

Options to improve access to existing and alternate accommodation to address the social housing shortage



To:	Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services
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Subject	Inquiry into options to improve access to existing and alternate accommodation to address the social housing shortage
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Barnardos Australia (Barnardos) thanks the Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services for the opportunity to provide a submission to its inquiry looking at options to improve access to existing and alternate accommodation to address the social housing shortage.

Background: Barnardos knowledge of this area

Barnardos is a not for profit children's social care organisation, providing family support and out-of-home care (OOHC) to approximately 15,000 children and their families in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and New South Wales (NSW) each year. In our family support work, we aim to reach vulnerable children at risk of separation from their families, and homelessness is a strong feature of this work. For close to 100 years, we have been working together with children, young people and families to break the cycle of disadvantage, creating safe, nurturing and stable homes, connected to family and community.

Barnardos' suite of Safety & Prevention programs includes tailored support for children and their families who are at particular risk of homelessness in Western Sydney, Penrith and Western NSW (see Appendix A for a summary of our homelessness programs).

We note the very high level of vulnerability of the children and families who use our services. For example:

- In Western NSW, homelessness or risk of homelessness is a presenting issue in approximately 80% of our intensive family preservation referrals and 30% of Brighter Futures referrals.
- In Penrith, for families accessing the transitional housing program over the last 12 months:
 - 100% of parents had a child protection history with the statutory authority (Department of Community and Justice).
 - 80% of residents (parents) were aged under the age of 25 years
 - 75% of parents had resided in OOHC as a child
 - 60% are Aboriginal families
 - The main reason for referral was parental mental health (often diagnosed with depression and typically co-occurring with PTSD), followed by domestic violence.

Options to better support 'meanwhile use' (temporary supportive accommodation), and the current major planning barriers to 'meanwhile use' (*Terms of Reference a*)

Barnardos Australia strongly supports in principle the innovative use of resources such as the 'meanwhile use' of properties that would otherwise be standing vacant to bridge the gap between crisis accommodation and social housing. We believe this approach has an important role in providing access to stable supported housing for women and children who have experienced trauma due to homelessness and domestic and sexual violence, and women with children who are at risk of a court-ordered child removal. In our experience these two vulnerable cohorts are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness and housing stress and face distinctive housing challenges that require targeted solutions.

We note:

- Repurposed spaces need to be fit for purpose for women with children in crisis.
- That the uncertainty of some forms of 'meanwhile use' tenure does not leave participants vulnerable to further instability and homelessness.
- That there are suitable exit pathways in place from transitional housing to secure, affordable and safe housing that women and children can call home.
- Enabling collaboration between government, property owners, nongovernment domestic violence, family support services and community housing providers is a promising approach. An example of this collaborative approach is the recent Pathways Home collaboration between the PAYCE Foundation, Women's Community Shelters, Bridge Housing Ltd and Twilight Aged Care and Link Housing. The collaboration provides transitional housing to women and their children and older single women escaping domestic and family violence by identifying and repurposing underutilised properties.
- Policy makers can support these innovative collaborative initiatives through a range of frameworks and mechanisms. Examples include providing funding resources, planning policy and guidance to facilitate partnerships and improve matchmaking and undertaking advocacy to build networks and capacity via the provision of best practice guidelines and compendiums, competitions and storytelling.¹

Options to improve access to existing accommodation to provide community housing (*Terms of reference b*)

We highlight the difficulties faced by our clients in accessing transitional short stay and social housing for the following vulnerable groups:

Women and children affected by family, domestic and sexual violence

In metropolitan Sydney, 28% of our referrals for families to homelessness programs are due to domestic violence. In rural NSW, domestic and family violence continues to be the primary referral reason to our homelessness services.

Case Study 2 in Appendix B illustrates the unique housing challenges faced by women and children escaping domestic violence and their need for additional support. In our experience:

- Women escaping domestic violence may not have an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) because they are too frightened to approach police or do not recognise they are experiencing domestic violence. This cohort struggles with accessing safe and stable housing as Housing NSW does not recognise them as being homeless – being homeless as a result of an abusive relationship is insufficient evidence in the absence of an AVO. Typically, they end up on the general housing list, which makes exit options from transitional short stay accommodation more difficult due to housing affordability.

¹ The Greater London Authority. (2020). *Meanwhile use in London: A Research Report For The Greater London Authority*. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/meanwhile_use_for_london_final.pdf

- When making their housing application, women may not realise what evidence is required and omit evidence about abuse. This may impede them getting priority on the housing list or obtaining financial assistance such as Department of Community and Justice (DCJ) Rent Choice Start Safely subsidy. For example, one of our clients, a young pregnant woman, was unaware she needed to provide information of the abuse and was offered a property in the suburb where her ex-partner lives which she had to decline.
- Subsidised rents are available for Rent Choice Start Safely payments to approved applicants from DCJ for up to 36 months. However, some domestic violence survivors experiencing additional complicating factors (i.e. complex trauma, health needs including mental health, newborns or pregnancy) need a longer period of support to recover and rebuild their lives.

Women and children who are risk of a court-ordered child removal

- Scarcity of affordable rental accommodation means that real estate agents and landlords can discriminate against women with children on benefits and with no rental histories, and who may be in recovery from substance abuse disorders, mental health difficulties and intergenerational trauma.
- Our Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) clients face challenges regarding the eligibility criteria for social housing. Clients on bridging visa or temporary visa status are not able to access social housing. This often results in overcrowding as families cram together in a small space e.g. two families with four children each residing in a two-bedroom unit. Due to their temporary visa status their employment and income are unstable and insufficient to support ongoing rent costs. There are only a few services available throughout NSW to accommodate these types of clients, and it remains a significant service gap. The shortage of stable and safe housing can in turn lead to child protection concerns, homelessness, and health problems that eventually increase the government's cost burden.
- Housing applications are now online and not an easy process for our clients to follow. In addition, online access creates challenges for clients who only have a phone as completing the application form and uploading supporting documents can be problematic.
- Our clients' experience is that housing applications are being rejected with no clear reasons being provided. This can lead to repeated contact with Housing NSW to obtain answers, long waiting times on the phone, and increasing feelings of hopelessness and disempowerment among clients. For example, a young pregnant mother lodged her application for housing in February and when she followed up in June it had not been looked at; in fact, it had not even been allocated to be assessed which was very disheartening for the client.
- Prior to securing refuge or transitional short-stay accommodation, many of our clients have moved multiple times over a short period of time. While transient and moving between services their information and history are frequently lost, making accessing consistent support more difficult.

Women with children exiting homelessness programs

Case Study 1 in Appendix B illustrates the crucial role of services and support for people at particular risk of homelessness, notably women and children exiting Barnardos homelessness programs.

Options to improve access to existing and alternate accommodation to address the social housing shortage

- Provide services for women with children who have a bridging visa or temporary visa and cannot access social housing. For example, the House of Welcome (St Francis Social Services) has access to vacant property that is able to accommodate these clients at minimal or no cost, but these services are scarce.
- Again, this is an area where collaborative partnerships between government, philanthropic funders, housing providers, and nongovernment domestic violence and family support services could be particularly fruitful.
- Increase funding for head leasing projects. The use of headleasing provides the time for clients to establish stable income, demonstrate the ability to maintain rental property, learn living skills, and address the vulnerabilities that lead them to social housing. During this time, they would be supported by a case management service with support being wound down gradually before the client takes over the lease. There are many success stories and pilot programs using this model, such as EHL Family Violence Head Lease Program (Victoria) and the Salvation Army and Sisters of Charity transitional housing program to support survivors of modern slavery.
- Encourage the use of underutilised or vacant properties that could be repurposed as a group of townhouses or apartments for vulnerable women and children who could live and access family support/youth support/intensive family preservation services colocated onsite.
- Create a team of housing workers to network between the different organisations that support families looking for housing.
- Link housing services directly to hospitals so young mothers have direct points of contact to overcome their housing challenges.
- Greater enforcement of regulations that protect tenants and hold landlords accountable for providing basic safety and maintenance, and protection for tenants to be able to raise complaints.
- Consider the location of housing including access to public transport to improve sense of belonging to a community.
- More financial support to agencies providing housing to increase the stock of available housing, thereby allowing more families to be supported. Barnardos currently operates a self-funded cottage which is set up to receive families who may be experiencing homelessness.
- Funding packages per family/per person potentially modelled on the Permanency Support Packages for families through Department Communities and Justice. This would allow wrap around services to be provided to the family.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any aspect of our submission. Please feel free to contact Dr Robert Urquhart, Head of Knowledge, Outcomes and Research on (02) 9218 2392 or rurquhart@barnardos.org.au.

Appendix A – Barnardos homelessness programs

Auburn Children’s Family Centre (Sydney NSW)

Auburn provides two homelessness programs:

- *Transitional Accommodation Program (TAP)*
 - Barnardos TAP provides “family support-style” casework to families living in 4 bedsit units owned by Barnardos and 6 properties in the community managed by Evolve Community Housing.
 - Target clients are young pregnant women and young parents 16-24 years, and families with dependent children who homeless or at risk of homelessness; for 3-18 months.
 - Clients are predominantly from the Cumberland Local Government Area and then Western Sydney.
- *No Wrong Door clients*
 - Brief crisis support to anyone homeless or at risk of homelessness to link them to other accommodation and services for on-going support and/or advocate for them to be rapidly rehoused.

Penrith Children’s Family Centre (Sydney NSW)

Penrith delivers two homelessness programs:

- *Universal Screening and Supports (also known as Mt Druitt Project)*
 - An early intervention program based on the COSS model (Geelong Project).
 - Is currently in Pilot stage at 4 high schools in Mt Druitt.
 - This model uses a screening tool to identify young people at risk of homelessness and early school leaving.
 - Service provision is guided by screening of young people and is for young people aged 11 to 18 years who are enrolled in a Chifley college within Mt Druitt.
- *Penrith Transitional Housing Program*
 - Currently not receiving external funding.
 - 6 one bedroom units which can accommodate 4 people.
 - Accommodation is provided to families who have children.
 - All families must be allocated to a program at Penrith to access accommodation.
 - Assessment of eligibility is regards to risk – Drug and alcohol use; domestic violence and mental health. Assessment is based around units not being staffed 24/7 – so families must be low to moderate need and risk.
 - Numbers per year vary – average stay for a family is 9 months.

Western NSW (rural and remote NSW)

Western NSW delivers a range of homelessness services including:

- *Reconnect Cobar, Warren, Nyngan* – 12-18 year olds who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- *Reconnect Wellington, Narromine, Gilgandra* – 12-18 year olds who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- *Reconnect Mid-Western Regional and Warrumbungles* – 12-18 year olds who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- *Mudgee SHS* - homeless or at risk of homelessness and domestic violence enhancement.
- *SHS Western NSW Domestic Violence Response Enhancement* – LINKER service-women with or with children who are homeless due to domestic or family violence.
- *Beyond Barbed Wire* – for women with children leaving correctional facility and returning to live in Western NSW.
- All Barnardos Western NSW safety and prevention services support families with children in relation to Housing and homelessness as needed.

Appendix B - Case Studies

All names have been changed and pseudonyms used.

Disconnection between services hinders support for women and children exiting Barnardos' homelessness programs

Mother with five children who experienced acute trauma after a residential fire

Barnardos Auburn Children's Family Centre homelessness programs – Transitional Accommodation Program

An obstacle to connecting services that support women and children is that Housing NSW services may not be trauma informed. For example, the family home of a single mother with five children burnt down and the family was placed in Temporary Accommodation (TA). Housing NSW offered the family a town house (identical to the home that burnt down) which the mother declined. The mother was so concerned and traumatised by the fire (in which three of the children were very lucky to escape from as they were upstairs when the fire occurred) that she could not even enter the townhouse. Once the mother declined the property the Housing NSW withdrew all housing support including TA. This resulted in the family sleeping in their car overnight, at which point the family were linked to Barnardos Family Connect and Support Services who then referred them to Barnardos Auburn Children's Family Centre homelessness programs for housing support.

Barnardos workers spoke to Housing NSW who did not accept the mother's state of acute trauma nor that this was a valid reason for declining the property. Rather, Housing staff told Barnardos staff that mother should have all her children removed for not accepting the property, even though the mother's reason for turning down the property was to protect the children.

Barnardos Auburn homelessness programs assessed the family and they agreed to move into a Barnardos headleased property. As she had been offered and accepted transitional accommodation the mother's priority housing application is now not deemed a priority and she is now back on a wait list for a Housing NSW property. However, the family lost all of their possessions in the fire and Barnardos does not have access for brokerage support to purchase furniture and whitegoods for the family. Housing NSW do have access to brokerage options, but three weeks later Barnardos staff are still waiting for Housing NSW to lodge the brokerage application on behalf of the family. This means while Barnardos have a property for the family, the family cannot move in as they do not have furniture and are still residing in temporary accommodation.

The additional support needs of women and children affected by family, domestic and sexual violence

Mother with infant child escaping a severe domestic violence incident

Barnardos Mudgee's Specialist Homelessness Service

Michelle was referred to Barnardos Mudgee's Specialist Homelessness Service by the Mudgee Police following a severe domestic violence incident that resulted in Michelle

sustaining substantial physical injuries. The noise that resulted for the incident caused concern with neighbours who called the police to notify them of the disturbance. On arrival the police called an ambulance who attended the scene and conveyed Michelle and her infant child Rose (aged 19 months) to the local hospital to treat Michelle's suspected broken ribs and concussion. Police explained to Barnardos staff that the perpetrator had not yet been located and that both Michelle and her daughter were at significant risk while ever he was on the run.

Michelle did not want to leave the Mudgee community because she had other children in informal care arrangements with extended family along with the only family support available to her. Michelle and Rose were approved to access the Crisis property where they would remain for the next two months while police searched for and finally arrested the perpetrator. During this time Michelle and Rose did not leave the property, as Michelle wanted to protect Rose. During this time staff did all her shopping and delivered it to her, as there was no online shopping available in a country town, and supplied age appropriate activities, toys and books for Rose to encourage a positive parent infant bond.

Michelle was initially supported by the local Mudgee Barnardos team, following this she was referred to the Barnardos Western NSW DV Linker program. Both services provided support and emotional assistance in the evenings and on weekends outside of business hours. Even though Michelle was in a heightened state she diligently followed the advice she was given, and she was proactive in completing a safety plan that she then adhered to.

Michelle also participated in play sessions with staff and Rose where they would role model how to teach Rose new things through play and conversation. Michelle felt that this coaching was important as Rose wasn't interacting with anyone else and she knew that her parenting had been impacted by the stress and anxiety of being in hiding to try to keep them both safe.

Following the arrest of the perpetrator two months after the incident Michelle and Rose moved into one of the Barnardos transitional accommodation properties. Barnardos staff were able to support her to re-enter the community, whilst ensuring her and her daughters' safety was maintained. Michelle began attending playgroup, completed housing paper work, attending counselling and an application was sent to Victims Services to get her car (which had been damaged to the point it wasn't driveable by the perpetrator during the DV incident) back on the road as well as security lights and cameras to make the property safe.

In a recent contact with Michelle she spoke of how much the afterhours phone calls that were provided by both the Barnardos Mudgee SHS Domestic Violence Response Enhancement (DVRE) program and the Barnardos DV Linker program greatly assisted her when she was in crisis and that she did not believe she would have been able to sustain her mental health during that time without this additional support.