

Introduction

Homelessness is a significant and growing issue in the Tweed Shire. Situated on the Far North Coast of NSW and on the fringe of urbanised South East Queensland it attracts people experiencing homelessness from a number of directions, putting stress on a community already under-resourced in terms of services and affordable housing options. People experiencing homelessness arrive in the Tweed from the South, drawn by the climate, and from the West where many services, especially those supporting Aboriginal communities, have been withdrawn. The vast majority of the transient homeless population though, comes from the North and over the Queensland border. The main adult (18 years and above) crisis accommodation service for the Southern Gold Coast is located at Bilinga a short walk from the border. Anecdotal evidence from people experiencing homelessness is that they are treated with more respect by police and other officials on the NSW side of the border, making Tweed Shire a more attractive option when emergency accommodation such as Bilinga is full.

The most recent official figures from the 2011 Census, show a homeless population of 308 people in the Tweed Shire - however it is generally acknowledged that efforts made to count the homeless population at that time were un-coordinated and the actual homeless number was significantly higher, particularly for young people and older persons that 'couch surf' or pitch make-shift tents in isolated areas. In response a comprehensive effort was made at the recently conducted 2016 Census to establish a more accurate figure. Despite this there is a distinct lack of crisis accommodation and short-term housing options provided in the Tweed Shire for any group other than women and children fleeing domestic violence. According to Homelessness NSW, the primary reasons people become homeless are identified as Domestic and Relationship Issues (33.8%), followed by Accommodation Issues (24.9%), Financial Difficulties (20.5%), Other i.e. Transition from care/custody, lack of support, discrimination (13.3%) and Health Reasons (7.5%). According to the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Tweed Shire is a relatively disadvantaged area with significant levels of youth unemployment rates at 16.1 per cent compared to 12.9 per cent in Regional NSW, and higher than average recorded domestic violence related assault incidents. (Source: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research).

Service changes and a reduction in the number of funded service providers as a result of recent funding changes have increased housing stress and the incidence of homelessness. This has had multi layered impacts. Competitive tendering and the introduction of for profit providers have diminished and inhibited the ability and the desire of community services to provide the appropriate levels of support and to work collaboratively. Services that previously provided case management for people in crisis no longer have the flexibility to respond because they are confined by available funds and narrower guidelines on service delivery. This is particularly the case for people seeking emergency relief 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. Across the sector, staff reductions have also resulted in less time to support clients navigate the bureaucracy of obtaining a mental health disability assessment, complete a housing application and/or access a rehabilitation service.

In recent years a number of small specialised services, which worked in collaboration to maximise the impact of the funding they received, have had their funding reallocated to a single larger community service provider. The result of this has been the loss of a significant amount of local experience and expertise. Persons working in the sector, from both Government and Not for Profit Organisations who attend the Council facilitated Tweed Shire Housing and Homelessness network report higher levels of work related stress due to their inability to support people in need of assistance, particularly those presenting with complex issues.

In October 2015, Tweed Shire Council adopted a Homelessness Policy which recognised that “It is apparent that the rise in homelessness is linked to issues of affordability and the unavailability of crisis, short-term and longer-term affordable housing options (public or private). These are critical issues that need to be addressed in Tweed Shire.” The policy sets out Council’s responsibility to respect and include people experiencing homelessness in the development of policy and service provision in areas including education and advocacy, facilitation and coordination, Council services and compliance, land use planning and monitoring and research. In this spirit Staff from across Council services who are involved and interacting with people experiencing homelessness in many different ways have drawn on their direct experience to contribute to this submission.

Key messages from this Submission

- Housing affordability and availability is cited by the wider sector as the single greatest issue contributing to homelessness in the Tweed Shire.
- Tweed registered clubs have indicated their support for an application to ClubGRANTS Category 3 funding for the establishment of a homeless accommodation service for the Tweed Shire. The current criteria for applications to this Category would render the application ineligible, and club representatives have communicated with the local state member to lobby for the eligibility criteria to be amended. To date there has been no amendments to the ClubGRANTS Category 3 eligibility criteria.
- The implementation of the NSW Government’s “It Stops here” Safer Pathways for victims of domestic and family violence identified as being at serious threat in the Tweed/Byron Local Area Command has been reported as a successful strategy to address the safety, referrals and service coordination for those clients. However the introduction of this program has not influenced housing stock numbers in the Tweed Shire.
- Council’s Community Options staff have expressed concern over the plight of seniors in need of housing assistance who will no longer be provided with previously provided case management as they are no longer funded to provide this service as of July 2016. These include people who are sleeping rough, who are frail and suffering from dementia among other health concerns. No effort has been made by any new organisation to make contact to establish continuity of case history and there is real concern they may not be getting the assistance they require. The State program Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) is reported to be very good but this has not been rolled out in the Tweed despite local demographics.

- Concern has also been raised over the prospects for people with disabilities who will transition to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) from July 2017. Current case management includes housing advocacy but this is not part of NDIS and will revert to Housing NSW.
- Council owned holiday parks are being used by local residents to place friends and relatives who may be dealing with mental health or addiction issues. This has been identified as a significant route into homelessness where intervention could be made if services were available.
- The Tweed Aboriginal housing co-op provides assistance to Aboriginal families who are experiencing housing stress in the shire. As with all social housing there is a limited supply of housing stock which at present has significant waiting periods for housing.
- Homelessness in the Tweed Shire is a major cross border issue and efforts need to be made to establish connections between the Queensland and NSW governments to ensure a consistent approach across regions. In meetings with the Cross-Border Commissioner, Council officers raised the issue of recent increases in homeless persons observed in public places located along the state border. Outlined in the Cross- Border Commissioner Business Plan (2015-2018) it states the issue of homelessness requires enhanced collaboration between government, community and business. The report also calls for better working arrangements between government and community stakeholders to optimise service delivery in cross-border areas.

Discussion Paper Main Points

Future Opportunities

- How can Government and non-government agencies build on previous initiatives to create a strategy to reduce homelessness?
- What are the key outcomes the homelessness system should deliver and what outcomes can it influence?
- What role can the private sector, philanthropists and others in community play?

Council's Homelessness Policy and the Tweed Shire Housing and Homelessness Network 'Strategic Plan' (2014-2019) have identified the need for a crisis accommodation service to provide safe, supervised assistance for those with immediate housing needs. This would serve to provide those sleeping rough a place to stay, increasing the safety and useability of local parks and other Council facilities. In the absence of such a service Housing NSW Link2Home is the only after-hours support service providing homeless persons with temporary accommodation in a motel of which Tweed Shire has only 3 motels willing to accept these referrals. In the long-term the model is not financially sustainable, nor is it consistent, as motels prioritise tourists particularly during peak periods.

Registered clubs in the Tweed Local Government Area contribute funds to community and welfare services through the ClubGRANTS scheme. The representatives of these clubs have indicated their support for an application to the ClubGRANTS Category 3 fund for the establishment of a homeless accommodation service in the Tweed Shire. ClubGRANTS Category 3 Grants currently define eligibility criteria for sport and recreation, arts and cultural

infrastructure and emergency relief. Proposals have been submitted by local club representatives to the local state member to lobby the Minister for the Department of Liquor, Gaming and Racing to amend the eligibility criteria for this funding, and Council has provided support to the Tweed ClubGRANTS Committee and the Tweed Shire Housing and Homelessness Network in these endeavours.

Future opportunities also exist in conjunction with the rollout of the NDIS in the Tweed in July 2017. At that time responsibility for assisting people living with disabilities that require assistance obtaining and maintaining housing will transfer from Council affiliated case managers to NSW Housing. In the months leading up to the transition there is significant opportunity for communication between these departments to ensure consistency of care and the minimisation of any potential new stress on the housing market.

Ultimately the best way to decrease homelessness in the Tweed is to increase the housing stock in the area. Two major developments at Cobaki Lakes and Kings Forest have Council approval to start construction and this will help, however none of this housing stock is directly targeted at people currently on the 15 year long waiting list for social housing and there is little evidence it will have an impact on affordability. The Future Directions for Social Housing document released by the NSW Government in 2015 talks about the creation of up to 23,000 new social housing homes across the state in the next 10 years. To date only one development under this plan has been allocated to the Tweed Shire and a commitment from the Government to provide more where the need is so great, would go a long way towards reassuring the community.

At a higher level the suggestion has been made for the state to promote the idea of investing in social housing to superannuation funds, and particularly those funds where members have called for their savings to be invested ethically. Unlike other real estate investors who may be looking for quick, maximised returns these investors might see the long term steady growth of such investments as beneficial.

Creating Pathways into Housing

- Are there circumstances where it is more difficult to link people to a suitable housing option?
- In addition to increasing housing supply what actions are needed to improve access to housing for people experiencing homelessness and how can the access system for social housing is more responsive to their needs?
- What different supports or tenancy management approaches could help keep people at risk of homelessness in their homes?
- How can different housing options be better linked to other supports?

People dealing with mental health issues and those with physical or intellectual disabilities are not provided with housing assistance in this region unless they are assessed as having a priority status designation, without which they are forced onto the open market. This causes serious problems in two ways.

First of all the complexity of the process to be put forward for evaluation and achieve priority status is very difficult for anyone who would qualify for it to work through on their own. Without a family member, friend or service provider to advocate on their behalf and provide support there is little chance that anyone who really needs help would be able to get it. These people inevitably end up on the streets where the issues they deal with are compounded often resulting with individuals seeking housing assistance elsewhere, which can jeopardise their continuity of case management with a specific support service.

The second issue this raises is that while people dealing with mental health or physical or intellectual disabilities might not qualify for priority housing their situation may affect their assessment as quality tenants by landlords and real estate agents. Even without a priority designation these people still need support to maintain good standing as tenants.

There is a great need for case managers to work in the community with those at risk of homelessness. This must be complemented by a significant increase in mental health and rehabilitation services in particular which are severely lacking in this region.

Harnessing Engagement to Prevent and Reduce Homelessness

- What needs to change for greater private sector involvement in delivering social and affordable homes?
- How can the strategy help engage the corporate sector and philanthropists with the issue and better link expertise and funds to help reduce it?
- How can the strategy help services work together to make a difference?

If social housing were structured in such a way as to offer lower rates of return but act as a longer term, more secure investment it could potentially attract more investment, including superannuation funds looking for higher levels of security.

State and Council planning bodies have the potential to collaborate and create situations where developers might find more profitability in building affordable homes such as reducing block sizes, increasing density and height requirements.

Better Exit Planning

- How can exit planning and pathways into housing be better connected?
- How can people at risk of homelessness be better engaged in their exit plans?

It is very difficult for anyone exiting institutions (such as prison or rehabilitation services) to obtain housing in the Tweed Shire unless they have family or other support networks in the area willing to take them in. Information needs to be provided to State run correctional facilities, treatment centres and other facilities to ensure people leaving understand there are very long waiting lists (in excess of 15 years) for social housing and very limited if any supply of short term or subsidised accommodation in the Tweed.

Empowering through Education, Training and Employment to prevent Homelessness

- How can employment initiatives be linked with other initiatives to support housing and homelessness outcomes?
- Where are these opportunities to improve how employment, training and education services help prevent homelessness?

As an early intervention measure Council makes a strong effort to employ and train young people at risk, providing them with structure and allowing them to experience the benefits of work. This program runs in conjunction with school based programs where participants are identified. By providing them with experience and training the participants have the opportunity to take control of their situation and are exposed to a path which might otherwise have led to serious life issues including homelessness. Council departments have also taken on people seeking work experience after time spent in rehabilitation services, providing them with further opportunities to get their lives back on track.

Operating on a case by case basis these situations have been positive and further opportunities exist if funding is made available to better incentivise these types of initiatives.

Putting People at the Centre of the Response

- How can the strategy encourage and support people working in the mainstream system to find solutions for people at risk of homelessness?
- What are the barriers limiting services from working with people to get them the support they say they need?

When discussing the barriers between people in the Tweed Shire experiencing homelessness and the services they need to access there are two main issues, transport and remote services only accessible by telephone.

With mental health and other support services in Tweed Heads operating in excess of their capacity, those seeking assistance are often given a phone number to call. This presumes the person experiencing homelessness has access to a phone, is able to keep it charged and has credit to spend on the calls. If they do get through and assistance is available it is usually in another town which is very difficult and relatively expensive to get to given the very poor state of public transport in the area.

This barrier could be eliminated if the people working in the system were supported to go out into the community and engage with people rather than placing the burden on them to make the connection.

Embedding Early Intervention

- How can services get better at identifying those at risk of homelessness and help them get support in place?
- Where are there program opportunities to improve the prevention of homelessness?
- What system-wide changes are required to focus on the prevention of homelessness?

The opening of a Headspace facility in Tweed Heads in March 2015 by the Federal Government has been a major boost in the area of early intervention for young people. This



has opened up opportunities for collaboration with the state, through the school system, and local governments for assessment and targeted planning for the needs of the community.

Strengthening Collaboration

- Where are local services and stakeholders implementing a collaborative approach to prevention and early intervention that is making a difference?
- Would a system wide definition of homelessness, prevention, early intervention and crisis responses help drive more collaborative approaches?
- What are the barriers to collaboration between sectors and how can they be addressed?
- Where has coordinated effort been used to prevent homelessness? What worked and what didn't?
- How can the government and mainstream agencies make their services available to people experiencing homelessness in ways that are accessible, dignified and not re-traumatising?

A high proportion of those experiencing homelessness in the Tweed have come from Queensland. Therefore increased communication and collaboration across local and state governments on this issue would be advantageous.

Tweed Shire Council facilitates regular meetings of the Tweed Shire Housing and Homelessness Network where all local services with any connection to the issue meet to discuss and collaborate. This body has been very effective at bringing together a broad range of government and non-government stakeholders. Collaboration at a local level is evident; however the sector requires cooperation at a higher systems level to address broader social issues linked to homelessness.

The collaborative focus of this group was highlighted recently during the 2016 Census, when members worked with Census staff to ensure a more accurate count through local knowledge about where to locate homeless people within the Tweed.

Building Effective Referral Pathways

- What examples are there of effective local referral processes which engage a broad range of sectors and mainstream services?
- How can referrals between other sectors and systems, such as primary health networks, be improved?

The implementation of the Safer Pathways program which brings together management level representatives of local bodies concerned with domestic violence has been very successful at improving outcomes for women and their children seeking to escape from these situations. The key aspect to this program has been the fact that decision makers from different bodies are present in the same room and are able to collaborate directly with each other. This approach should be used to design future collaborative strategies.

Unfortunately the strongest collaborative networks which existed previously in this region have been significantly damaged by a change in the approach to funding local services.



Where previously a number of small services each received funding for a certain sector and worked together to create efficiencies and maximise the return on funding much of that funding is now allocated to a single service provider. The collaborative expertise this process facilitated has been lost to the community and it is not clear as yet how well the new single service provider is meeting the community's needs.

Using Data to Improve Services

- What data being collected by agencies could be shared to improve responses to homelessness?
- Is there any scope for reconfiguring services based on this data?

Most bodies report they are 'drowning' in data and that this should not be an area of priority. Where opportunities do exist to collect more detailed information it is unclear what this would be used for.

Children and Young People

- Where are the opportunities to better identify and respond to the warning signs that young people are at risk of homelessness?
- How can the strategy strengthen services to ensure young people are engaged and they are tailored to children's needs?
- How can services better work together and engage young people at risk of homelessness to keep them in education, training or employment?
- How can services engage with young people to help them into appropriate housing?

Children under the age of 18 make up around 30 per cent of the secondary and tertiary homeless population in the Tweed Shire. The establishment of the headspace facility is a major step in the right direction as far as dealing with youth mental health; however the affordability issues in the region are especially sensitive for this group as instability in this area leads to low levels of school attendance.

Family Violence and Homelessness

- How can we build on existing programs to address the risk of homelessness for people experiencing domestic and family violence, including supporting women and children to remain in their home?
- How can the Safer Pathways rollout be used to ensure early intervention for people at risk of homelessness?

As noted previously, the Safer Pathways service provision in the Tweed has enabled the provision of increased safety measures and case coordination to victims of domestic and family violence identified as at serious threat. There are still however, distinct challenges with finding long term solutions for those leaving emergency accommodation who wish to maintain local support networks.

Aboriginal People and Homelessness

- How can existing services better identify and support Aboriginal people at risk of homelessness?
- How can service systems improve how they engage with Aboriginal people to deliver culturally competent, holistic responses when they are at risk or experiencing homelessness?

The Tweed Aboriginal co-operative provide significant support to Aboriginal community members experiencing housing stress. As with all social housing there is a limited supply of housing stock which at present has significant waiting periods for housing. Additional stress is placed on existing services and housing from people moving to the region from other areas. The Tweed Aboriginal co-operative are presently advocating for the development of a Local Allocation Strategy with the social housing sector in Tweed.

Existing services within the Shire should collaborate better with the Aboriginal organisations within the region to improve service delivery to those at risk.

Additional support by all levels of government would be beneficial for the Aboriginal community organisations who have worked collaboratively over many years to reduce the Aboriginal community's risk of homelessness.

Older Women and Homelessness

- Where are the opportunities to identify and support older women earlier who may be vulnerable and at risk of homelessness?
- How can the aged care system help divert people from homelessness?

Council case workers with the Community Options program are very concerned about a number of elderly clients who passed out of their care as of July 2016. They were aware of a number of frail and aged people sleeping rough who were dealing with health issues including Cancer and dementia and have had no contact from any agency who has taken over their care.

The Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) program has been mentioned as a very positive program which is very much needed in the Tweed due to the ageing population however it is yet to be launched here.

Rough Sleeping and Chronic Homelessness

- What are the barriers to housing and support providers working together to support a Housing First approach for people sleeping rough?
- What scope is there for new investment models to fund housing and support models for people who are sleeping rough?
- Where are these opportunities to identify people who are sleeping rough and intervene earlier to stop the problem becoming chronic?

The major centre for rough sleepers to congregate in the Tweed is the park surrounding the recently renovated Jack Evans Boat Harbour precinct. This area was developed to encourage tourism however the facilities and their location just over the NSW/Queensland border are instead attracting those with nowhere else to go.

The issue highlights the need for an emergency accommodation centre in Tweed Heads, as discussed earlier in the report, an option which has widespread community support.

Mental Illness and Homelessness

- What needs to change to stop people living with mental illness from becoming homeless because of the episodic nature of their illness?
- How can the mental health system better keep people at risk of homelessness engaged with their support?

People living with mental illness in the Tweed Shire need a much higher level of case management and advocacy on their behalf in dealing with the housing system. A major issue is the fact they are not able to access many avenues of assistance unless they reach a crisis point such as having a public psychotic episode. This means those who do the right thing, take their medication regularly and work to fit in to the community are penalised as they are still more than likely not viewed as attractive tenants on the open market.

Much more support is needed across the board for mental health services in the Tweed Shire.

People with Disability and Homelessness

- How can housing, health and disability support services work together to ensure that the risk of homelessness for people with disability is minimised by identifying problems and intervening early?
- How can mainstream housing providers and the NDIS work together to ensure that housing providers have access to services, information and support that promote the maintenance of successful tenancies in both the public and private housing sectors?

The introduction of the NDIS in the Tweed Shire in July 2017 is being looked at with cautious optimism. There is an opportunity still for those in the Housing NSW who will be taking over the case management of housing for those currently being assisted by community case workers, however it is still unclear to those case workers how this process of changeover will happen. While housing support is a crucial part of current funding models it is not part of NDIS funding. It is critical in this circumstance to provide continuity of care to prevent stress for the people involved.

Leaving Prison and Homelessness

- What exit planning strategies and support partners need to be involved to stop people leaving prisons into homelessness?

People need to be made aware when they leave prison of areas where housing availability is a serious issue as heading for these areas is not conducive to getting people back on track.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities and Homelessness

- Are there linguistic or cultural barriers to accessing services which could help prevent homelessness?

Council staff reported no obvious barriers to be in place which could help prevent homelessness.

Veterans and Homelessness

- What systemic changes would prevent Veterans and their families from becoming homeless, particularly during the transmission from military to civilian life?
- Where are the opportunities to identify and intervene earlier with veterans at risk of homelessness?

Council staff have not had obvious interaction with homeless veterans.