission report on the contribution of the not for profit sector to the Australian economy makes the economic benefits of a viable and well supported social and community services sector abundantly clear. The Productivity Commission estimated that the economic contribution of the sector accounted for four percent of our annual Gross Domestic Product or $42 billion per annum.

Our view is that while perhaps less tangible, the social benefits and contribution of our sector are even greater. When combined they make a compelling case for securing the diversity and viability of the sector into the future.

Homelessness Australia welcomes the opportunity to work with the community sector more broadly and Government
Homelessness Australia acknowledges the significant effort over the past four years at a national level that is aimed at improving relations between the Government and NFP sectors. The National Compact with the Community Sector is an important symbolic document to which Homelessness Australia is a signatory.

We are optimistic about these processes and the prospect that they will lead to improved partnerships and relationships between the Australian Government and the not for profit sector.

The establishment of a single national body that will oversee the not for profit sector is something many people have been calling for, for a number of years now. We are hopeful that the promises of a reduced regulatory burden, reductions in red tape and simpler, more streamlined reporting requirements will lead to improved reporting processes in the future and allow workers in frontline services more time to work with clients. Homelessness Australia understands that there are necessary reporting requirements and accountability frameworks that need to be complied with but members consistently report to us that they feel overburdened by red tape.

We are looking to play a more active role in providing input into the advisory groups established to provide input into the development and implementation of the ACNC.
We hope the current processes taking place deliver an improved partnership between Government and non-Government going forward.

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