

COFFS HARBOUR GREENS

HOUSING STRATEGY PROPOSAL





MANY OF US ARE 3 STEPS AWAY FROM HOMELESSNESS

Coffs Harbour Greens presents a 3 step Homelessness Strategy proposal that includes the following key approaches:

1. Housing First Approach: Long term homeless response and prevention pathway to be expanded with innovative and evidenced based solutions.

2. Real Affordable Housing: More affordable homes to rent and buy, such as smaller sites, community title, granny flat expansion program.

3. Preventing climate change related homelessness in Coffs Harbour: Involving the community and planning for climate change.

BACKGROUND

- The Mid North Coast is currently experiencing a housing and homelessness crisis. Recent modelling, commissioned by NCOSS and other peak bodies, has showed homelessness numbers are expected to swell by close to 25 percent across the state due to the COVID hit on the economy and the winding back of JobSeeker and JobKeeper supports.
- Homelessness services are at capacity already while the demand continues to grow. Public housing is also at capacity creating inefficient use of housing with the limited stock of three and four bedroom properties used for individuals due to the low number of varied housing options in Coffs Harbour.
- According to the NSW Department of Communities and Justice there is a 5+ year wait list for 3 bedroom public housing homes in the Coffs Harbour area. The Mid North Coast residential vacancy rate decreased from 3.2% in May 2020 to 1% in May 2021. In Coffs Harbour, we are experiencing a 0.9% residential vacancy rate, according to the Real Estate Institute of NSW as of May 2021.
- The numbers of people accessing support for housing issues have soared across the region as people from the cities flock to the region and investors sell their rental properties because of rising property prices.
- Investment in homelessness services in NSW is failing to keep up with demand, and public funding for social housing in NSW has been drastically reduced.
- As unemployment rises in the region this situation is only projected to worsen, according to the Productivity Commission. Competition for low cost rental accommodation is increasing whilst rents and house prices have increased dramatically in the area. Increasing supply of housing will not adequately address this without public intervention regarding cost, housing pathways, housing types and affordability, as supply is not the issue, but the levers that stimulate demand.
- This situation is going to drastically worsen unless local government intervenes with advocacy for and facilitation of innovative and evidence based solutions.

A HOUSING FIRST APPROACH

The housing first approach is based upon the principle that everyone has a right to a stable home. It is also based upon the theory that once people have been assisted to overcome their homelessness crisis with long-term housing, then it is much easier to support them to address the multiple issues that contributed to their homelessness in the first place. This model is currently showing success in Finland and is being adopted by several other countries due to its success.

Providing emergency accommodation in hotels and other forms of temporary accommodation is expensive and has not resulted in a linear pathway to overcoming homelessness. For many, it is circular creating a cycle of short term support and homelessness, not housing.

In addition, there is the expense of support failing in other areas of people's lives because they are still experiencing a form of homelessness in temporary accommodation and thus still in 'crisis'. This can have massive budgetary impacts, for example, in the criminal justice system and health system. The community benefits when all who are capable can obtain and maintain employment.

The Housing First model has been successful in reducing homelessness in Finland. In 2019 the homeless population had fallen to approximately 5,500 people experiencing homelessness out of a population of 5.5 million. Compared to 37,715 people in NSW counted as homeless in the 2016 Census, out of approximately 7.5 million people. In the last 30 years over 12,000 people have been housed as part of Finland's Housing First initiatives (ABS, 2020, equaltimes.org).





Finland recognised that the staircase model of people moving through different stages of temporary accommodation while they were being supported to try to get their life back on track was not working and nor was it cost effective. Instead, the Housing First model, in Finland, involves providing people with homes as soon as they need them, unconditionally, without any requirements on the length of stay, or conditions to keep the roof over their head. These unconditional factors have been attributed to the success of their housing first program.

In the Housing First model, tenants usually pay rent in the form of a percentage of their government benefits or pay. It is very easy for the tenant to predict what their monthly bill will be. Intensive wrap-around-support early in the program is provided to the tenants, usually onsite by services such as NGOs. This model has been highly successful in reducing the rate of homelessness in Finland and is an evidenced based model that works and is now being trialed in other countries.

The Housing First principle has been adopted by peak bodies and community organisations working to address homelessness in NSW, as it is understood by those working in the homelessness sector to be needed to support people experiencing homelessness (Public Interest Advocacy Centre Homelessness Forum, 2020).

Housing First Recommendations:

- 1.** Coffs Harbour Greens believe that a Housing First approach should form the underlying principle of a homelessness strategy for Coffs Harbour City Council.
- 2.** Coffs Harbour Greens support a feasibility study into the construction and running of a Housing First model property to address homelessness on Council land.

REAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING OPTIONS

The current planning systems have created a low variety of housing options with investment focused on homes with an affordability range in the higher end, displacing potential cheaper options. It is counterproductive to have low-density town specific areas excluding both medium and high-density options that would improve service delivery, housing options and potentially reduce housing costs.

In order to provide smaller and varied more affordable options, Council will need to be proactive in encouraging development in the appropriate zones and delivered in conjunction with real affordable housing related planning instruments. Therefore, Coffs Harbour Greens encourage Coffs Harbour City Council to investigate provisions that could reduce lot sizes to 200m² with strict conditions dedicated to those on low incomes and consult with the Greens on details to fulfill this goal.

CHCC has a parallel role in controlling the availability of housing options for all members of society with the state government. Council also has a considerable area of land, some of which could be utilised to provide for homeless people short and long term. It is recommended that recent land audits be reviewed for opportunity for short and long term evidenced based homelessness solutions.

There are some relevant initiatives that have been delivered in Western Australia, including an over 55s community housing home for women on public land. This initiative is driven by the belief that affordable housing can be achieved when the cost of land is removed and that quality of life is improved when people have a permanent home and support services and that everyone deserves a home.



Coffs Harbour's current design has been poorly planned resulting in low resilience to climate change and absorbing unlimited population and services growth. Historical planning decisions have allowed critical infrastructure and services to be located within areas now susceptible to flooding emergencies. Critical infrastructure will become increasingly unable to function at capacity during a crisis. The inefficient nature of current planning creates a high cost burden for the community including inflated housing costs, inefficient transport and increased time and costs for recovery from emergencies. The Greens encourage Ecologically Sustainable Design principles in all planning decisions.

Recommendations:

1. Investigation of the possibility of reducing lot sizes to 200sq meters for low income earners.
2. An audit of council land and buildings for the purpose of housing and supporting the homeless and prevention of homelessness.

Homeless people and their pets deserve protection and assistance during the most vulnerable time in their life. The homeless experience harsh and increasing challenges resulting from extreme weather events and disasters. Extreme weather events lead to a large number of homeless, often who have very few possessions.



PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

Coffs Harbour has so far avoided the worst of weather extremes but this is no reason for complacency with repeated warnings for increasing extreme events. Understanding the risk that threatens people's health, planning to mitigate the impact, and preparing to respond can significantly save lives and preserve health and well-being. Increasing the speed of housing displaced people and repairing damaged infrastructure improves economic recovery. Planning improves social and economic resilience.

Australia has seen a significant increase in events that lead to homelessness including increased house prices, drought, fire, floods and now the pandemic. Climate change induced weather events will continue to increase in intensity and frequency increasing the severity and longevity of the impacts (Bushfire Inquiry report 2020) amplifying these.

During emergency events, transport, food and health provisions become difficult to access and cause delays in assistance. Damaged infrastructure slows economic response and directly displaces impacted residents. Disaster events have a greater impact on the lower socio-economic community members less able to help themselves recover. Increasing Coffs Harbour's emergency planning provisions, thus resilience, will decrease the negative impacts of these shortages and lead to improved health outcomes for the entire community. Recent fires and floods demonstrate current emergency planning at the local and state level requires more attention.

Local councils are in the best position to determine the needs and resourcing required and could provide logistical coordination for other agencies tasked with assisting impacted people. CHCC's Emergency Dashboard provides a good platform for extension community services. The Greens support further resourcing of this program. Extreme weather events, while difficult to predict, have warning processes in Australia from the BOM giving councils time to react and prepare.

PREVENTING CLIMATE CHANGE RELATED HOMELESSNESS IN COFFS HARBOUR

Coffs Harbour's population is set to grow to around 100,000 by 2040 with infrastructure already not delivering enough support efficiently for the current population. Acting to prevent and mitigate the impacts early will decrease overall costs to the community.

Coffs Harbour Community and Council have endorsed a Compact City model to manage our LGA's urban footprint. Since then, development approvals that lead to exurbs are still approved (i.e. Moonee Beach). The development approval system has historically failed to ensure city growth policies that uphold Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) thereby reducing preventable impacts on the community.

Resident groups have formed over time to resist inappropriate development approved by planning staff only to be rejected by Councillors and later in the Land and Environment Court. Examples include the Emerald Beach outfall in the 1990's and more recently the Emerald Beach North development and service station at Moonee Beach.

Coffs Harbour Greens understand that long term planning for a new city is required to house the growing community in a changing world. Regarding housing, good long term planning will limit the costs of climate change impact on the community and homeless. Such planning enables sustainable placement of infrastructure to offer diverse and relevant housing options. It also assists the community by limiting extreme weather impacts on housing. It will enable the maximisation of energy benefits of new technology while protecting the environmental values that give us the lifestyle we enjoy. This could provide ongoing jobs in the community and promote investment giving long term planning security based upon sustainability. The Coffs Harbour Greens support proactive planning and the compact city model aligned to the principle of ESD.





Prevention of climate change homelessness recommendations:

1. Plan for a resilient city centre for Coffs Harbour's long term future.
2. The creation of a emergency plan related to homeless at the time including actions and stages for action implementation.
3. The creation of a strategy to house people made homeless by emergencies. This is to include identification of emergency shelter areas, information hubs, provision logistics, safety equipment, training of community members. As the lead agency, CHCC will undertake the coordination of state and private agencies for assistance.
4. The inclusion of pets and stock in the emergency housing plan.
5. The control of pollution and debris created limiting the negative impacts of material and chemical pollution.
6. Updating the recovery plan with specific focus on efficiency, coordinating across councils various plans and programs.

CONCLUSION

The Greens will encourage sustainable improvements to the situation for Coffs Harbours homeless. Increasing options for housing, sustainable planning and planning for climate change will alleviate pressures but it is understood the issue is complex and solutions will take time. The Housing First model gives us a positive framework to build an improved system.

Housing homeless in publicly owned long term accommodation will support positive long-term community outcomes including decreasing costs to the public. Coffs Harbour Greens encourage varied housing options with proactive measures to meet community needs as it will assist to improve the homelessness situation.

Emergency situation response costs are rapidly rising, often beyond the financial capability of councils requiring external support. Preparation and planning will promote localised specific decision making to prioritise resourcing inside the Coffs Harbour region.

Coffs Harbour's growth has exposed critical infrastructure as a high risk to now predicted weather extremes and without action for sustainability, we are facing dramatic potential future costs to the community. Based upon climate change modeling we will advocate for a new planned Coffs Harbour following ESD principles, outside of the predicted flooding zones.

In this document Coffs Harbour Greens have proposed sustainable, future oriented and evidenced based solutions that could be facilitated and advocated for by Coffs Harbour City Council.

Our community deserves nothing less.

REFERENCES

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