



**Submission to the Estimates and  
Financial Operations Committee -  
Inquiry into the financial administration  
of homelessness services in Western  
Australia**

**March 2022**

## Introduction

Uniting WA (Uniting) welcomes the opportunity to make the following submission to the inquiry into the financial administration of homelessness services in Western Australia, conducted by the Estimates and Financial Operations Committee.

Uniting is part of the UnitingCare Australia network, one of the country's largest community service providers which employs over 50,000 staff, supported by more than 30,000 volunteers.

Uniting's programs span the areas of homelessness and crisis accommodation services, family and children's services, mental health and disability support, as well as financial wellbeing and reintegration services. We are also a registered Tier 2 Community Housing Provider.

In WA, Uniting has extensive experience and a strong track record of persisting to create tangible positive impacts for vulnerable Western Australians. We deliver essential community services with respect and compassion, and we work with the government to build a strong foundation for positive change, supporting policy implementation that addresses social issues.

We do not shy away from complex challenges – we lean in, take on the challenge and work to deliver real outcomes.

Through the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Uniting spearheaded the Beds for Change initiative, in partnership with Aboriginal-controlled organisation Noongar Mia Mia. Beds for Change provided hostel-style accommodation and intensive, wrap-around support for up to 50 people at a time who were sleeping rough in Perth.

The positive outcomes achieved by Beds for Change led to the establishment of an ongoing supported transitional accommodation program, Koort Boodja. Our commitment to positive outcomes is evident in the establishment of Koort Boodja, as well as our service delivery in other services – homelessness outreach (including Street to Home and HEART), Tranby Engagement Hub for people in crisis and experiencing homelessness, our Homeless Accommodation Support Service (HASS), Specialist Re-Entry Services, Family Foundations and others – as well as our partnership in the Medical Respite Centre.

Fundamentally, we believe in an empowered and connected community. We amplify the voices of people who are experiencing vulnerability or hardship and share their stories to drive systemic change for a fairer, more just society.

**Uniting welcomes the opportunity to be called as a witness before the Inquiry to discuss our insights and recommendations further.**

## Summary of recommendations

### Current funding and delivery of services

**Recommendation 1:** The delivery of contemporary, agile and fully-funded homelessness services must not take a back seat to the application of a strategic lens to commissioning and contracting. Service providers require the Department of Communities to review current funding arrangements with clear and constructive consideration to ensure service provision is appropriate and well-supported for the current context. Funding continuity and certainty provides clear air for service providers to contribute to the Plan and Strategy that will support a cohesive and consistent approach to procurement and contracting for key service delivery areas into the future.



**Recommendation 2:** That the importance of meeting funding package deadlines (ranging from building partnering relationships, the application process, approval, award of grant, etc) is acknowledged by the Department of Communities and prioritised in future funding/grant processes. Delays and shifts in the timeline around funding allocation has significant implications for service providers, their contractors and the sector as a whole.

**Recommendation 3:** Conduct an audit of services across the housing continuum and make this available to the public. This audit would align with the development of the Online Homelessness Portal, an action from the Government's co-designed No Wrong Door Strategy.

## 'All Paths Lead to Home', Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030

**Recommendation 4:** Identify and fund innovative programs, like Next Step, that seek to address gaps in the housing continuum in line with the Housing First priority within the 10-Year Strategy. Next Step Housing introduces a stage between people moving out of transitional accommodation and into social housing, to mitigate the risk of returning to homelessness. Our housing system needs to be responsive and innovative so that people have a home regardless of their personal circumstances.

**Recommendation 5:** A dedicated, short-term supported accommodation housing service combined with flexible, wrap-around return to Country support will address some of the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people who live in regional and remote WA experiencing homelessness when travelling to Perth for medical treatment. This targeted solution could successfully support this distinct cohort of people, enabling them to exit homelessness in Perth and return home.

This service should be independent of the Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS) so that the flexible, agile support required is not reliant upon PATS/medical referral. Ideally, the service should have a direct, open dialogue with Aboriginal Health Liaison Officers within major metro hospitals and PATS to enable case management and return to Country.

**Recommendation 6:** While low-barrier responses have proven value to the Western Australian community, service provision is impacted as societal challenges evolve. More practical support, such as funding the necessary security services at Tranby Engagement Hub, which has experienced a significant increase in anti-social behaviour, is required to continue safely providing services to vulnerable people.

**Recommendation 7:** The State Government adopts the recommendations of the [Anglicare WA Home Stretch WA Trial 2021 Report](#) to provide continuation of care beyond 18. As shared by Anglicare WA in the Trial report, "Scaling the key elements of Home Stretch across the system requires an approach that unites people around a shared vision and provides them with the support and resources to integrate Home Stretch into their local context."

## Current funding and delivery of services

### 1. Strengthening commissioning and contracting

The community services sector faces a perennial lack of certainty around funding for important projects and programs. The Department of Communities is currently attempting to address issues around contracting through the Communities Agency Commissioning Plan (the Plan) which is being delivered in line with the development of the Western Australian State Commissioning Strategy (the Strategy) for community services. The Strategy is intended to generate greater cohesion between the Government, service providers, peak bodies and consumer advocates around the development and delivery of services.

The Plan's development has resulted in the rollover of several Perth metro homelessness contracts without review and revision until June 2024. Uniting appreciates the complexity of contracting and



commissioning community services and we support the strategic lens the Government and Department are applying to the issue. However the rollover of contracts, without significant review, impacts the sustainability of services that were funded under different models and different conditions.

By way of example, the contract for Uniting's low-barrier homelessness crisis response, Tranby Engagement Hub (Tranby), commenced in 2009 without any substantive change to funding apart from the addition of weekend services. The current funding levels are significantly out-of-step with the cost to deliver the service – none more so than the impost of security, which accounts for more than 40% of the current base contract funding agreement with Communities that is intended to cover the entirety of Tranby's operations.

**Recommendation:** *The delivery of contemporary, agile and fully-funded homelessness services must not take a back seat to the application of a strategic lens to commissioning and contracting. Service providers require the Department of Communities to review current funding arrangements with clear and constructive consideration to ensure service provision is appropriate and well-supported for the current context. Funding continuity and certainty provides clear air for service providers to contribute to the Plan and Strategy that will support a cohesive and consistent approach to procurement and contracting for key service delivery areas into the future.*

## 2. Improving the administration of funding packages

The sector welcomes new government programs, funding packages and grants that can assist service providers to support vulnerable members of our community. In 2020, the Western Australian Government announced the Social Housing Economic Recovery Package (SHERP), an important government program undertaken in partnership with the community housing sector to significantly improve housing for some of WA's most vulnerable people through targeted maintenance, refurbishments, and new social housing builds.

Sector applicants applied considerable effort and resources to meet submission deadlines. This included redeploying staff and engaging contractors, such as quantity surveyors, to assist with quality assurance and grant applications, along with liaising with tenants and obtaining photographs and quotes for the refurbishment work. As part of applications, consideration was given to a program of works that would mitigate the impact on tenants and achieve economies of scale within each organisation's broader property portfolio.

The quotes, works and program planning were based on the SHERP guidelines, which outlined applications would be assessed and applicants notified in November 2021. Grant agreements would then be sent to successful applications and funding released in December 2021/January 2022, with works to be completed by December 2024.

In December 2021, applicants were informed of a delay in assessment and that grants would now be awarded in "the first half of 2022".

The impact of delays like these on the sector is considerable, including tenant relocation, the expiry of quotes, the inability for organisations to plan their program of work, as well as the management of budgets and resource planning.



**Recommendation:** *That the importance of meeting funding package deadlines (ranging from the application process, approval, award of grant, etc) is acknowledged by the Department of Communities and prioritised in future funding/grant processes. Delays and shifts in the timeline around funding allocation has significant implications for service providers, their contractors and the sector as a whole.*

### 3. Build broader awareness of services in WA

Homelessness service provision in WA is diverse, stratifying prevention, early intervention, intensive support and more. Uniting's service model alone covers direct outreach to those experiencing homelessness, crisis support through Tranby, wrap-around support covering financial wellbeing, mental health and more, as well as HASS that provides case management and accommodation support for people experiencing homelessness in Perth.

A shared understanding of the services available in WA will more effectively fulfil the aims of the Government's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness. Having a clear picture of all services active in the State will illustrate gaps, areas of need and duplication. Much of this information has likely already been collated by organisations like Entrypoint Perth and simply needs to be reorganised, categorised across the continuum and made publicly available to assist those experiencing homelessness, service providers and the Department.

**Recommendation:** *Conduct an audit of services across the housing continuum and make this available to the public. This audit would align with the development of the Online Homelessness Portal, an action from the Government's co-designed No Wrong Door Strategy.*

## 'All Paths Lead to Home', Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030

Uniting supports the Government's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness, "All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030" and the accompanying action plans. The first Action Plan for the Strategy covering the period 2020-2025 focuses on ending rough sleeping, building a "No Wrong Door" approach to service delivery, increasing low-barrier crisis responses and supporting innovation.

Uniting recognises that significant progress has been made on these focus areas; however, gaps in the housing continuum should be the next focus of Strategy implementation.

### 1. Strengthen Housing First through funding the gaps in the housing continuum

People exiting homelessness and re-integration transitional supported accommodation programs have limited opportunities to secure safe, affordable and sustainable housing options that facilitate their long-term independence. As a result, these individuals are at high risk of recidivism or returning to homelessness and are more likely to become trapped in an ongoing cycle of disadvantage – at a significant cost to the individual, the Government and the broader community.

A gap in the housing continuum is that of medium to long-term housing solutions that is inclusive of responsive support for vulnerable cohorts. Uniting has developed the concept of Next Step Housing (Next Step) to address this gap.

Next Step is designed to support people in these situations (aged 18 and over) who have demonstrated their potential to live independently and sustain a long-term tenancy with access to minimal support. Next Step sits between transitional supported accommodation placements and community housing (Figure 1). The program combines a supportive landlord approach (the landlord being Uniting) with light touch supports, which are flexible and tailored to the unique needs of each individual accessing the service.

## Supportive Housing Along the Housing Continuum

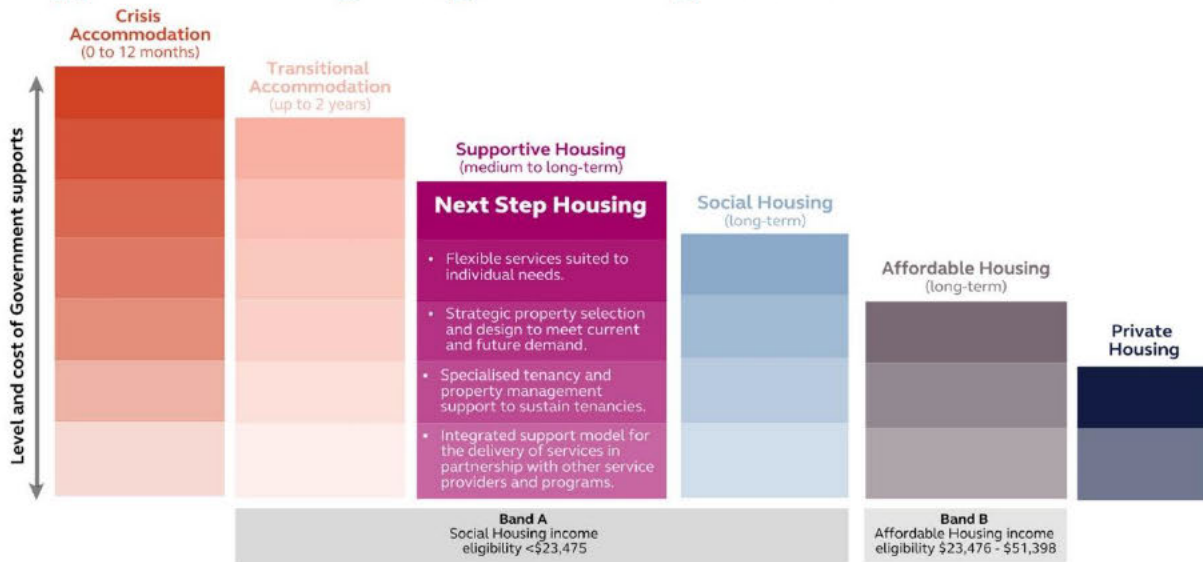


Figure 1 - Supportive housing along the housing continuum.

**Recommendation:** Identify and fund innovative programs, like Next Step, that seek to address gaps in the housing continuum in line with the Housing First priority within the 10-Year Strategy. Next Step Housing introduces a step between people moving out of transitional accommodation and into social housing, to mitigate the risk of returning to homelessness. Our housing system needs to be responsive and innovative so that people have a home regardless of their personal circumstances.

## 2. Addressing challenges facing those with complex health conditions and aiding their return to Country

As outlined in the 10-Year Strategy, Aboriginal people continue to be overrepresented in homelessness, and those experiencing homelessness often live with complex and chronic health conditions.

Uniting's Transitioning from Homelessness outreach team has identified a common theme of people sleeping rough in Perth who have travelled from northern parts of WA and subsequently missed flights home or encountered other issues that have prevented their return to Country.

While there are many different reasons why people travel to Perth, there is a cohort who come for specialist medical treatment, or support someone else to do so.

And while the State Government-funded Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS) supports eligible residents in rural and regional areas of WA with travel and accommodation subsidies, and Aboriginal



Medical Hostels provide transport and accommodation support, if people miss their scheduled return journey home, they often lose contact with PATS and their associated short-term accommodation.

Once they have fallen through the cracks, many people inadvertently find themselves trapped in a cycle of crisis and homelessness, with no way home.

The issue is the inflexibility of the system and the higher level of support sometimes required to assist people to return to Country.

**Recommendation:** *A dedicated, short-term supported accommodation housing service combined with flexible, wrap-around return to Country support will address some of the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people who live in regional and remote WA experiencing homelessness when travelling to Perth for medical treatment. This targeted solution could successfully support this distinct cohort of people, enabling them to exit homelessness in Perth and return home.*

*This service should be independent of the Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS) so that the flexible, agile support required is not reliant upon PATS/medical referral. Ideally, the service should have a direct, open dialogue with Aboriginal Health Liaison Officers within major metro hospitals and PATS to enable case management and return to Country.*

### 3. Practical support for low-barrier responses

The Government's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness, All Paths Lead to a Home, recognises the key role of low-barrier responses, like Tranby Engagement Hub, in addressing homelessness in WA. The Action Plan through 2020-2025 outlines implementation of low-barrier responses, removal of restrictive rules and barriers to entry and a focus on creating culturally safe environments for vulnerable cohorts as key priorities.

To ensure the success of low-barrier responses, the Action Plan must also prioritise practical support and investment. Tranby is an engagement and referral service for people who are in crisis and sleeping rough in and around the City of Perth. The service operates seven days a week and is the only crisis service operational in the Perth metro area on weekends.

A steady increase in demand for crisis support over the past decade has resulted in numbers growing from an average of 80 presentations per day in 2009 to a current daily average of more than 130. This increase in numbers has strained resources and increased the pressure on Uniting's homelessness services to react to emerging trends and needs. This evolution in service provision and the need for additional support relates to our earlier recommendation regarding commissioning and contracting.

With its limited resources, Tranby cannot address the needs of every rough sleeper in the Perth area. Further, in its current location, Tranby requires a balance between the needs of service users and those of the surrounding neighbours and community. Over the years, safety and risk concerns have increased in line with a rise in community issues, including methamphetamine use, limited access to appropriate mental health support and lack of access to stable housing. Consequently, Tranby engages security guards, a factor not considered necessary in 2009 when the number of daily presentations was far fewer and people's needs were not as complex.

Tranby is one of the most successful low-barrier responses to help vulnerable Western Australians in crisis and ensures they are supported to take steps towards a more stable and independent life. The flexible, person-centred support provided by Tranby allows for case management and facilitates engagement with other service providers (including culturally-appropriate services) where



needed, enabling the most vulnerable people with the most complex needs to build their capacity to take the next step on their journey out of homelessness.

To provide the safest, most effective service into the future, greater investment in practical supports – like security – is required to ensure the wellbeing of Tranby service users, Uniting employees and the local community.

**Recommendation:** *While low-barrier responses have proven value to the Western Australian community, service provision is impacted as societal challenges evolve. More practical support, such as funding the necessary security services at Tranby Engagement Hub, which has experienced a significant increase in anti-social behaviour, is required in order to continue safely providing services to vulnerable people.*

#### 4. Young people in out-of-home care

There is a critical need to focus on early-onset child, adolescent and youth homelessness. Young people's experiences of homelessness are varied and require targeted support. The child and youth homeless group are a cohort for whom the stakes with regard to homelessness are particularly high, as homelessness experienced in youth is a significant predictor of repeated, longer durations of homelessness throughout adult life. There is also an established link between young people with experience in the justice system, or those who have experienced out-of-home care, and lifetime risk of repeat episodes of homelessness.

On any given night in WA, more than 3,000 people under the age of 25 experience homelessness. Of those young people, two out of three have lived in State Care. More than 55 per cent of WA children in State Care are Aboriginal, despite only being three per cent of the state's total population.

Anglicare WA has spearheaded the Home Stretch WA Trial to co-design and test an enhanced support system for young people as an extension of care, providing them with a continuation of support and access to resources from 18 years to when they turn 21. Key components of Home Stretch have included a visible and viable, secure safety net that ensures access to housing, foster care, health education and life skills, as well as flexible, one-to-one support focused on coaching towards interdependence and support for young people to build their own enduring natural support networks. The Home Stretch WA Trial has seen significant success and is now ready to support the scaling and expansion of an extension.

**Recommendation:** *The State Government consider adopting the recommendations of the [Anglicare WA Home Stretch WA Trial 2021 Report](#) to provide continuation of care beyond 18. As shared by Anglicare WA in the Trial report "Scaling the key elements of Home Stretch across the system requires an approach that unites people around a shared vision, and provides them with the support and resources to integrate Home Stretch into their local context."*

#### Data systems and how data informs service delivery

A lack of cohesion between homelessness reports and research has led to a reliance on three main sources of data to provide a view and profile of homelessness in Western Australia: The Census of Population and Housing; Specialist Homelessness Services data; and the Advance to Zero database.



Organisations using the Advance to Zero database maintain a By-Name List (BNL), which captures, in real-time, inflows and outflows of homelessness in a given community by engaging with people experiencing homelessness. The By-Name List data is added into the national Advance to Zero database.

While the By-Name List provides useful data and insights, it has some limitations in terms of its ability to truly capture a full picture of homelessness in the community. The personal nature of the questions being asked can sometimes present a barrier to people providing their information, and this can have a flow-on effect by reducing a person's likelihood to engage with outreach and other homelessness support services.

For this reason, low-barrier services that support the most vulnerable people within the population of chronic, long-term rough sleepers remain necessary and critical.

**Recommendation:** *In order to provide truly meaningful insights into homelessness in our community, the By-Name List needs to be adopted by local and state government and properly funded as a database and resource by the Department of Communities. The service delivery costs to providers associated with building trust and relationships with rough sleepers in order to capture accurate data also needs to be recognised and appropriately funded.*

## Conclusion

While Housing First is an ideal solution that the Government and community services sector are working towards, we cannot afford to wait for housing stock to increase and we must increase investment in the responses prioritised by All Paths Lead to a Home. More funding and flexibility will support the Strategy and Plan.

We know low-barrier responses work as an effective crisis intervention measure and the sector understands the current gaps in the housing continuum. We need more investment in these services to enable people to take the first step in their journey to exit homelessness. As the waiting list for social and affordable housing continues to grow, there is an urgent need to bridge the gap between crisis accommodation and long-term housing solutions.

Many of the most vulnerable members of our community, such as people exiting homelessness, those with ongoing lived experience of mental health and people reintegrating after serving prison sentences, have limited opportunities to obtain safe, secure housing that facilitates their ongoing independence. The system needs to provide support along the housing continuum that sees people transitioning from crisis accommodation get access to accommodation that offers a supportive landlord approach and light touch support - enabling them to build capacity, consolidate their independent living skills and facilitating them to take the next step towards long-term housing.

The system can achieve this through increased funding, increased information sharing and continued open dialogue between Government and the sector on the gaps that service providers see on the ground. With more collaboration across government, the private and not-for-profit sectors will create pathways that enable people experiencing homelessness to achieve ongoing transformational change in their lives.

Improving our approach to housing and homelessness and increasing investment in this area of priority will deliver benefits to the State by reducing the financial burden on the Health and Justice systems, as well as the community services sector. It will also deliver lasting social benefits to the broader community and most importantly, support our fellow Western Australians when they are in need.



## Contact information

Name	Position	Email address	Phone
Michael Chester	Co-Chief Executive Officer		
Jen Park	Co-Chief Executive Officer		
Jennifer Snell	Principal Practice Lead Service Development and Quality		