



INTERFACE
COUNCILS

Creating liveable communities in Melbourne's outer suburbs

VICTORIAN PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS

Submission by Interface Councils



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TERMS OF REFERENCE

On 7 June 2019, the Legislative Council agreed to the following motion:

That this House requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report, within 12 months, on the state of homelessness in Victoria, and in particular, the Committee should

- 1. provide an independent analysis of the changing scale and nature of homelessness across Victoria;*
- 2. investigate the many social, economic and policy factors that impact on homelessness; and*
- 3. identify policies and practices from all levels of government that have a bearing on delivering services to the homeless.*

INTRODUCTION

Housing that works for residents is an essential component of a liveable community. Accessible housing and associated services are essential components of building neighbourhoods in Melbourne's Interface Councils and reducing the rate of homelessness in Victoria as a whole.

Interface Councils recognises homelessness as a serious and enduring issue that significantly affects Local Governments and their communities. Social and crisis accommodation is vastly undersupplied and does not meet the needs of communities that commonly endure higher than average rates of economic and social disadvantage and, in particular, family violence and mental health issues. Requests from desperate individuals from all walks of life have heightened over recent years. Housing and homelessness services report increasing requests for support that are not matched by housing options for the people who need them.

A safe and secure home is the basis on which strong individuals, healthy families and resilient communities are built. Ensuring people can live with dignity and have adequate access to services where they live is paramount. This means closing the service gap in terms of homelessness and family violence, mental health and allied health. To do this, Interface Councils is calling on a new collaborative and strategic response to homelessness that utilises existing assets and focuses on prevention measures in an attempt to catch up with demand.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Sustained non-partisan commitment** to provide ongoing funding to drive grassroots, whole-of-population, early intervention and primary prevention initiatives.
- **Appropriate national, state and local housing strategies** to meet future needs.
- **Changes to the Victorian Planning Act** to require mandatory inclusionary zoning.
- **State Government funding** to support service delivery required at a local level, utilising assertive outreach.
- **Establishing Orange Door hubs** or similar coordinated access points in the Interface Councils Region.
- **Provision of services** that are locally accessible and culturally appropriate.
- **Greater financial support for Local Governments** regarding the prevention of family violence and early intervention.
- **A commitment to school-based programs** that promote gender equality.
- **Greater accountability, regulation and integration** across the sector.
- **Greater value to be placed on resourcing** and staff in the services sector.
- **Provision of adequate and secure tenure accommodations** to mitigate the already overwhelmed homelessness sector.

BACKGROUND

Home to more than 1.6 million residents in 2016, the Interface Councils group is a coalition of ten municipalities that form an urban ring around metropolitan Melbourne. Comprising Cardinia Shire Council, City of Casey, Hume City Council, Melton City Council, Mitchell Shire Council, Mornington Peninsula Shire Council, Nillumbik Shire Council, City of Whittlesea, Wyndham City Council and Yarra Ranges Shire Council, Interface Councils are vibrant, welcoming and diverse communities.¹

The Interface Councils Region (ICR) includes seven growth area councils.² In addition, Interface Councils accommodates 40% of state population and 47% of Melbourne's population. It manages 90% of Green Wedges, including some of Melbourne's most important assets. They represent one of the fastest growing regions in Australia, with anticipated population by 2041 to exceed 3 million³ and will accommodate 53% of Melbourne's population growth over the 2016-2031 period.

Unprecedented growth and changing demographics within the ICR have put increased pressure on local services and infrastructure that have traditionally already been underfunded in these municipalities.⁴ This poses considerable challenges for councils in continuing to build and maintain healthy, sustainable and inclusive communities.

The Interface Councils Region:

- has the highest levels of mortgage and rental stress in Victoria at 13.16% yet has the lowest average rent for a three-bedroom property
- has areas with few low rental properties available for key workers, older women and others on low incomes
- has high costs of living such as transport costs that add to household stress
- ranks 1.76% below the state average of social housing as a total percentage of dwellings with some Councils having only 4% of rentals affordable to the lowest income households
- has fewer government-subsidised Commonwealth aged care places than middle Melbourne
- has a significant absence of crisis and transitional housing
- is impacted by the shift to using rental properties for short-term accommodation in response to economic opportunities from tourism.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

The Interface Councils Human Services Directors Working Group identified housing and homelessness as one of the top five service gaps across the region, particularly regarding crisis housing.

Ensuring people have access to affordable housing is an essential component of a liveable community. Action needs to be taken to make sure people can live with dignity in affordable, safe and appropriate housing. Access to housing services and crisis accommodation when they need it is vital. Victoria's housing strategies require more innovative approaches to make use of surplus government land, leverage developments to include social housing and strengthen existing infrastructure in the region to achieve this objective.

¹ *Interface Councils Liveability Snapshot, 2017*

² City of Casey, Cardinia Shire Council, Hume City Council, Melton City Council, Mitchell Shire Council, City of Whittlesea & Wyndham City Council

³ Id 2019

⁴ *Interface Councils Liveability Snapshot, 2017*

The demand for housing has increased steadily in the Interface Councils Region over the last five years. Social and affordable housing is under supplied and aged-care places are limited. There is an emerging trend of private housing not being affordable for very low to moderate income earners to either purchase or rent.

Interface Councils has developed two significant pieces of work that represent a critical starting point and background information for this submission:

1. [Human Services Gap Analysis](#) (2017): This was developed to test whether the inequitable distribution of services creates a disadvantage for communities in the Interface Councils Region and understand whether this might be addressed through service redesign and reform, shifting and reprioritising investment and improving service commissioning processes. This report builds on the *Supporting Interface Families* (2016) report which explored the question, 'What are the services families should expect to receive no matter where they live?' In addition, it coincides with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's analysis into the top contributing factors of homelessness in Victoria – family violence, mental health issues and financial difficulties.
2. [Interface Councils' Liveability Policy](#) (2017): This marked a concerted effort by Interface Councils to better understand the true state of liveability within the region. This process identified a disturbing trend of lower liveability in the ICR when compared with the rest of Melbourne. The Interface Councils developed a framework to address these liveability issues, focussing on the key elements that impact on liveability

Other important pieces of work have been undertaken by homelessness organisations across Victoria, which should also be considered. These include but are not limited to *Crisis in Crisis: The appalling state of emergency accommodation in Melbourne's north and west* produced by the Northern and Western Homelessness Network.

FUNDING CONTEXT

The population growth occurring in the ICR is rapidly increasing, while the rate of investment in critical services and infrastructure remains stagnant and insufficient. This means liveability challenges and levels of disadvantage persist. To date, the impact of the imbalance in proportionate funding with respect to population growth remains entrenched in Melbourne's outer suburban communities. Interface Councils understands that the economic climate is tight for all levels of government. However, without a greater emphasis on a needs-based analysis, the complex issue of homelessness cannot be managed in a way that ensures all Victorians are afforded an equal quality of life.

Moreover, the ICR is still not receiving State Budget funding allocations in proportion to population growth. Regarding the 2019-20 Victorian Budget,⁵ there are significant deficits in the provision of public housing in the region. The \$209 million promised for 1000 new public housing dwellings over the next three years does not include any suburbs in the ICR. Further, despite acknowledging that family violence is a major contributor to homelessness, the Budget does not explicitly provide for any new crisis housing for those escaping family violence, which is of great concern.

Fundamental issues persist in the delivery and prioritisation of infrastructure and services across Victoria, and in this region in particular. Not only do the levels of disadvantage remain higher than average, but economic indicators continue to show high unemployment rates, low levels of non-domestic building investment (commercial, industrial, hospital/healthcare, public buildings etc.), and low economic output (GSP).

It is important to note that the key beneficiaries of any investment in the region are not just the residents who live in the immediate surrounding area. If the level of service and infrastructure capacity is increased in the ICR, there will also be enormous productivity and serviceability gains for people living across the whole of Victoria.

⁵ <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/delivering-more-public-housing-for-victorians/>

This would begin to mitigate the long-term social costs associated with historical underfunding in the region by starting to address the increasing pressures on Victorian State Government Budgets.

RESPONDING TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

SCALE

Provide an independent analysis of the changing scale and nature of homelessness across Victoria

The ICR has a higher proportion of homeless people than metropolitan Melbourne or the rest of Victoria. The seven growth Councils are currently experiencing varying levels of urban growth and the region is expected to accommodate approximately 53% of Melbourne's population over the 2016-2031 period. The non-growth area Interface Councils also experience increased homelessness and declining housing affordability, which is complicated by limited access to services and housing supports.

Housing prices in the ICR have historically been more affordable for families than in metropolitan Melbourne, which is a factor in the region's expanding population. However, this is fast becoming eroded by the increasing cost of living. The challenges that come with meeting this demand for critical services and infrastructure have been documented by Interface Councils and other independent sources over many years.⁶

A large portion of the homeless cohort in the ICR is "invisible" or provisionally accommodated. These people reside in inadequate housing such as overcrowded environments or in temporary arrangements with others. Homeless people also include those who are couch surfing, living in rooming houses or those living in cars, tents, caravan parks and improvised dwellings. Some of these people will never have the prospect of accessing permanent housing. This is in contrast to the more visible homeless people in Melbourne's inner city where many people are sleeping rough on the streets. It must be noted however that more visible homelessness has also increased in the ICR, particularly post action to displace homeless people from Melbourne's CBD.

Interface Councils supports the view that homelessness is more than "rooflessness." Individuals who are homeless lack a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety and the ability to control their own living space. It follows that a person is considered homeless where their current living situation is inadequate, has limited or no tenure, or does not allow them to have social relations.⁷

Further, it is critical that homelessness be viewed in the context and continuum of the housing system as opposed to in isolation. If this is not done, the ability for a nuanced and comprehensive understanding and response to this issue is likely to be impacted. In addition, Interface Councils recommends lived experience be emphasised to fully comprehend homelessness.

In general, the ten Interface Councils are large and diverse municipalities with small urban centres and limited social support services. The flow-on effects of the current level of growth manifests in the following problems for the region that have a direct impact on those experiencing or at risk of homelessness:

- **Challenges in access to services**
 - The capacity for outreach services is severely compromised in the region.
 - The limited capacity of homelessness services means community facilities are increasingly being accessed as places of refuge and safety, particularly in extreme weather.
 - People are using public spaces such as libraries and leisure centres to access basic requirements such as heating, cooling, clean water and safety. This has a direct impact on Councils' operating environments – including the need to train staff in supporting persons who are homeless (in situ and referrals).

⁶ Visit www.interfacecouncils.com.au/research-publications for all research and publications

⁷ Mallet 2004, cited in ABS 2012

- This also means some Councils reconsider center opening hours and the suitability of spaces or amenities available in facilities.
 - Hume City Council has developed homelessness help cards for Council staff in order to assist people who are homeless, including people sleeping rough in parks, public toilets and cars.
- In addition, there are multiple and complex cases being presented to services including mental health issues, AOD, family violence and trauma.
- **Limited wrap-around services**
 - This is a substantial issue that has a symbiotic relationship with homelessness.
 - Wrap-around service delivery, including collaborative case management approaches to managing homelessness and flexible family- or person-centered support, is lacking.
 - It is difficult for organisations to work together to provide holistic support when there are limited organisations that are struggling to cope with demand.
- **High levels of domestic and family violence**
 - Incidents of family violence are increasing disproportionately with the rate of increase for the rest of Victoria.
 - Family breakdowns impact the ability to maintain housing stability.
- **A lack of affordable housing and diversity in the private market**
 - Housing options are inadequate – there is little or no crisis housing in many Interface municipalities.
 - Transitional housing options are limited, expensive and often located far away from the municipality where people live.
 - Private rooming houses can be dangerous and unsuitable for individuals or families.
 - Social housing availability is dramatically below what is needed to ensure housing for everyone.
 - The waiting lists/times for public and social housing are growing exponentially.
 - Incentives for the private market to provide diverse, affordable housing options are almost non-existent (e.g. NRAS finished, no mandatory inclusionary zoning.)
- **Impact of “over-tourism”**
 - Over-tourism is symptomatic of the approach of the travel and tourism industry to almost always focus on growth, with limited consideration, concern or planning for the impacts.⁸
 - For some Councils, a lack of inadequate housing options means crisis accommodation is provided in hotels or motels, which stretches already limited resources and affects tourism.
 - The effects of tourism have started to irreparably erode some communities in the ICR. This means prices are driven up and that social capital and infrastructure are compromised. There are many contributing factors such as the commercialisation of the ‘home share’ concept.⁹
- **Insecure employment opportunities and poor education outcomes**
 - The rate of these are higher in the ICR than the rest of the state.
 - Financial difficulties related to insecure employment make ICR residents more vulnerable to circumstances that lead to homelessness.
 - Children growing up in insecure housing can miss out on education opportunities, representing huge costs in terms of loss of opportunity and potential for these children.

⁸ *Short Term Accommodation* - Online Platform Response Issues Paper Page 10 Noosa Council, 2019

⁹ Ibid

- **Social and cultural isolation**
 - There are higher levels of social and cultural isolation than metropolitan Melbourne or the rest of the state.
 - There has been an increase in culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities and larger families presenting to services due to population growth.

- **A lack of basic public transport**
 - The ICR has inadequate public transport that exacerbates existing vulnerabilities in the region.
 - Limited public transport can be particularly challenging for people on low or very low incomes.
 - It means local health/support services and local employment are harder to reach.
 - Opportunities to connect within a local community are minimised.

Over the 2011-2016 period, there has been an increase in homelessness across the ICR, as shown by the snapshot of outer south eastern suburbs in Figure 1 below. The City of Casey has one of the highest numbers of people counted as homeless in the Southern Region for both 2011 and 2016.¹⁰ This is based on ABS Census data.

Figure 1.

| | Cardinia | Casey | Mornington Peninsula | Yarra Ranges |
|-------------------|----------|-------|----------------------|--------------|
| 2011 | 144 | 931 | 272 | 334 |
| 2016 | 220 | 1285 | 298 | 360 |
| % increase | 76 | 38 | 9 | 7 |

However, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Salvation Army data is more reliable than ABS Census figures. Overall, Census data under-represents levels of homelessness, which points to a substantial issue relating to homelessness data in general. For example, in Yarra Ranges over 1000 individuals sought help from a local housing agency in one year, which was almost three times what was recorded in the Census data results. Reliability and accuracy of data is very difficult for Councils to obtain, particularly where invisible forms of homelessness are prevalent. The capacity to source and utilise reliable data would be an invaluable resource for Councils that would need substantial research and funding commitments.

In addition, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Data indicates that a high proportion of homeless population in the ICR were not homeless the month prior to receiving Specialist Homelessness Services. The implication of this is that there is a large proportion of the homeless population in the region that is more likely to exit homelessness with the right support and housing intervention than the more intensive case management required for the chronically homeless. For example, in the City of Casey during 2017-2018, 40% of individuals receiving Specialist Homelessness Services cited family violence as the reason for seeking help.¹¹

This means housing agencies in the ICR must often expend a large amount of their budget (HEF) in placing individuals in rooming houses, and families in motels. This compounds the effects of under-funding and resourcing of the housing and homelessness sector in the region because a considerable amount of the funding is absorbed in crisis housing and therefore individuals are likely to be trapped in cycles of poverty.

¹⁰https://1eabf943-ba21-444d-8d7b-5c053ba0746d.filesusr.com/ugd/776f42_39ffaa4d24fb404eae175e1c2d686c5b.pdf; p7

¹¹Information sourced directly from the City of Casey

The homelessness profile for Mitchell Shire Council, shown in Figure 2 below, has been taken from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, which takes into account those at risk.

Figure 2.

| | 2014 – 15 | 2015 – 16 | 2016 – 17 | 2017 – 2018 |
|-----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| At risk | 352 | 391 | 337 | 402 |
| Homeless | 140 | 139 | 132 | 150 |

CASE STUDIES

The following case studies from Yarra Ranges Shire Council and Mornington Peninsula Shire Council illustrate the changing face of homelessness in the region and are emblematic of the challenges all Interface Councils struggle with.

1. No crisis or transitional housing in the Yarra Ranges

“Robyn” has experienced family violence for many years and has made the decision to leave the family home with her two young children. Initially she was able to stay with friends then with a family member. Robyn’s mental health has been fragile since leaving and the family is desperate to see her in secure housing with the children.

The local housing agency has no crisis or transitional housing to allocate. The children are in a school and preschool which are their primary source of support and stability. Robyn is reluctant to move them to areas where she may have a better chance of being housed.

Like many women in this circumstance, from time to time she and the children have spent the night in their car and sought assistance from emergency relief agencies to buy food.

Rentals in the Yarra Ranges are both hard to find and expensive for anyone living on a statutory income. As time goes on, the pressures of being homeless undermine Robyn’s relationships and confidence which also impact on her likelihood of gaining employment and sustaining a tenancy.

Crisis or transitional housing with supports would break the nexus of homelessness and start the process of re-establishing a stable life.

2. At risk youth

“Josie” is 16 and has left home after continued threats and intimidation by her step-father. She is couch surfing in her local area. Josie relied on her family to get to school and she is finding it hard to attend school every day without them. She hangs out in the houses she is staying in and is exposed to high levels of alcohol and drug use. With no access to money while she waits for Centrelink to assess her circumstances, she considers dropping out of school and getting a part time job.

Josie begins to experience anxiety and feels pessimistic about her life and future. She is on a waiting list for appropriate accommodation but will need to wait for a place to be available.

3. Salvation Army in Mornington Peninsula

This is not a real case, but is a regular scenario encountered by the Salvation Army – Homelessness – Rosebud team in the crisis centre. The three children are aged four, seven and nine.

The family have been evicted from their private rental in Rosebud after the owners advised they want to develop the property. The family were given a Notice to Vacate and began searching for an alternative. Unfortunately, they were unsuccessful in securing anything else affordable before the eviction date and as a result they have had to put their possessions into storage. They are now homeless with nowhere to stay from tonight onwards.

The crisis workers are able to secure a room at a local motel for \$550 at a weekly rate. (Over December, January and any major holidays, the crisis centre would normally use out of area motels such as those in Dandenong as none would be available on the Peninsula). The mother is receiving a single parent pension and it is expected to contribute substantially to the cost of the motel. The crisis centre will fund the difference while an alternative is sought. The crisis centre receives minimal funding from the department for clients in crisis.

While they are staying in the motel, they are all sharing a room. Facilities are limited and they have a small kitchenette to prepare food. They are expected to continue to look for private rentals and other alternatives such as caravan parks and appropriate rooming houses. This impacts their financial situation as they spend extra money on food, public transport and storage costs.

After six weeks in the motel, this family has some luck. The crisis team has managed to successfully refer them to a vacancy at Launch in Dandenong – the closest supported crisis accommodation. They are provided with Myki cards and begin the journey to Dandenong on public transport (about 1 hour and 45 minutes). The children are disadvantaged as they are taken out of school/kinder or childcare and sent to a new place on a temporary basis.

At this stage, in several situations people refuse to relocate and resort to other alternatives such as couch surfing and sleeping in cars in order to remain in their community. This may be due to part time work commitments or family that are relying on them. They may prioritise their children staying in school or may be anxious about a place they are not familiar with so far away.

The pathway from crisis accommodation such as Launch housing is into one of our transitional housing properties. In the Rosebud/McCrae area, there are five transitional housing properties for families. One family may occupy a property for over two years while waiting for priority public housing, which explains why these properties aren't readily available at the right time.

Pilot project: *Home as a Haven*

As part of the [Interface Councils Budget Submission 2020-21](#), Interface Councils developed a group of pilot projects that utilise innovative approaches, such as local commissioning, to revise the service delivery model and produce more positive outcomes for people as well as long-term savings for State Government.

In September, this pilot project was presented to members of Parliament including the following MPs:

- Treasurer Tim Pallas
- Minister for Suburban Development Marlene Kairouz
- Minister for Prevention of Family Violence; Women and Youth Affairs Gabrielle Williams
- Minister for Health Jenny Mikakos
- Minister for Child Protection; Disability; Ageing and Carers Luke Donnellan, and
- Minister for Jobs, Innovation and Trade Martin Pakula

Interface Councils is encouraged by the interim recommendations of the Victorian Royal Commission into Mental Health and believes there is an opportunity to capitalise on them to deliver services in a way that will change people's lives and improve critical parts of the health and human services system, such as in a holistic response to homelessness. In addition, recent reports by [Infrastructure Australia](#) and [Infrastructure Victoria](#) highlight affordable housing as a key component of social infrastructure and should be considered alongside this submission.

Service levels in the Interface Councils Region (ICR) are at a significantly lower level than the average for the rest of metropolitan Melbourne.¹² The gap in local service provision equates to more than a quarter of a billion dollars, which is demonstrated in the following statistics for the region:

- There are 52.3% fewer psychologists, representing an estimated \$57 million funding gap.
- There is 49.1% less family violence support, representing a \$17 million funding gap.
- There is 22.3% less mental health support, representing an estimated \$7 million funding gap.
- There is 13.4% less alcohol and other drugs support, representing an estimated funding gap of more than \$1 million.

Project overview

The *Home as a Haven* pilot project target gaps in essential services and aim to meet the specific needs of Melbourne's outer suburban communities. One of these service gaps is homelessness. The project is an assertive outreach program helping those experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness by providing housing support and specialist homelessness services.

Intervention techniques and targetted responses will be used to support individuals get back on their feet and into secure housing. It will provide assessment, referral, casework & case management, assistance to access emergency & supported accommodation, access to laundry, bathroom and cooking facilities, early & crisis intervention, ongoing support, assistance to access health & community services, emergency supplies & food packages. It must be noted that a risk to the outcome of this project is the lack of affordable rental housing across the region.

Yarra Ranges Council and Nillumbik Shire Council were identified as ideal areas to trial this new approach because there is a significant need to address this issue from both a social and public health perspective. In

¹² *Human Services Gap Analysis, 2017; One Melbourne or Two, 2018*

total more than 1000 people are sleeping rough every night in these municipalities. Of this number, over 100 are women living alone and aged 55 and over, and 240 are people receiving the Disability Support Pension.

Yarra Ranges does not have any crisis housing, while Nillumbik Shire has some of the lowest levels in the ICR. Low income, mortgage stress and high rental costs increase the potential for a person to become homeless. According to 2016 Census data, both Yarra Ranges and Nillumbik have above average levels of households affected by mortgage stress, despite below average housing costs. The number of households affected by either rental or mortgage stress is typically highest in the most disadvantaged areas.

Timing and stage of development

The pilot project would run over a 12-month period. During this time the quantity and quality of outreach efforts will be monitored to determine improvements in individuals' health and wellbeing with the intention of reducing the number of homeless persons. This project does not request recurrent funding. It is scalable to apply to other Victorian municipalities.

Benefits for State Government

Ensuring access to affordable housing and health services is a growing concern for the most vulnerable in society. This evidence-based approach aims to drive housing reform in Victoria to deliver long-term sustainable outcomes across the sector. Research by consulting firm SGS Economics and Planning in 2017 estimated that the benefit of providing housing to a person who is experiencing homelessness in Australia equates to \$25,615 per person per year, through health cost savings, reduced crime and improved human and social capital. This supports the cost involved of providing outreach services, crisis housing and social housing.

This project would provide the following benefits:

- Reduce the demand on existing homelessness services through improving the overall health of individuals
- Contribute to reducing the number of individuals experiencing homelessness
- Generate greater understanding of the available services
- Reduce the cost to government services by approximately \$2,000,000 per annum

Social and community benefits

It is widely acknowledged that adequate housing, including the prevention of precarious housing, is a key component of health promotion or disease prevention.¹³ A safe and secure home is the basis on which strong individuals, healthy families and resilient communities are built.

This project seeks to improve health and wellbeing through assertive outreach and intensive case management support services designed to engage with individuals at risk or currently experiencing homelessness. It will provide individuals with increased capability for holding onto accommodation and to seek employment opportunities by promoting the recovery model. This is a person-centred approach focused on inclusivity to empower individuals, with a strong evidence base.

It is estimated that this project will reduce the number of homeless people by 60% in the region through specific measures to improve physical health, mental health, social connectedness and overall wellbeing. When people are physically and mentally healthy, they are more likely to maintain their tenancies in their new accommodation.

¹³ VicHealth, 2011

Partnership organisations

[Anchor Housing and Support Services](#) is the key partner to Yarra Ranges Council. Anchor would work in conjunction with other health services, such as [Inspiro](#) and [Uniting Care Australia](#) to continue to deliver this program.

In Nillumbik, Melbourne Youth Support Service (MYSS), [Frontyard](#) or [Vicky's Place](#) (Melbourne City Mission) may be appropriate partners to consider.

Costs

The total cost of the pilot project will be approximately \$800,000. This will include the appointment of four homeless assertive outreach officers for a 12-month period per municipality. In addition to the salary expenses, there will be operating expense costs, supplies & on-ground costs, project management and supervision expenses.

RESPONDING TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

CAUSE

Investigate the many social, economic and policy factors that impact on homelessness

Factors impacting homelessness are inextricably tied to those regarding systemic disadvantage. Social, economic and policy drivers of homelessness are complex and the subject of ongoing research.

Specific demographics are disproportionately vulnerable to homelessness and are less readily able to find appropriate and affordable housing. This includes people on such a low income they are unable to compete for rental properties with people with stable employment and a good rental record. These groups of people commonly include women, single persons, sole parent families, young people, older people, people living with a disability, people living with a mental illness, refugees and asylum seekers.

Housing insecurity can affect anyone. In recent times, vulnerability to becoming homeless has increasingly included professionals, households where partners separate and people who may have a prolonged illness that impacts their ability to pay their high mortgage or rent.

Social factors

Social determinants in increasing or decreasing the prospect of homelessness include a person's social and cultural characteristics, environmental events and neighbourhood, community and demographic factors. The following social factors in particular lead to and exacerbate homelessness:

- **A lack of local services to provide early intervention for mental health conditions**
 - Existing conditions are exacerbated when people are unable to reach basic services.
 - Often people only seek help in desperate situations that could have been prevented.
 - There are long wait times (sometimes in excess of three years) for social housing due to the lack of new social/crisis housing stock.
- **Domestic and family violence**
 - This is consistently reported - by Interface Councils and other sources - as a leading driver of homelessness.
 - Women and children fleeing from violence are particularly affected.
 - Anchor reported family breakdown as a result of family violence as responsible for nearly half of all reported cases of homelessness.
- **Social, physical and cultural isolation**
 - While this is a common issue among Interface Councils, each of the ten municipalities has unique demographics that must be taken into account.
 - For example, Yarra Ranges Council has a high percentage of new arrivals who are from refugee backgrounds. Many are families purchasing in the area who may feel the effects of a lack of cultural diversity and a mature service sector in this respect, as opposed to growth area Councils such as Hume City Council with established diversity and social supports in place.
 - Stigma and misconceptions about homelessness isolate people.
- **Mental illness and public sentiment**
 - Stigma around mental illness & addiction and historical trauma increase individual vulnerability to be homeless.
 - It is important to recognise homelessness can also cause declining mental health, rather than mental health being the cause of homelessness.

- The Interim Report by the Royal Commission into Mental Health acknowledged ‘there is a growing understanding of the close relationship between trauma, poor mental health and mental illness, and increasing recognition of the need for trauma-informed mental health treatment, care and support.’¹⁴
- Public misunderstanding and a lack of school-based education have a negative influence on the homeless population and surrounding conversation. This also impacts decisions about investments in new social housing as local community perceptions may come to the fore in planning decisions.
- **Cultural and linguistic diversity (CALD)**
 - CALD communities face more barriers to accessing housing than other demographics.
 - Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) communities are also disproportionately affected by homelessness in the ICR.
 - City of Whittlesea has the greatest population of people of ATSI descent by Local Government area in Greater Melbourne (0.8% of the population compared with 0.5% of Greater Melbourne.)
 - ATSI women are overrepresented in the homelessness population. For example, one in four women presenting at a homelessness service in Whittlesea is of ATSI descent and 14% of Victoria’s asylum seeker population lives in the municipality.
- **Limited or zero crisis/transitional housing**
 - Limited housing solutions for vulnerable communities exacerbate existing conditions.
 - Some organisations in the ICR use money from the [Housing Establishment Fund](#) to “buy beds” for people to live in motels, caravan parks, backpacker accommodation and rooming houses because there is no other choice. These options are expensive, often unsafe and unhygienic and not suitable to meet the needs of highly vulnerable groups such as women and children escaping family violence.
 - The quality of crisis and transitional housing is often unacceptable. Private rooming houses are expensive and can leave people with no disposable income for food, transport etc.
- **2009 Black Saturday bushfires**
 - Weather will always have a disproportionate impact on the homeless and at risk groups, while simultaneously increasing that cohort.
 - The ongoing environmental and social impact of the Black Saturday bushfires is still an issue for Local Councils such as City of Whittlesea, Yarra Ranges and Mitchell Shire Council.
 - Bushfires have the potential to strip people of their housing and exacerbate vulnerabilities in both urban and rural areas.
 - The link between natural disasters and family violence is important for the Committee to recognise. It is explored in detail in [this report by the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience](#).
 - Domestic and family violence levels increased after Black Saturday. Homelessness, unemployment and increased alcohol and drug use are characteristic of the disaster recovery period.¹⁵
 - Governments and service providers need to take extreme weather conditions into consideration preemptively. This is a challenge in areas of bushland in particular, such as Yarra Ranges, where people camp in the forests.

¹⁴https://rcvmhs.vic.gov.au/download_file/view_inline/21751; p39

¹⁵<https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/ajem-apr-2013-the-hidden-disaster-domestic-violence-in-the-aftermath-of-natural-disaster/>

Economic factors

The following economic factors lead to and exacerbate homelessness:

- **Lack of affordable housing stock**
 - This is a core driver of homelessness across the ICR.
 - There is not enough appropriate housing for the growing population.
 - There are no appropriate transitional housing solutions for those at risk.
- **Lack of coordination between services**
 - This is a well-documented driver of increased homelessness in Australia.
 - This is particularly significant regarding family violence prevention efforts in the region.
- **Private rental costs and mortgage stress**
 - On average, over 13% of households in the ICR experience mortgage stress – this is higher than the average for metropolitan Melbourne and the rest of Victoria.¹⁶
 - Some municipalities have even higher rates than this average, such as Whittlesea which has 19% of people (or 12,613 households) experiencing housing stress.
- **Cost of living expenses**
 - Basic costs required to live do not correspond with wages for low and moderate income workers.
 - Expenses are exacerbated by costs associated with long travel distances, which are often required to be made in private vehicles.
 - Centrelink payments do not cover housing or essential expenses such as utility bills, transport, groceries, education and medical bills.
 - Financial vulnerabilities mean people are less likely to seek out the services they need to prevent them from becoming homeless due to associated costs.
- **Lack of local and diverse employment opportunities**
 - As well as not being diverse, jobs are unstable in the region.
 - There is a lack of employment for low skilled residents and a lack of local white collar employment opportunities.

Policy factors

The following policy factors lead to and exacerbate homelessness:

- **Policy emphasis and clarity**
 - Some Interface Councils reported a lack of clear policy related to homelessness from the State Government.
 - Public health policy that prioritises early intervention, early treatment for mental health conditions and coordination between agencies is vital but is not commonplace.
- **State-owned land for social housing**
 - Victorian social housing is limited in supply and does not meet increasing demand.
 - State-owned and under-used land should be tapped into to develop new social housing applying current models e.g. Launch Housing and VicRoads.
 - There is a need for greater transparency in this area to clarify the role of Local Councils in this process. For example, as planning authorities, advocates and partners in developing new social housing on state-owned land.

¹⁶ *Interface Councils Liveability Snapshot*, 2017; p18

- **Development and planning policy revisions**

- Mandating inclusionary zoning is critical for the provision of social and affordable housing to keep up with population growth as well as the servicing of social housing tenants.
- There are existing opportunities in growth areas to increase the amount of affordable housing if specific provisions are included in Precinct Structure Plans and other land use planning documents and the Victorian Planning Act.
- There is no requirement that new developments include social/affordable/crisis housing in growth corridor developments and this is a significant missed opportunity.
- The reliance on voluntary S173 agreements between developers and Councils to include social and affordable housing in new developments is problematic. This only delivers a very small number of dwellings, if any, and is costly to all involved.

RESPONDING TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

SOLUTIONS

Identify policies and practices from all levels of government that have a bearing on delivering services to the homeless

FAMILY VIOLENCE SUPPORT

Residents of the ICR experience family violence at higher rates than the rest of Victoria. There is a significant lack of resources and support services to provide early intervention or prevention measures locally. Family violence data in the Human Service Gap Analysis shows there is a gap of service provision of over 49% in this area compared with the metropolitan Melbourne average.

Interface Councils acknowledges the Victorian Government is committed to implementing all the recommendations of the Family Violence Royal Commission and the interim recommendations from the Royal Commission into Mental Health. The Family Violence Reforms currently being rolled out will have a significant impact on the delivery of Child Protection and ChildFIRST services across the state.¹⁷ However, the gap of over \$27 million in family violence support centres¹⁸ is concerning. Compounding this issue is the difficulty quantifying demand when there are very few local services to record it, or none at all.

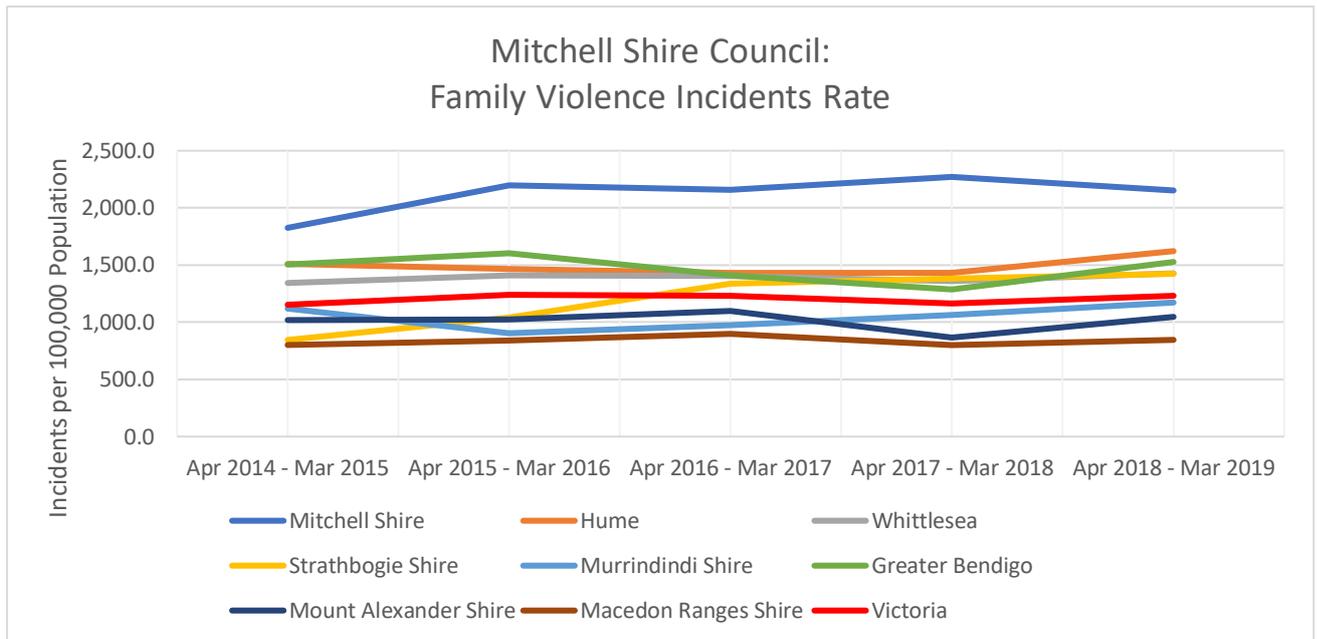
A key point of referral and data repository for family violence response and support is [The Orange Door](#) hub. The geographical locations of the ten municipalities mean that more than one hub is needed. However, no Orange Door hubs have been established, or are in the pipeline, for the region. The impact of not having a local hub inhibits outreach capabilities and stretches the “hub and spoke” model to breaking point.

Interface Councils is advocating for an Orange Door hub to be established in the ICR at a both a group and individual Council level. IFC has met with both the Minister for the Prevention of Violence Against Women and Family Safety Victoria more than once in recent months to discuss this issue further. While Interface Councils acknowledges certain services need to be in place before a hub is established, this situation poses a “chicken and egg” scenario for Local Councils with those at risk members of community suffering most.

Without adequate family violence and mental health support, there is increased risk that the most vulnerable groups in the region will more readily end up homeless. Limited services exist at the moment and increased funding, more accessible support and a holistic approach focusing on prevention is urgently needed.

¹⁷ *Human Services Gap Analysis, 2017*; p43

¹⁸ *Ibid*; p8



Mitchell Shire Council has one of the highest rates of domestic and family violence among Interface Councils and across the rest of Victoria, with 2,147.5 incidents per 100,000 people. This is the 11th highest rate of family violence for LGAs in Victoria, and almost double the state average.

Mitchell Shire has areas of very high socio-economic disadvantage. Notably Seymour, Broadford and Kilmore are all below the state average on the Index of Relative Social Disadvantage. Seymour is within the bottom 9% for relative disadvantage.

The graph above (supplied by Mitchell Shire Council) highlights the scale of this challenge and compares Mitchell with other Local Councils in the neighbouring areas.

EARLY INTERVENTION AND ASSERTIVE OUTREACH

Early intervention and assertive outreach are core components of an effective systematic response to homelessness. There is considerable evidence, from a local and state perspective, that shows the value of prevention services for people at risk of homelessness. As noted in this submission already, this critically intersects with the need for housing stock where people can live safely, affordably and securely.

However, the capacity for Interface Councils to support their residents experiencing homelessness is severely restricted due to insufficient homelessness services and affordable, appropriate housing, or none at all. For example, Hume City Council has the seventh highest number of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria yet lacks a local access point. The closest available access point is located in Glenroy, which services a large geographical area that includes Broadmeadows in the south east, Craigieburn in the north and Sunbury in the north west. Within the larger cohort needing outreach and early intervention services, there is a big proportion of homeless and 'housing-vulnerable' residents from CALD backgrounds needing effective and culturally-appropriate early-intervention services. Increased funding for early intervention is essential to identify people who are at risk before they actually become homeless. Because a significant portion of people are in marginalised or living in overcrowded housing arrangements, more resourcing is critical to prevent the cycle of homelessness continuing in outer suburban communities in particular.

Although many individual Councils partner with a range of agencies and organisations that deliver some outreach services, there is an acute need for an increase in this type of service and for more service providers

to be located in, and based from, Interface Councils. This is because the effects of service providers and clients having to travel long distances to and from services is a major barrier to assistance. The effect this has on residents ranges from an increased expense to not using the service at all and therefore it is common for any efforts to do with early intervention to fail.

Given the lack of localised services, the provision of outreach services would ensure local communities have more access to early intervention measures and response efforts.

Further, according to Wyndham City Council, over 50% of people presenting to homelessness services in Wyndham City do so in crisis. This is the opposite trend to other IAP services across Victoria.¹⁹ Intervention measures such as appropriate housing advice, referrals and knowing where to go for help before a crisis point transpires are crucial.

There is an opportunity to leverage and adapt what is already working locally. The following programs and services have positively impacted local communities in Melbourne's west:

- [The West Justice Mortgage Stress Program](#) has prevented homelessness in 100% of cases in their management.
- [The Geelong Project is a ground-breaking early intervention program](#) that tackles youth homelessness by identifying the risk profiles of high school kids by using the Australian Index of Adolescent Development.
- The State Government's [Private Rental Access Program \(PRAP\)](#) service provides a brokerage service preventing people from falling through the gaps into homelessness and into the private rental market.
- The H3 Head Leasing Scheme not only provides [Head Leased accommodation](#) but also support to help people maintain housing and attempts to break the cycle of homelessness.
 - Within H3, a number of prevention services exist and prevent homelessness by responding, assessing and case managing clients to maintain or support their current circumstances.
 - For example, Uniting Wyndham's H3 Early Intervention Program, H3 Rough Sleepers program (outreach capacity), MCM young person's outreach program and Whitelion's outreach program.

SOCIAL, COMMUNITY AND CRISIS HOUSING

An effective and affordable housing system is a fundamental component that is a requirement that urgently needs redressing to assist with the homelessness problem.

Limited resourcing across the continuum of social and affordable housing means there is an inadequate supply of solutions to homelessness in the ICR. For example, in the City of Whittlesea and Yarra Ranges Council there is no operational crisis housing at all. This can mean people are exposed to unsafe and inappropriate solutions are relied upon in times of crisis, including budget motels, caravan parks and rooming houses. Municipalities are not allocated appropriate shares of resourcing and this has led to more disadvantages socio-economic profiles over time in some municipalities. Local Councils have reported that State Government resourcing of social housing has no transparent geographical criteria, which is problematic. Once homeless individuals and families access crisis accommodation, the transition to long-term and sustainable housing is often a drawn out and difficult journey. The gap in social housing required to house people continues to grow and requires urgent action.

There is very limited youth crisis accommodation in the ICR. To access vacancies, young people often need to travel alone to places far away from their municipality and support systems. For example, in the Mornington Peninsula, young people may need to travel to inner Melbourne, Dandenong, Box Hill or Ringwood. For people

¹⁹ Unisons Housing Research Lab Report dated August 2018 -[https://www.unison.org.au/cms/uploads/docs/6075--unison--rmit-research-report-no-1--diversity-and-complexity-\(web-ready\).pdf](https://www.unison.org.au/cms/uploads/docs/6075--unison--rmit-research-report-no-1--diversity-and-complexity-(web-ready).pdf)

in Whittlesea, to access [Haven Home Safe](#), the mandatory first step to access specialist services, is located in Preston. This is extremely difficult for people to get to and requires private transport or a lengthy trip on public transport. For many, this barrier will mean they will not make the effort at all. The opening hours further prevent people from making the trip, with the service only open before 5pm on weekdays.

Although the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) enables housing payments for Specialist Disability Accommodation, there is still a deficit of this type of accommodation. Some of these potential providers approach Councils for financial assistance or land in order to make their projects viable. In Whittlesea, a recent survey of residents living with a disability found that 67% of respondents said affordability was a barrier to living in their preferred housing. In addition, 22% could not afford to live in their preferred area, 27% could not afford adequate home-based support and 18% could not afford housing with appropriate accessible design features.

Interface Councils supports the *Homes for Victorians* strategy and its whole-of-government response to addressing housing affordability and increasing the supply of affordable and social housing. However, the ICR must be treated as having unique requirements in this area and forward planning must follow accordingly.

INTEGRATED PUBLIC TRANSPORT

The social and economic factors that impact the homelessness cohort already identified in this submission are magnified by a widespread lack of access to integrated public transport. Better utilisation of our existing roads and an increase in public transport would support access to the services that assist with homelessness relief.

VAGO acknowledges historical deficiencies and underfunding in this area, which includes a lack of adequate planning in growth areas in particular.²⁰

In the ICR, just over 55% of residents live near public transport. This is 40% lower when compared to middle and metropolitan Melbourne. In addition, 75% of residents travel to work, school and supermarkets by car. The congestion, and associated health risks, residents experience is a reflection of the lack of transport mode choice and hence the car-dependency in the region. Almost one in five ICR residents have a two-hour or more daily commute to work, which is higher than middle and metropolitan Melbourne.²¹ These figures take on a new significance when you consider a single parent family trying to maintain a household after leaving a domestic violence situation.

In addition, the inadequate provision of bus services and routes means those who are homeless are not able to access specialist services as required when they don't own their own vehicle. Between 2006 and 2016, the shift from vehicle-based transport to public transport for Interface Councils labour force participants has been much smaller than trends observed for labour force participants outside of the ICR, whose proportion of vehicle-based travel has declined from 76% to 70%, with the proportion of public transport usage increasing from 12% to 16%.²²

For example, Mornington Peninsula Shire has the second lowest provision of public transport per person in metropolitan Melbourne, which impacts vulnerable and socially disadvantaged residents most. 82% of the Shire has no public transport at all.

The lack of a cross-peninsula service also means that those from the Western Port side are not able to get to any other services on the Port Phillip side (i.e. Rosebud – the only office in the municipality supported by The Salvation Army Homelessness Service).

The lack of both bus and train services in the area prohibits the majority of the community to have a direct and timely link to Melbourne's CBD and other areas where there are emergency accommodation options and job opportunities. Currently, residents around the peninsula have to go to a station on the Stony Point line, which then connects to Frankston station, to get to the CBD. This service varies in frequency from one and a half to

²⁰ <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/coordinating-public-transport?section=>

²¹ *Interface Councils Liveability Snapshot*, 2017; p2

²² *One Melbourne or Two*, 2018

two hours with limited services on weekends. This has a big impact on users, as some emergency accommodation, job opportunities or specialist services require residents to travel into the CBD after normal working hours.

In the long term, integrated transport planning is urgently needed for growth corridors, with meaningful Local Council engagement embedded into that process. Forward planning in terms of bus routes, connectivity with train timetables and improving services is necessary for new communities but is not included in State Government processes currently.

RECOGNITION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT'S ROLE

The reach of Interface Councils across local communities is unrivalled and there are many opportunities for this to be better utilised by State Government. The group occupies a unique position as the State Government's "early warning system" because they are the tier of government closest to the community and therefore have the greatest insight into local needs. They have oversight of and administer various networks, which can be better utilised to assist with homelessness prevention and service coordination. However, in general the capacity for Councils to do this work is limited due to insufficient resources.

Support for family violence is best implemented at a local level, with local solutions and with local leaders and community at the forefront. Gender equality principles can be embedded across multiple community settings and services such as youth, kindergartens, maternal and child health, family day care and aged services to tackle one of the determinants of homelessness over the longer term. Funding to support this, and Local Council's work in partnership with others, would strengthen the ability of Interface Councils to respond.

Based on the diverse needs of individual communities (including culture, language, migrant experience, demographic, economies and geographies), state- or nation-wide strategies will get the most traction if implemented at the local level using existing services and infrastructure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Interface Councils is committed to working with State and Federal Governments to reduce the rate of homelessness in local communities and recommends:

- Sustained non-partisan commitment to provide ongoing funding to drive grassroots, whole-of-population, early intervention and primary prevention initiatives. These measures must be pursued at a large scale over an adequate length of time.
- Appropriate national, state and local housing strategies that address homelessness and a requirement for Local Governments to conduct housing needs analyses every four years and produce a strategy with an action plan in order to meet the future needs of an expanding population. This must include appropriate funding to ensure implementation.
- Change the Victorian Planning Act to require mandatory inclusionary zoning in developments of scale.
- State Government funding to support service delivery required at a local level to assist those at risk of homelessness or those who are already homeless. Assertive outreach models should be a central tenet of this.
- Establish Orange Door hubs or similar coordinated access points in the Interface Councils Region. This should include access to appropriate accommodation plus preventative wrap-around services to enable appropriate first-time responses to those who need it, when they need it.
- Provision of services that are locally accessible and culturally appropriate for women, children, queer people, the elderly and people with a disability.
- Greater financial support for Local Governments in the prevention of family violence, particularly regarding early intervention and prevention measures. Consider innovative models of housing women and their children escaping family violence and implement pilot programs as a matter of urgency.
- A commitment to school-based programs that promote greater respect for women and gender equality that include financial literacy. For example, the Respectful Relationships program should be rolled out to all non-government schools and across early years providers.
- Greater accountability and regulation across the sector against recognised standards. For instance, there needs to be a commitment to reform the standard of rooming houses, and a commitment to better fund and integrate crisis accommodation with other types of accommodation. Consider setting rent caps for rooming houses to prevent exploitation by private owners.
- Greater value to be placed on resourcing and staff in the services sector; staff need to be recognised, professional and upskilled.
- Provision of adequate and secure tenure accommodations to divert families and young people away from the already overwhelmed homelessness sector.

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