

Responses to Homelessness: A Yfoundations Research Bite

Key points

- The Audit Office of NSW released a report assessing the Department of Communities and Justice (the Department)'s effectiveness in implementing the NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-23 (the Strategy) and addressing street homelessness during COVID-19.
- The report suggests that the NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-23 (the Strategy) was not developed to end homelessness and will have a limited short-term impact on homelessness across NSW.
- The Department received significantly less funding for the Strategy than it requested and most of it (95%) was given to crisis responses for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, rather than to early intervention initiatives.
- Aboriginal people, members of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ people did not receive targeted responses under the Strategy.
- During COVID-19, the Department focused on assisting people sleeping rough through the Together Home program. As of April 2021, the Together Home program assisted 400 people to obtain accommodation and supports for two years. A further 400 places have been set aside. This is still not enough as it only covers 18% of this population in NSW.
- The Department does not know whether any of the people who received assistance returned to rough sleeping or other forms of homelessness.

Introduction

The NSW government developed the NSW Homelessness Strategy to address the rise in homelessness following the 2016 census. To inform the Strategy, the NSW government undertook a state-wide consultation process with members of the community, non-government organisations, advocacy groups, government agencies and legal services (NSW Government, 2018). Through this consultation, the Strategy defined three focus areas:

- Prevention and early intervention
- Better access to supports and services
- An integrated, person-centred system

On 4 June 2021, the Audit Office of NSW released a report assessing the Department's effectiveness in implementing the Strategy and addressing street homelessness during COVID-19. This Research Bite provides an overview of the key findings of this report.

Was the NSW Homelessness Strategy successful in ending homelessness?

The report outlined that the Department struggled to develop a holistic, state-wide, long-term solution to homelessness as there was a lack of available evidence to underpin it. Therefore the Strategy focused on building the evidence through pilots and evaluations, rather than on ending homelessness. This decision was made in the hope that these evaluations, due in September 2021, would provide the Department with the necessary evidence about which programs should continue until the end of the Strategy. However, this evidence is unlikely to show the programs'¹ true impacts due to implementation delays and short reporting timeframes. This creates a risk that future funding for a comprehensive strategy will not be secured.

¹ Appendix two of the report includes a list of actions within the NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-23 and Appendix three outlines their progress.

The Department's data showed that the Strategy has supported over 4,000 individuals at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. However, the Strategy was limited in its scope. It failed to provide targeted responses for Aboriginal people, members of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with disability and LGBTIQ+ people, all of whom are at higher risk of homelessness.

The Audit Office's report found that the Strategy delivered most of its actions, but that it was unlikely to achieve its objective of 'creating an integrated, person-centred system'.

The Department received significantly less funding than it initially planned and most of the funding (95%) was given to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, rather than to early intervention initiatives. As a result, the locations and number of people targeted by the Strategy were limited. The Strategy's actions cover only a quarter of the state's local government areas. Through its actions, the Strategy supported around 8,200 people, which equates to only 22% of people experiencing homelessness in NSW.

How effective was the Department's COVID-19 response?

During COVID-19, the Department focused on supporting people sleeping rough, who were at a heightened risk of contracting the virus due to their lack of protection and access to healthcare.

In March 2020, the Department established the **Sydney Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce**, made up of representatives from the Department, NSW Health, NSW Police, the Minister's Office, local government, peak organisations and NGO service providers. This group contributed to the development and implementation of the Department's COVID-19 response to rough sleeping.

Between 1 April 2020 and 31 January 2021, the Department provided temporary accommodation to 32,158 individuals, of which 4,355 were sleeping rough, under its enhanced temporary accommodation program.

In May 2020, the Department also launched the **STEP-Link** program. This program provided people who were sleeping rough in the metropolitan Sydney area with enhanced temporary accommodation while assisting them to transition to stable housing. Between 7 May 2020 and 21 January 2021, the program engaged with a total of 1,833 people who had slept rough. Out of this number, 892 people moved into further accommodation when they exited the STEP-Link program, although these weren't always longer-term housing options.

In September 2020, the Department announced \$36.1 million in funding to establish the **Together Home** program to support rough sleepers. The program provides 24 months of head-leased housing and wraparound supports, such as alcohol and other drugs counselling, mental health support and disability services. The aim of Together Home is to achieve sustainable housing after the period of support ends.

When the Together Home program began, the eligibility criteria was restricted to over-18-year-olds who were sleeping rough, had been approved or were eligible for social housing, and held an unrestricted visa. The eligibility has since been expanded to include people who have a history of sleeping rough.

In its initial implementation, the Together Home program aimed to support 400 people sleeping rough. This target was met by April 2021. In January 2021, the Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services announced an additional \$1.3 million for Together Home to provide homes for Aboriginal people sleeping rough on the Central Coast, to run for 18 months.

In the 2020-2021 NSW Budget, a further \$29 million was provided to create 400 additional program places. This increase was still not enough to support all people sleeping rough, and only covered 18% of this population in NSW. The program also faced difficulties in securing affordable rental properties for its applicants due to increased rental demand across the state during the pandemic.



Overall, the Audit Office's report found that the Department effectively planned and implemented its homelessness response. However, due to the lack of data, the Department collected it cannot identify precisely how many people who were assisted during COVID-19 have returned to rough sleeping, and therefore how successful its interventions were. In fact, the Department's data suggests that 72% of the 4,000 people sleeping rough who exited temporary accommodation between 1 April 2020 and 18 April 2021 left with an unknown housing outcome.

Where to from here?

Based on its findings, the Audit Office report issued some important recommendations:

1. The Department must use the data from the Strategy to better understand the unmet need for homelessness supports.
2. The Department must use the evidence from the Strategy to develop a more comprehensive strategy to address homelessness, linked to the government's ten-year plan for social housing and 20-year plan for housing.
3. The Department must establish a mechanism so that the Specialist Homelessness Services sector, the community housing sector, Aboriginal people, and people with lived experience of homelessness may directly contribute to policy and decisions.
4. The Department must, in partnership with Aboriginal stakeholders and communities, design and implement a strategy for early identification and responses to the needs of Aboriginal people who are vulnerable to homelessness. The Department should also build the capacity and resourcing of the Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector to deliver homelessness services.
5. The Department must evaluate the homelessness response to COVID-19, integrate lessons learnt and create protocols to better respond to future emergencies.
6. The Department must establish a way to collect client outcomes data and feedback to improve their responses to homelessness.

Endnotes

NSW Government (2018), NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023, retrieved from:

https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/590515/NSW-Homelessness-Strategy-2018-2023.pdf