



Place-based homelessness prevention: a role for local government

By Leanne Mitchell
Churchill Fellow 2019

Key terms: homelessness, local government, prevention, collaboration, funding gaps

Homelessness is increasing around Australia and, in the absence of other support, communities are turning to their local councils, who have no mandate to act and little money to spend, to ‘do something’ about it. A new national housing and homelessness plan provides an opportunity to fund place-based local government homelessness prevention and early intervention activities.

Homelessness in Australia – in public places, cars, couch surfing, in places of insecure tenure and overcrowded facilities¹ – is getting worse. The 2021 Census² and other sources³ show that it’s no longer just capital cities experiencing the problem.⁴ Outer ring suburbs and regional areas⁵ are also feeling the pressure, and many local councils don’t know what to do.⁶

The causes and manifestations of homelessness are complex. Individual and community experiences can be vastly different, and homelessness can’t be ‘fixed’ in a simple way or solved by the actions of one group.⁷

Collaboration is key

While the Commonwealth, states and territories hold legislated responsibilities and contribute significant funds, local government response has been mixed. Australia’s 537 councils are diverse in size, budgets and focus, with two-thirds in regional and rural areas. While many understand the role local government can play in influencing housing supply, fewer have experienced or know how to respond to homelessness in their local communities.⁸



In these circumstances, councils may turn to one of the only tools at their disposal to manage public space – compliance.⁹

Constituted by state and territory governments and managed under respective local government acts, roles and responsibilities differ across jurisdictions. With funding from federal, state and territory governments, local governments play a crucial role in communities, managing infrastructure, services and public spaces.¹⁰

It is within shared locations – on streets and parks, in libraries and family services – where homelessness and its associated risks become evident. Despite this, councils have a limited legislative mandate and funds to address homelessness comprehensively.

As the closest level of government to the community, local governments possess untapped expertise, resources and levers¹¹ to address homelessness proactively. Still, in many circumstances, councils’ potential role is undervalued and overlooked.

Through my experience managing homelessness responses in local government and undertaking a Churchill Fellowship, I know first-hand that Australia’s councils can have an essential role in ending our homelessness crisis.

Councils have:

- **Deep knowledge about the local homelessness situation.** Councils are well placed to gather data and create information sources to enable targeted, locally focused program design and interventions.
- **Connections into communities to recognise indications and triggers of homelessness.** Through programs and services, frontline council staff, like librarians, park rangers and family nurses, are well placed to identify triggers and, if appropriately trained, can provide referral pathways to people at risk of homelessness who may not be actively seeking assistance.

- **Established partnerships that can drive coordination between services.** Councils are trusted local partners,¹² able to collaborate with multiple stakeholders in delivering response efforts.¹³
- **An ability to lead the narrative.** Local government is well positioned to build community understanding regarding homelessness and housing response efforts.¹⁴ Education can eliminate misinformation¹⁵ that may lead to oppositional stances.^{16, 17, 18}

While councils can make a significant contribution, it should be noted that response efforts should support, and in no way replace, the mandated roles and responsibilities held by state and territory governments. Additionally, with limited funding available, any efforts must be supported through dedicated funding streams.

Policy context and the homelessness landscape

Housing ends homelessness. With over 170,000 households¹⁹ on social housing waiting lists, rental affordability dropping across the country²⁰ and home ownership out of reach for many, the shortage of affordable housing remains a significant national challenge. While commitments like the Housing Australia Future Fund (HAFF), the National Housing Accord (NHA) and the Social Housing Accelerator²¹ are positive steps, delivery of 40,000 social and affordable homes will not meet demand.

Australian local governments have traditionally had a narrow range of responsibilities regarding homelessness. However, the increasing visibility of homelessness has seen communities demanding action²² and prompted policy-level discussions about local councils’ role in ending homelessness.²³

Australia currently lacks a national plan to end homelessness, with responses funded through federal, state, and territory budgets.

The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA), the primary funding mechanism between governments, distributed approximately \$1.7 billion in 2022-23 to states and territories, with \$146 million for homelessness services.

While states and territories are required to match Commonwealth funding for homelessness services and have housing and homelessness strategies, local governments operate under state/territory regulation, are not included in the NHHA and are not always included in the relevant national government forums.²⁴

Two significant reviews, the 2021 Australian Government’s parliamentary inquiry into homelessness²⁵ and the Productivity Commission’s 2022 NHAA review,²⁶ recognised a role for local government but failed to articulate what councils could do to prevent and end homelessness.

Principal options for Australian policymakers

In 2022, Australia’s Homelessness Monitor²⁷ noted that when responding to homelessness the role of local government remains ‘unrecognised and undefined.’ The authors said that ‘to contribute towards

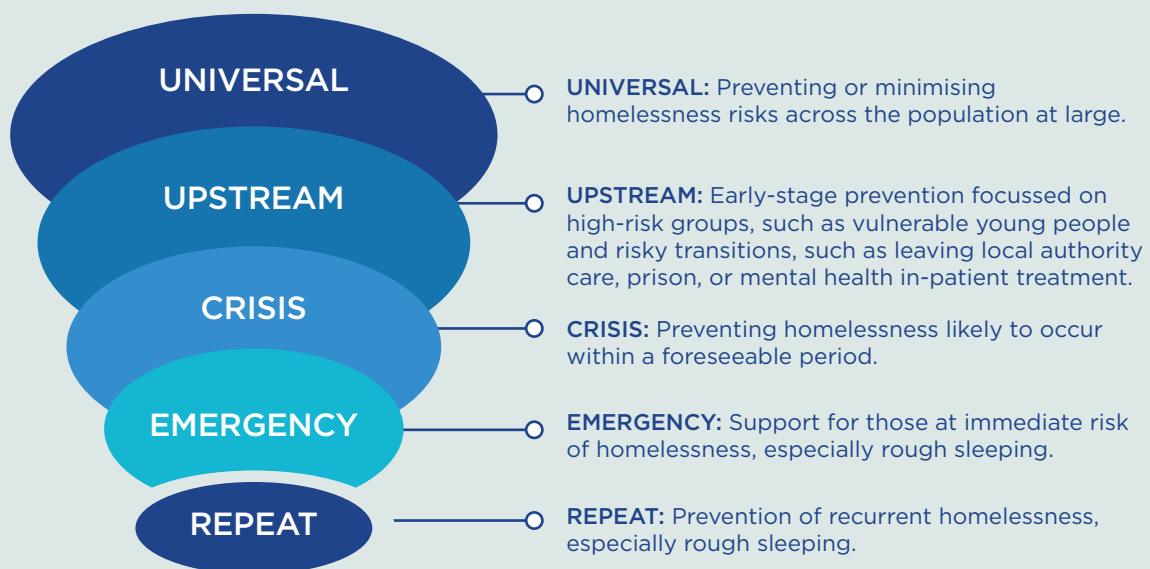
national efforts to end homelessness, the role and opportunities for LGAs need to be explicit and more coherently integrated within national and jurisdiction-specific strategies’.

As Australia develops a National Housing and Homelessness Plan,²⁸ the time to articulate and support local government’s role is now. Drawing on local knowledge, deep connections into community and a proven ability to drive collaboration, councils are well placed to initiate prevention and upstream interventions – and engage in crisis response when absolutely necessary.

Initiatives in the UK and US (**case studies 1 and 2**) demonstrate how local government can play a specialised role in prevention, collaboration and frontline efforts to end homelessness, which could be replicated in an Australian context.

A model developed by the UK voluntary sector offers a holistic view of prevention and early intervention that would extend thinking and benefit Australian efforts (**Figure 1**). Based on a five-stage typology,²⁹ it guides integrated responses at multiple points – from all of population efforts (like welfare) to prevention for people at immediate risk of losing housing or experiencing recurrent homelessness.

Figure 1. Prevention and early intervention framework



Source: Fitzgerald, et al., *Advancing a Five-Stage Typology of Homelessness Prevention*, 2021.

Case Study 1

Community connections prevent homelessness

Councils in the UK demonstrate the unique role local government can play in homelessness prevention and early intervention.

Newcastle City Council has adopted a broad approach to homelessness prevention and, through its Active Inclusion³⁰ program, demonstrates how locally led efforts to connect communities, utilise existing service systems and involve council staff can bring results.

Drawing on local knowledge and data, the response involves local partners to focus on the main causes of homelessness within the community – poverty and economic exclusion. The approach includes training council staff who are not homelessness or housing specialists to identify and connect individuals at risk into the right support services. Between 2014 and 2020, these efforts prevented more than 24,000 households from becoming homeless.³¹

Also in the UK, Manchester City Council has formed deep connections with its community, listening, learning and inviting local partners to work collaboratively. A homelessness charter unites the council and the local community, setting a joint vision, values and actions.³²

A Partnership Board brings together key decision-makers and influencers from businesses, government, charities, volunteer organisations, alongside people with a lived experience of homelessness to connect frontline actions to strategic decision-making. The board works on systems change and removing barriers across the city. A number of action groups, formed around specific needs (including employment, mental health, prevention), and open to any member of the community, inform and work with the Partnership Board.³³

In reviewing its last homelessness strategy (2018–23), Manchester recorded the highest number of homelessness applications in England but also a decrease in the number of people sleeping rough – from 123 in 2018 to 58 in 2022.³⁴

These examples demonstrate that wicked problems, like homelessness, need multifaceted, collaborative responses. In Australia, the Commonwealth's Stronger Places Stronger People³⁵ program, is a collaborative place-based approach 'to disrupt disadvantage and create better futures for children and their families through locally tailored and evidence-driven solutions to local problems, in partnership with local people'.³⁶ It offers an established model to trial a multi-stakeholder, locally based homelessness prevention initiative, where local government can play an active role.

Stakeholder consultation

I consulted a mix of experts in homelessness and local government, working in the public sector, peak bodies and associations.

There was strong agreement that local government has a role to play within national homelessness response efforts, particularly in prevention – a role which, to date, has not been articulated or formally explored.

All agreed that the new National Housing and Homelessness Plan offers an opportunity to change the way all levels of government work together. How this role is defined is key.

Local government stakeholders noted that most councils are wary of taking on more work and responsibility and are highly concerned about cost shifting by state and territory governments. As such, they would support recognition of the role local government might play but not want it to be mandated. Further, any programs or initiatives would need to be backed up by direct funding.

Stakeholders familiar with the Stronger Places, Stronger People program agreed that a place-based approach was a possibility and an extension or adaptation of this could provide the base for a feasible pilot.

Case Study 2

Establishing community connection points in libraries

Public libraries are often one of the only free, welcoming locations left in our modern communities. Social work programs in libraries, placing trained professionals to assist staff and customers at these service points, are proving to be extremely effective approaches to prevent and address homelessness.

Leah Esguerra has been San Francisco Library's in-house social worker since 2008.³⁷ She has mentored and trained people with a lived experience of homelessness to be in-house peer educators, connecting with visitors and offering assistance and referrals to support services.³⁸ The library backs this up with a number of programs and initiatives to build technical and life skills, including computer and job-ready courses.

Since the City of Melbourne established the country's first formal library social work program in 2019, similar efforts are gaining traction across Australia. Program evaluations indicate that homelessness outreach is often more successful in libraries than it is on the streets.³⁹

Recognising the potential, a growing number of Australian councils in cities and regional areas are adopting this approach, with social workers, community development workers and social work students embedded in public libraries. A new Australian community of practice is now in place to improve skills and drive this work.⁴⁰



Stakeholders consulted:

- Australian Local Government Association
- Brimbank City Council
- Council of Capital City Lord Mayors
- Department of Social Services, Government of Australia
- Homelessness Australia
- Homes Victoria, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
- Local Government Association of Tasmania
- Municipal Association of Victoria
- National Shelter
- The University of Queensland
- Treasury, Government of Australia.

‘As the closest level of government to the community, local governments possess untapped expertise, resources and levers to address homelessness proactively.’

Policy recommendations

The Australian Government can include local government by articulating its role in the National Housing and Homelessness Plan and establishing direct funding mechanisms.

1. Within a national homelessness and housing plan:
 - a. Recognise local government as a key response partner, acknowledging the cumulative impact of three levels of government collaborating to end homelessness.
 - b. Articulate local governments' role in place-based prevention and early intervention – noting the close connections between councils and local communities to help identify, inform and educate before homelessness hits crisis point, in addition to their ability to influence public perceptions.
 - c. Identify ways to support local government in crises, including responding to rough sleeping in natural disaster response.⁴¹



1

Recognise local government

Articulate the role local government can play in the National Housing and Homelessness Plan

2

Establish funding streams

Initiate direct funding streams to support local government responses to homelessness

3

Pilot a place-based approach

Test place-based homelessness prevention initiatives involving councils and communities

2. In partnership with Australian councils (through ALGA and/or state-based municipal associations) initiate direct funding mechanisms to support local government responses to homelessness:
 - a. In the short term: recognise and fund local government through existing channels, including the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement.
 - b. In the medium term: pilot direct funding streams through a local government-specific grants program. This could be connected to housing funding advocated by ALGA.⁴²
 - c. In the longer term: include and fund local government in any future Commonwealth-funded homelessness prevention initiatives (such as a Prevention Transformation Fund, as recommended through the Productivity Commission⁴³ and advocated by Homelessness Australia⁴⁴).

This funding will help councils' efforts to prevent and end homelessness, including:

- establishing nationally consistent data collection methodologies
 - communication and education initiatives
 - staffing and training to grow knowledge and build preventative capacity (including social work in libraries)
 - service coordination activities to ensure a joined-up prevention and homelessness response
 - assertive outreach.
3. Working with councils (through ALGA and/or state-based municipal associations), fund a pilot program testing place-based homelessness prevention initiatives, modelled off the Australian Government's Stronger Places, Stronger People program.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Professor Cameron Parsell, University of Queensland, and Emma Greenhalgh, CEO of National Shelter, who provided invaluable expertise and insight through peer-reviewing this article. Any errors or omissions are my own.

Leanne Mitchell is a local government worker whose experience managing homelessness responses in inner city Melbourne exposed her to the many limitations that councils and communities face when crisis hits. Leanne is committed to educating local government colleagues about homelessness. Leanne advocates for more recognition and funds to support prevention efforts and collaborative responses that make homelessness everybody's business.

References

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics. "Homelessness Operational Groups". 15 October 2021. <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/guide-census-data/census-dictionary/2021/variables-topic/housing/homelessness-operational-groups-opgp>
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics. "Estimating Homelessness: Census". 22 March 2023. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/latest-release>
3. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. "Homelessness and homelessness services". 7 September 2023. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/homelessness-and-homelessness-services>
4. Convery, S, and Nicholas, J. "Outer suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney are homelessness hotspots, data reveals," The Guardian, 8 June 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jun/07/outer-suburbs-of-melbourne-and-sydney-are-homelessness-hotspots-data-reveals>
5. Tippet, H and Wong, L. "Stark rise in homelessness reflected in regional Victoria Statistics," ABC News, 16 July 2023. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-16/homelessness-regional-victoria-squatting-gee-long/102596558>
6. Loney, G. "City of Bunbury apologies to Wiggles for playing Hot Potato to deter antisocial behaviour". 8 November 2023. <https://www.abc.net.au/>

- news/2023-11-08/bunbury-council-apologises-to-wig-gles-for-use-of-hot-potato/103076128
7. Mitchell, L. *Everybody's Business: What local government can do to end homelessness*. Melbourne, Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. 2023. <https://churchilltrust.my.salesforce-sites.com/api/services/apexrest/v1/image/?Id=06998000020HuyAAE&forceDownload=Yes>
 8. Murray, N (ed). *In the Heart of the City: Responding to Homelessness in the Capital Cities*. Parity magazine, Vol 34 Issue 4. May 2021.
 9. Justice Connect. "Blocking Melbourne's homelessness ban". Accessed 3 December 2023. <https://justiceconnect.org.au/campaigns/blocking-melbourne-homelessness-ban/>
 10. Australian Local Government Association (ALGA). "Facts and Figures". Accessed 1 September 2023. <https://alga.com.au/facts-and-figures/> Ryan, R., et.al. 2015 *Why Local Government Matters: Summary Report 2015 Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government*, University of Technology Sydney Australia. <https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/WhyLocalGovernmentMatters-FullReport.pdf>
 11. SGS Economics and Planning. *Australian Local Government Association. Research for submission to Australian Local Government Productivity Inquiry*. August 2022. <https://alga.com.au/app/uploads/Final-Report-SGS-Research-Aug-2022.pdf>
 12. Prance, F. et.al. *The Role of Local Government in Addressing Homelessness. A Toolkit for Local Government*. University of Adelaide. 2013. <https://aaeh.org.au/assets/docs/Publications/A-Tool-Kit-for-Local-Govt.pdf>
 13. City of Sydney News. "A small team doing big work: our homelessness unit advocates for positive change". Accessed 24 November 2023. <https://news.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/articles/a-small-team-doing-big-work-our-homelessness-unit-advocates-for-positive-change>
 14. RMIT University. "Seven myths about homelessness busted". Accessed 16 November 2023. <https://www.rmit.edu.au/news/all-news/2018/aug/seven-homelessness-myths-busted>
 15. Adams, B., Welsh Carroll, M., & Gutierrez, N. (2023). Community Acceptance of, and Opposition to, Homeless-Serving Facilities. *International Journal on Homelessness*, 3(2), 156-183. <https://doi.org/10.5206/ijoh.2022.2.1478>
 16. Batterham, D. *Public Perceptions of Homelessness – a literature review*. Launch Housing. May 2020. https://cms.launchhousing.org.au/app/uploads/2020/06/Public-perceptions_a-literature-review_Final_Public.pdf
 17. SBS News. "Why residents of wealthy suburbs are fighting moves to create affordable homes". 23 April 2023. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/why-residents-of-wealthy-suburbs-are-fighting-moves-to-create-affordable-homes/ly0G1230v>
 18. National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation. *State of the Nation's Housing 2022-23*. Sydney. Australian Government. 2023. https://www.nhfc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-03/state_of_the_nations_housing_report_2022-23.pdf
 19. SGS Economics. *Rental Affordability Index*. November 2023. <https://sgsep.com.au/projects/rental-affordability-index>
 20. Australian Government. *Ministers Treasury Portfolio. Media Release: Delivering on the \$10 billion Australia Future Fund*. 11 September 2023. <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/julie-collins-2022/media-releases/delivering-10-billion-housing-australia-future-fund#:~:text=The%20%2410%20billion%20Housing%20Australia%20Future%20Fund%20will%20create%20a,made%20to%20the%20Australian%20people>
 21. Beazley, J. "'Do we just make a tent city?': the councils grappling with an influx of homeless Australians", *The Guardian*, 20 November 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/nov/20/do-we-just-make-a-tent-city-the-councils-grappling-with-an-influx-of-homeless-australians>
 22. Council of Capital City Lord Mayors. *Local Government Community of Practice: Housing and Homelessness Report*. 23 October 2023. <https://www.lordmayors.org/local-government-community-of-practice-housing-and-homelessness-report/>
 23. Skatssoon, J. "PM&C accused of breaking commitment to local government". *Local Government News*. 31 May 2023. <https://www.governmentnews.com.au/pm-c-accused-of-breaking-commitment-to-local-government/>
 24. Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. *Inquiry into homelessness in Australia*. Canberra. Commonwealth of Australia, July 2021, p.vii.
 25. Australian Government Productivity Commission. *In need of repair: The National housing and Homelessness Agreement Study Report*. Canberra. Commonwealth of Australia. August 2022, 169.
 26. Pawson, H. et.al. *Australian Homelessness Monitor 2022*. Victoria. Launch Housing, 2022. https://cms.launchhousing.org.au/app/uploads/2022/12/AustralianHomelessnessMonitor_2022.pdf
 27. Australian Government Department of Social Services "Developing the National Housing and Homelessness Plan". Accessed 1 October 2023. <https://www.dss.gov.au/housing-support-programs-services-housing/developing-the-national-housing-and-homelessness-plan>
 28. Fitzgerald, S. et.al. *Advancing a Five-Stage Typology of Homelessness Prevention*. *International Journal on Homelessness*, 2021
 29. Newcastle City Council "Information for professionals – homelessness prevention" Accessed 1 October 2023. <https://www.newcastle.gov.uk/services/housing/housing-advice-and-homelessness/information-professionals-homelessness-prevention#ain>
 30. World Habitat Awards. "Homelessness prevention in Newcastle upon Tyne". Accessed 6 October 2023. <https://world-habitat.org/world-habitat-awards/winners-and-finalists/homelessness-prevention-in-newcastle-upon-tyne/>
 31. Manchester Homelessness Charter. Accessed 15 January 2024. <https://charter.streetsupport.net/manchester-homelessness-charter.pdf>
 32. Manchester Homelessness Partnership. Accessed 25 November 2023. <https://mhp.org.uk/>
 33. Manchester Homelessness Partnership. *Manchester Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2024-2027*. https://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/200117/homeless_people/7160/homelessness_strategy#:~:text=Homes%20and%20property%20Homelessness%20Strategy&text=It%20identifies%20four%20priorities%3A%20Increasing,accommodation%20and%20supporting%20better%20lives
 34. Australian Government Department of Social Services, "Stronger Places Stronger People". Accessed 28 October 2023. <https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-programs-services/stronger-places-stronger-people>
 35. Australian Government Department of Social Services. *Families and Children. "Stronger Places, Stronger People"*. Accessed 25 November 2023. <https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-programs-services/stronger-places-stronger-people>
 36. Esguerra, L. "Providing Social Service Resources in a Library Setting". *Public Libraries Online*. 4 January 2019. <https://publiclibrariesonline.org/2019/01/providing-social-service-resources-in-a-library-setting/>
 37. Enoch Pratt Free Library. "Peer Navigators" Accessed 1 October 2023. <https://www.prattlibrary.org/services/peer-navigators>
 38. Garner, J. et.al. *Social Work in Australian Public Libraries: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Social Justice*, *Public Library Quarterly*. 2020. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01616846.2020.1825917>
 39. Charles Sturt University. "Social Work in Libraries". Accessed 3 December 2023. <https://thinkspace.csu.edu.au/librarisocialwork/>
 40. Commonwealth of Australia. *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. Final Report 2020*. <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/natural-disasters/report>
 41. Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) 2023-24 Pre-Budget Submission, p.15. 30 January 2023. <https://alga.com.au/app/uploads/ALGA-Pre-Budget-Submission-2023-24.pdf>
 42. Australian Government Productivity Commission. *In need of repair: The National housing and Homelessness Agreement Study Report*. Canberra. Commonwealth of Australia. August 2022, p.43. <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/housing-homelessness/report/housing-homelessness-overview.pdf>
 43. Homelessness Australia. *National Housing and Homelessness Plan Submission*. p.34. October 2023. <https://homelessnessaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/National-Housing-and-Homelessness-Plan-Submission-9.pdf>