

Inquiry into service coordination in communities with  
high social needs

Submission to NSW Legislative Council,  
Standing Committee on Social Issues

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## 1 Tweed Shire

Tweed Shire LGA is located in the north-east corner of New South Wales, about 860 kilometres north of Sydney and around 100 kilometres south of Brisbane. Tweed Shire is bounded by the Queensland border, the Scenic Rim Region and Gold Coast City in the north, the Pacific Ocean in the east, Byron Shire and Lismore City in the south, and the Kyogle Council area in the west. Tweed Shire is a large and diverse region including rural areas, national parks, beaches and coastal areas, and growing residential and rural residential areas. The Tweed's urban areas are concentrated in the northeast corner (Tweed Heads), the Tweed Coast, with an inland urban centre at Murwillumbah, and several smaller towns and villages. Tweed Shire encompasses a total land area of about 1300 square kilometres. There are 81 geographically, socially and economically distinct towns and localities in the Tweed, home to diverse groups of people, including creative and cultural groups, Aboriginal people, farmers, urban dwellers and surfing communities. Tweed Shire measures 958.5 on the SEIFA scale which indicates that this is a low socio-economic region.

Tweed Shire Council contributed to the development of the draft Northern Rivers Affordable Housing Strategy (2012) "which investigates the issues of housing affordability, accessibility and availability in the Northern Rivers region and confirmed that there is a high degree of 'severe housing stress' in the LGAs of the Northern Rivers for people on low to moderate incomes. The ABS Census 2011 confirms that housing in the Northern Rivers is considerably less affordable than the rest of NSW and that the problem has continued to worsen in the past five years. Without change in the current dynamics of housing supply the consequences of this crisis will continue to broaden from stress on individuals and families to wider community consequences."<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Overview

### 2.1 Key Issues

#### 2.1.1 Service response to people who are homeless and lack of crisis accommodation

Service provider restructures, funding changes, and closures as a result of Commonwealth Department of Social Services and the NSW government reform of the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) have increased housing stress and the incidence of homelessness. This has had multi layered impacts. Competitive tendering and the introduction of 'for profit providers' has emphasised competition for scarce funding and resources and this has diminished and inhibited the ability of community services to provide the appropriate levels of support and to work collaboratively. There is also a distinct lack of crisis accommodation and short-term housing options, with no dedicated accommodation available in Tweed Shire.

#### 2.1.2 Coordination between homelessness services and housing providers

Homelessness services and housing providers must work together to enable people to move out of crisis and short-term housing into stable housing options. This impacts social, physical and mental health and financial stability. There needs to be better connections

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<sup>1</sup> Draft Northern Rivers Affordable Housing Strategy (2012)

between homelessness services and both public and private housing providers in a continuum of service response.

### **2.1.3 Coordination between housing providers**

Competition for resources, housing and funds between housing providers limits and inhibits the ability to coordinate and collaborate for the benefit of people seeking assistance. This makes providers unwilling to share information and work together for solutions to improve housing services and options, to develop innovative housing strategies, and to provide advocacy. There is also a lack of data and restricted access to existing Housing NSW data to assist better and fairer decision making and understand the true scale of housing need.

### **2.1.4 Service response to anti-social and criminal behaviour within social housing complexes**

There is an inappropriate mix of tenants in social housing complexes and more consideration needs to be given to the suitable placement of tenants with specific needs. In addition, there is a lack of coordination between health services, mental health, housing providers and police in addressing behavioural issues and sense of safety in social housing complexes. Social housing tenants are disempowered by the inability to influence decisions relating to neighbours displaying anti-social behaviour that disrupts their lives. Service response to support people with complex needs maintain tenancies and address socially unacceptable behaviours is inadequate or unavailable in certain localities.

### **2.1.5 Service response to specific population groups such as single homeless men, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, older people at risk of homelessness, adults under 35 years who have been assessed as ineligible for the DSP**

Some of these population groups are already acknowledged as at risk of homelessness. However new vulnerabilities are emerging along with an increased risk of homelessness for all in our community. This has been impacted by eligibility changes to Centrelink benefits. Support needs to be broadened beyond those in greatest need, to support all those people who are in a situation of homelessness.

### **2.1.6 Impact of changes to the service system on housing and homelessness service provision**

Services that previously provided case management for people in crisis no longer have the flexibility to respond because they are confined by funds and narrower guidelines on service delivery. This is particularly the case for people seeking emergency help for housing assistance and has led to reduced options for crisis housing as private options withdraw because of the lack of tenancy support and management.

### **2.1.7 Response to demand for affordable housing and housing availability**

Coordination amongst different levels of government in planning for and providing affordable housing solutions is a major issue. There is a need for State and Local Government planning controls to work together using available evidence to develop targets and strategies to create more social housing and affordable housing. Clearer planning and policy controls need to be determined to give local Councils greater weight in decisions requiring private developers to make provision and improve design decisions that increase the stock of affordable housing.

### 3 Evidence

The expected population growth in the Tweed over the next 20 years together with the current relatively high cost of housing will further exacerbate housing availability and housing affordability issues currently experienced in the region. The 2015 report *Dropping off the Edge* report<sup>2</sup> confirmed Tweed Shire as an area experiencing housing stress ranking in the top 20% worst affected areas in NSW. As a result of population growth, there is a real possibility that the cost of private rental accommodation will increase resulting in people on very low incomes (i.e. government benefits) being squeezed out of that market. The high competition for private rental accommodation means that the “least desirable” tenants are missing out entirely. Young people who have never lived independently will have almost no chance of acquiring private rental housing, both because they cannot afford it and because they have no rental history<sup>3</sup>.

For the past five years Council has been conducting research into marginalised population groups and prepared documents to assist Council better represent these population groups including: Youth Strategy and Action Plan (2013-2017) focusing on young people aged 12-25, Homelessness Issues Paper (2013), Access and Inclusion Plan (2014-2018), Issues Paper and Profile of Older People (2015) and draft Age Friendly Community Strategy and Action Plan (2015-2019). Common issues identified through this research, relevant to this submission include the urgent need for appropriate and affordable accommodation (crisis, short-term and medium-long term), better coordination and collaboration between service providers, wrap-around support for those experiencing homelessness and support for people to sustain tenancies.

The Tweed Homelessness Issues Paper 2014 identified different subgroups within the homeless population in Tweed Shire including single men, single women, families, elderly people, young people, people from New Zealand and Aboriginal people<sup>4</sup>.

A range of issues affecting risk of homelessness was also identified such as:

Social exclusion, drug or alcohol addiction, mental illness, family and relationship breakdown/domestic violence, a background of institutionalisation, cost of living pressures and access to social support services<sup>5</sup>.

The Issues Paper authors identified a number of service gaps and barriers<sup>6</sup> which relate to the key issues identified in this submission.

These include:

#### **Crisis and Short Term Accommodation**

There is no crisis and very limited short term accommodation available in the Tweed Shire along with sub-standard temporary accommodation with insecure tenure (tents, caravan parks, boarding houses, couch surfing and others). Temporary accommodation is not available to single men.

<sup>2</sup> Dropping off the Edge 2015, Jesuit Social Services/Catholic Social Services Australia

<sup>3</sup> Tweed Shire Homelessness Issues Paper 2014, pp i-ii

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p iii

<sup>5</sup> Ibid pp iv-v

<sup>6</sup> Ibid pp v-vi

### **Appropriate and Affordable Long Term Accommodation**

There is a lack of affordable housing with insecure tenures and a lack of appropriate long term housing options in the private market. This is exacerbated by a significant lack of appropriate social housing with a 10 year wait period.

### **Support for People to Sustain Tenancies**

There are insufficient support options with the scope to offer wrap around assistance over the long-term in particular for clients to remain living in private rentals. There is also a lack of support for real estate agents and landlords to maintain tenancies as well as for people in social housing tenancies to sustain those tenancies.

### **Services for families/young people**

There are inadequate services for young people and their families in times of crisis increasing the risk of homelessness. The combination of low income and no rental history makes it very difficult for young people to access the private rental market. Young people are vulnerable to living in over-crowded sub-standard housing, or to accept others offers to couch surf often in unsafe environments.

### **Support for People with Mental Illness, Drug and Alcohol Dependence**

Eligibility (such as a diagnosed mental illness) is a barrier to clients accessing existing homelessness services as many people are not diagnosed and struggle with everyday living skills. Homeless people experience drug and alcohol issues and sometimes these are combined with other factors such as mental illness and chronic diseases. Service responses are unavailable/inadequate, and uncoordinated. Opportunities for drug and alcohol rehabilitation are very limited in the region.

### **Public Space Liaison Services & Assertive Outreach**

There are no specialist public space liaison officers within Council or based in other agencies. There is significant unmet need for active, assertive outreach into key locations where an assessment and referral is possible.

### **Better Co-ordination of Services**

There is a need for better partnerships with Real-estate agents, Police, Council, Education, Health services. True partnerships and collaboration are difficult to achieve because of the competitive nature of the funding environment.

### **Transport to support services**

The lack of available and affordable public transport is a significant issue in Tweed Shire.

The location of key services provides good access for some communities but is a barrier for others.

Transport is essential in the search for housing and for accessing services and then for moving around once housing is secured (the small amount of affordable housing is in more remote locations of the Shire).



## 4 Case Studies

The following Case Studies are based on actual local scenarios with the names of agencies and individuals excluded.

### **Case Study 1 – Lack of service response and service coordination for older man with dementia forced into homelessness**

The man is 65 years old. He has no family support. He was evicted from a retirement village in July 2015 because that property was sold. A local community worker based in Murwillumbah assisted the man to apply for all rentals in his price range over the weeks leading up to his eviction but he was not approved for any of them (around 25 in total).

The community worker noticed cognitive changes in the man during this time. He was becoming increasingly confused, disorientated and depressed. When the eviction day arrived he had still not secured alternative tenancy. The community worker tried to find out why he had been unsuccessful in securing a rental property and was told by the real estate he was 'unsuitable'. The worker helped him to access temporary accommodation, which he was granted for 3 nights.

The worker became increasingly concerned regarding his cognitive functioning and decided to contact Community Options regarding long term solutions as she was concerned that even if he gained a rental property he would be unable to maintain it and care for himself. He was already forgetting to eat and shower and would become confused over simple tasks like getting a bank statement.

The following is a list of the organisations that the worker contacted and the responses given:

- **Regional Assessment Service:** because he was over 65 they could not offer any assistance.
- **Regional Assessment Service:** they could not see him because he was homeless and they only see people in their homes and only if they are over 70
- **Dementia Support and Advocacy Service:** the information provided by ACAT was wrong and that they should contact 'My Aged Care'
- **My Aged Care:** worker advised to submit an online assessment and someone would make contact. Submitted assessment and man was contacted a few days later however he became so confused on the phone that he had to hang up. Worker contacted MyAgedCare again and was told that they had closed his file as they could not understand what he wanted. Worker had them re-open his file and asked them to send a referral to ACAT. This happened a further 3 times.
- **Housing and Homelessness Service:** No assistance available, 6 week waiting period to see a case worker.
- **Disability/Aged Care Service:** No assistance.
- **Residential Aged Care Service:** ACAT assessment needed before any help could be given.
- **Crisis Accommodation Service:** No beds available.
- **Aboriginal Service:** Prefer not take persons who are homeless because of the difficulty in finding longer term accommodation

The worker finally got in contact with a Regional Assessment Service, and booked an assessment with a seven day wait. The assessment is booked in for Thursday 6 August at

the Community Centre. The client's temporary accommodation will end on Wednesday 5 August and he will be out on the street as he has used up his temporary accommodation allocation for the year.

**NOTE:** Due to the client's cognitive function he had not cancelled his direct debit from the bank to the real estate. This only came to the workers attention last Thursday after going through bank statements when the man said he had no money. Worker phoned the real estate agent who informed her that they could not return the money (4 weeks rent totalling \$880) as it goes into a trust account and the money is gone. The community worker contacted Legal Aid who are now investigating the matter.

### **Case Study 2 – Lack of service response and service coordination for people with complex needs within social housing unit complexes**

Older residents in two social housing complexes are trying to address violence, alcohol and drug use behaviour among younger tenants. The older residents are having their lives disrupted and personal safety compromised by tenants with anti-social behaviour. They have no say over the make-up of tenants in the complexes and no power to address the behaviour of new tenants. When seeking help they are referred from one service to the next with none acting to address the issue or provide support for any of the tenants.

In one complex of 28 units older residents are being verbally abused and threatened on a regular basis by one tenant for initially asking the abusive person to drive more safely in the internal common areas. The abusive tenant had threatened violence to neighbours and their families. This means that older vulnerable tenants living closest to this person are too afraid to sit in their front yards or to complain to the Housing Provider or Police for fear of being targeted and threatened. Another tenant has short term frequent visitors at all times of the day and night (24 hours a day) suggesting drug use behaviour. This means that cars are continually driving up and down the narrow shared internal driveway across which the majority of units face each other. The residents have been living with this situation for over four years. At times the older residents have tried to seek help but were referred from Housing Provider to Police, from Police to Housing Provider. Some tenants who are connected into the mental health or disability systems are supported by workers/carers to manage their living skills and supports. The tenants with anti-social and violent behaviour have secured social housing and have obvious coping and social wellbeing needs but are either unwilling to receive support or are not linked into the system of support. The Housing Provider seems unable to deal with their extreme and unsafe behaviour. The Housing Provider only acts if the individual tenant does not pay rent or damages property. The Housing Provider advises tenants to call the Police but the Police response is often inadequate or non-existent. The affected tenants are afraid that the Police will identify them as the complainant to the offender.

Another block of units in the same town with primarily older residents has recently had new tenants move in. Almost immediately the new tenants displayed anti-social behaviours similar to those described in the first example. The older residents in this complex wrote to Council seeking help after experiencing the same response from service providers. The letter included about thirty signatures from residents desperate for a solution. They expressed understanding for people who struggle with mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction and the lack of support from mental health services and others to assist people to develop social and coping skills to be better tenants. However, their formerly peaceful lives have been disrupted and compromised by the behaviour of the new tenants. This can only affect their health and wellbeing in the short and longer term. As social housing tenants their options are limited due to housing affordability and availability.

## 5 Recommendations

### **5.1.1 A commitment from Commonwealth and State Governments to provide affordable housing options and targeted support for people who find themselves homeless**

A key challenge is the acute short fall in crisis, short term and longer term social and affordable housing supply that perpetuates the demand for a crisis response.

The rise in homelessness alongside the need to increase the availability of different forms of housing assistance, appropriate to the needs of individuals and families as circumstances change over time, are pressing policy issues. Yet the shortfall in affordable (public and private), and social housing supply, does not appear to be a priority of government or the nation's infrastructure agenda, even though it has been identified as a significant social and economic problem with serious implications for productivity and workforce participation.

### **5.1.2 Develop a coordinated State or National statutory framework to increase affordable and social housing supply**

The responsibilities of each level of government to reduce homelessness and increase affordable and social housing supply need to be clearly defined so that policy can be coordinated and achieve real outcomes. Such a framework can consider the wider context and provide the much needed investment, guidance and legislative controls. It can also work to reconcile State-based barriers to implementation by local government, such as financial capping of infrastructure contributions and expenditure and the ability to leverage development bonuses.

Without assistance from Federal and State Governments, local government cannot address these problems. Whilst responses to homelessness and affordable housing supply requires local understanding, greater efficiencies are achieved when the response is from all levels of government.

### **5.1.3 Develop a coordinated local/regional approach to providing affordable rental accommodation for people on low incomes**

The need for better engagement with the Real Estate Industry to build the capacity of that sector and increase the supply of affordable rental stock.

### **5.1.4 Develop a coordinated local/regional service response to support people with complex needs to maintain tenancies and prevent conflict with neighbours**

A coordinated response between Housing Providers, Real-estate agents, Police, Council, Education, Health (particularly Community Mental Health) are essential if people with complex needs are to establish and maintain socially acceptable behaviours as tenants and neighbours. There is a need for a protocol with mental health services with a clear contact person to assist clients particularly in times of crisis.

### **5.1.5 Develop and implement a coordinated service response at the local level to assist people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness**

This response needs to be in a service continuum with the provision of crisis and short term accommodation; appropriate and affordable long term accommodation; and support for people to sustain tenancies. It is important for local Networks to collaborate and share

information such as the Tweed Shire Housing and Homelessness Network and the Northern Rivers Housing Forum to link into decision makers and to play a role in advocacy and partnership building with peripheral stakeholders such as Police, Health, Council (Rangers and Parks staff).

#### **5.1.6 Develop better mechanisms for collating and sharing data on housing affordability**

The State Government needs to continue to collate data on housing affordability (rental and ownership data) and release it in a timely and regular way to Local Governments and service providers as a means of monitoring affordability in specific regions. As the State and Federal Governments receive reports and data from funded service providers, they are in a position to provide timely reports to local areas of collated data that can assist in monitoring the availability of appropriate housing and related support programs, as well as affordability. Sharing centralised data from local services with Local Governments would be a useful input to planning and service development on the ground.

#### **5.1.7 Develop a coordination strategy for housing (social and community) and homelessness services at a regional level at least**

A coordinated service response at a regional level would enable better information sharing and provide more housing options for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness through housing stress. The Northern Rivers from Coffs Harbour to the Queensland border was identified in the *Dropping off the Edge* Report as an area experiencing the highest level of disadvantage except for some small areas on the coast around Ballina and Byron Bay. This makes the need to coordinate a service response enabling vulnerable people access to crisis, and then secure housing, essential.

## **6 Summary**

There are identified gaps in service coordination in the continuum of housing provision that must be closed so that the most vulnerable people can secure and maintain long term housing. This is a human right. The connection between mental illness, drug and alcohol dependence and homelessness means that a range of services need to be involved and working together to meet the needs of the most vulnerable in our community. As social housing tenants this support also benefits other tenants who want to live in safe communities unaffected by behaviour resulting from drug and alcohol usage. The second tier response from all levels of government and the not-for profit sector is to plan for and provide affordable housing for people on low incomes with a clear need to increase supply to meet demand. This includes people on Centrelink benefits and people in low paid employment.





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