



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Proof Committee Hansard

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL POLICY AND LEGAL
AFFAIRS

Homelessness in Australia

(Public)

THURSDAY, 30 JULY 2020

CANBERRA

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL POLICY AND LEGAL AFFAIRS

Thursday, 30 July 2020

Members in attendance: Ms Claydon, Dr Freeland, Mr Laming, Ms Murphy, Mr Ramsey, Mr Simmonds, Mr Wallace, Dr Webster.

Terms of Reference for the Inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs will inquire into and report on homelessness in Australia. The inquiry will have particular regard to:

1. the incidence of homelessness in Australia;
2. factors affecting the incidence of homelessness, including housing-market factors;
3. the causes of, and contributing factors to, housing overcrowding;
4. opportunities for early intervention and prevention of homelessness;
5. services to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including housing assistance, social housing, and specialist homelessness services;
6. support and services for people at particular risk of homelessness, including:
 - a. women and children affected by family and domestic violence;
 - b. children and young people;
 - c. Indigenous Australians;
 - d. people experiencing repeat homelessness;
 - e. people exiting institutions and other care arrangements;
 - f. people aged 55 or older;
 - g. people living with disability; and
 - h. people living with mental illness;
7. the suitability of mainstream services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness;
8. examples of best-practice approaches in Australia and internationally for preventing and addressing homelessness;
9. the adequacy of the collection and publication of housing, homelessness, and housing affordability related data; and
10. governance and funding arrangements in relation to housing and homelessness, particularly as they relate to the responsibility of Local, State, Territory and Federal Governments.

WITNESSES

BEBBINGTON, Ms Samantha, Private capacity.....	24
FITZGERALD, Ms Christine, Executive Director, Strategy, Policy and Performance, Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development, Northern Territory	46
GANT, Mr James, Volunteer, Neami National Street to Home.....	24
HAYHURST, Ms Wendy, Chief Executive Officer, Community Housing Industry Association.....	9
KLERCK, Mr Michael, Social Policy Manager, Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation.....	31
McBRYDE, Mr John, Vice-Chair, NT Shelter Inc.	53
McMILLAN, Mr Peter, Executive Officer, NT Shelter Inc.	53
MOWBRAY, Dr Jemima, Policy and Advocacy Coordinator, Tenants' Union of New South Wales	1
PATTERSON ROSS, Mr Leo, Chief Executive Officer, Tenants' Union of New South Wales.....	1
PEARSON, Mr David, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Alliance to End Homelessness	17, 24
PINKSTONE, Ms Rebecca, Chief Operations Officer, Bridge Housing Limited	9
RICHARDS, Mr Scott, Peer Support Officer, Neami National.....	24
SWINDLE, Ms Michelle, Private capacity	24
WALSH, Ms Karen, Acting Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development, Northern Territory	46
WALSH, Ms Karyn, Director, Australian Alliance to End Homelessness	17

MOWBRAY, Dr Jemima, Policy and Advocacy Coordinator, Tenants' Union of New South Wales

PATTERSON ROSS, Mr Leo, Chief Executive Officer, Tenants' Union of New South Wales

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

Committee met at 08:46

CHAIR (Mr Wallace): I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs for the inquiry into homelessness in Australia. At yesterday's hearing the committee heard from witnesses about homelessness in our capital cities and about how we can better support veterans in our community who may be at risk of homelessness. At today's hearing the committee will hear more about community housing and about the experience of homelessness in the Northern Territory. The committee is also pleased to be able to speak with some individuals with lived experience of homelessness, who will provide a valuable perspective on the committee's inquiry. In accordance with the committee's resolution of the 23 July 2019, this hearing will be broadcast and the proof and official transcripts of proceedings will be published on the parliament's website. I remind any members of the media who may be listening online of the need to fairly and accurately report the proceedings of the committee.

I now welcome representatives of the Tenants' Union of New South Wales to give evidence via teleconference. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as a proceeding of the House. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. I'll now invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to a general discussion.

Mr Patterson Ross: Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee, and I'd like to acknowledge that we are calling in from multiple Aboriginal lands today. I thank the Australian parliament for taking the time to consider this vital issue. We have been the peak body representing tenants' interests in New South Wales since 1976. One of the main projects in our work has been to prevent homelessness. Our work, when not protecting legal rights or advising government of needed legislative and policy reform, is ultimately aimed at ensuring that everyone has a good home. We recognise homelessness is not simply a lack of a roof but also a lack of security, stability and safety in our shelter. Everyone deserves a home. Housing is the basis from which we ensure our community's wellbeing. This is not simply about the material, physical and structural protections housing provides but also a sense of home and belonging within a wider community. The Australian housing system, and in particular the private rental market, has failed to ensure everyone has access to safe, secure and affordable housing. This failure increases both the risk of homelessness for vulnerable renting households and the barriers to people developing a pathway out of homelessness.

Our submission highlighted three main routes for the prevention of homelessness into the future. We need to ensure the legislative framework for residential rental law is appropriate and effective in ensuring people can both find and keep their rented homes; we need to ensure the costs of housing are not placing people at risk of homelessness, which requires ensuring households have both the resources to pay for their housing and other needs and a sufficient supply of genuinely affordable housing; and, finally, people who rent need both advisers and advocates to prevent negative outcomes. All states and territories fund advice services that offer the individual advice. However, these services are not funded in line with demand to ensure that, when a person needs advice, the services can give that assistance in a timely way. Renters also need public advocates, particularly at the national level, to be able to share their experience in timely and effective ways with policymakers when Australian parliament is making decisions that will flow down to them at the home and street level. My colleague Dr Mowbray, as part of our opening statement, will share a couple of stories of people who have contacted the Tenants' Union recently.

Dr Mowbray: Thank you to the committee for the chance for us to speak to you today. I'm speaking from Darug land. In our submission we wrote of Ben's experience. I don't know if you remember, but at the time Ben was waiting on the result of his tribunal application and he was challenging as retaliatory a no-grounds eviction he'd just received. Unfortunately, while the tribunal found the eviction was retaliatory, we've had an update. They decided to allow it nonetheless. The member told Ben at the time of the hearing, 'Even if I stop this eviction, the landlord can just evict you again in a couple of months.' But Ben tells me that he has nowhere to go. Ben's story is one that I've heard many times—eviction pushing people into homelessness.

We've previously shared many of these stories. We've shared the story of Andy from the Central Coast, who was evicted for no grounds. They were told confidentially it was because 'the landlord is sick of you'. When her tenancy applications were continually declined because she was told her disability support pension was too low, she was forced to put furniture in storage, rehome her dogs and couch surf with family. Kai and her daughter, just

two weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic, received a no-grounds eviction. She said to me when I was chatting to her: 'I can't afford to move. I've faced homelessness before. I do not want to face it again.' Just yesterday I spoke with Kate. She's been living in her Sydney home in the inner west for eight years. Just like Ben, she's been chasing repairs, because of significant mould issues in her home. Just like Ben, she received a no-grounds eviction just a few weeks ago and she believes that's clearly in retaliation because she was about to get to the tribunal to chase those repairs. She tells me that the eviction is making her feel really unwell and anxious, because she's not wanting to move in the middle of the pandemic but she's also not sure she'll find another home that she can afford and she doesn't know where she's going to go.

We wanted to share these stories. They're just a few of many stories that we've heard from renters who contact us for advice. We know how easy it is in the middle of discussions, when we're thinking about the policy and legislative frameworks and the key recommendations that need to be made, to lose track of the lived experience of loss of home and of insecure, unstable housing. I think it's important because you mentioned that you're going to be hearing from people directly about their experience later today. I'm really glad to hear that, because I think keeping these stories and these experiences front and centre refocuses our efforts and our resolve. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thanks very much. I'll kick us off with a few questions before I throw to my colleagues. I note in your submission that you say there's been no increase to Newstart and other support payments in real terms in 25 years. Those welfare payments are indexed, so when you say 'there's been no real increase' you mean beyond the CPI. Is that right?

Mr Patterson Ross: Yes, that's correct. The experience of a person on Newstart is it's actually been falling behind the cost of living in general. We obviously acknowledge that the actual dollar value has increased.

CHAIR: I also want to take you to the concept of a no-grounds eviction, and this goes to your broader point about the first of your three main recommendations, and that is that the residential tenancy laws be overhauled, if I can put it that way. What does a no-grounds eviction actually mean? Does it mean what it says? It seems to me—and I'll flag that I'm a landlord; I'll raise that issue upfront—that there are many reasons a landlord may terminate a tenancy but may not declare what those reasons are. It may not be a retaliatory action against the tenant. For instance, they could be wanting to move in themselves. I appreciate that I'm asking you to comment on this when we've got eight different regulatory regimes around the country.

Mr Patterson Ross: That's absolutely fine. When we talk about a no-grounds eviction, that's right, we are talking about an eviction notice—or, in most of the tenancy act language, a termination notice—where the landlord does not need to state a reason for the eviction. That doesn't mean that there isn't a reason. We absolutely agree that it is an improbability, if not an impossibility, that there's no reason at all. What matters is the reason behind it. We have a list of reasons in the New South Wales tenancy act. There are more than 20 reasons that a tenancy can be ended. We then have the no-grounds evictions, which in our act are sections 84 and 85. Either at the end of a fixed contract or during a periodic contract, where there is no particular fixed date, the landlord can serve a notice asking the tenant to leave without having to disclose the reason that they want that to happen. What our proposed policy response to that is to reform those sections to expand the number of reasons that a landlord can give. Like in Victoria currently and like in many, if not all, OECD countries now, a reason like a landlord needing to move back in to use the property as their own home—which we understand the community as a general group may think is a perfectly reasonable reason—would be the reason given rather than the no-grounds eviction, where it's just not disclosed.

The reason that this causes a problem is that the person who is moving back in to use it as their own home is using the same notice as a retaliatory landlord who's trying to avoid their repairs obligations. Those two reasons are using the same notice and you can't tell the difference between the two, which causes this distortion in the landlord and tenant relationship. We are proposing more transparency around the reasons rather than a restriction, particularly of landlords who are trying to move back in. We also propose that major redevelopments—certainly a knockdown rebuild but potentially other renovations—might be a useful expanded reason. We've been saying that this needs to be a community conversation where parliaments look at the reasons it might work in their own communities.

Dr Mowbray: I'll add very quickly that one of the reasons we think that we need this removal of no grounds and a replacement with a range of reasonable grounds is it allow renters the ability to put those reasons to the test if it's necessary. Where they think it might be retaliatory, they can then make an application to the tribunal, to an independent arbiter, who is then able to look at the evidence and make a decision about whether or not it's a retaliatory eviction or if the reasons hold. I think that process provides a whole lot more security and confidence for renters.

CHAIR: Can I ask both of you what your views are in relation to periodic tenancies—whether they should be permitted, whether they should be permitted but have greater regulatory involvement? It seems to me that, if the parties agree—for whatever reason, whether that's to start off with or to roll a fixed-term tenancy over into a periodic tenancy—the parties are agreeing to have a greater degree of flexibility by virtue of the fact that a decision or agreement has been made to enter into that periodic tenancy. In those circumstances, why should governments get involved in—and further regulate, in some cases—periodic tenancies with more regulation than what is involved in a fixed-term tenancy?

Mr Patterson Ross: The periodic tenancy is an agreement between the parties to continue until something changes. That's how I would characterise it. At the moment, a periodic agreement can be ended by the landlord for no reason other than that they think that particular tenant is asking for their legal rights to be upheld and they don't want to uphold those rights. In a tight rental market, they're fairly sure that they can find someone else who will accept it as is, effectively, even though that's also not actually permitted under our tenancy laws. Because we don't have a sufficient supply of genuinely affordable housing, renters don't have a range of options available to them. The principles of competition—bringing the consumer what they need—have fallen apart.

On the periodic agreement being expanded with further reasons, one principle that we like to work from or think of is that if the property is still available for rent to anybody then the sitting tenant should have priority, because they're already there. It's already their home. If something changes to make that property no longer available for rent, such as the owner wanting to move back in, then that seems to be a reasonable reason to end that tenancy. The property is no longer available for rent. But if the property is still about to be available for rent, just to somebody else, we think that's an element where government regulation can have a useful part to play in ensuring that our homes—and our rental sector particularly—are actually delivering on the social outcomes that we all want.

CHAIR: This is not a loaded question, but would you be prepared to qualify that answer by saying 'provided the tenant is not in breach'?

Mr Patterson Ross: Absolutely. We are talking about no-grounds evictions here by definition, not breaches, because if there was a breach the landlord has a range of options—from minor breaches all the way up to very serious breaches with progressively shorter notice periods or, indeed, being able to go directly to the tribunal without a notice period. If the tenant's in breach of their contract, that is a separate question entirely from the no-grounds system.

CHAIR: Over the last three days of hearings that we've had, we've heard a lot of evidence and we've received a lot of submissions about a national housing strategy. We've heard many people say that housing and homelessness is principally the responsibility of the states and territories. There have been discussions around what if any sort of involvement of the Commonwealth's there should be in all of this. Obviously you would agree with me that the residential tenancy laws are the entire responsibility of the states and territories and the Commonwealth doesn't have any look-in on this whatsoever. What part or place do you see the federal government having in any sort of look-in on this particular issue? The reality is that the residential tenancy laws are 100 per cent within the purview of the states and territories. I have a follow-up question to that, but I'll come back to it. Could you at least just address that issue to start with.

Mr Patterson Ross: I think there are two routes here for the Commonwealth government. One is a coordination role and one is essentially seeking value for money for government expenditure. So the coordination role, like we already have in a number of COAG situations, can bring the states together to have a conversation about how they can all move forward together on some agreed principles. One particular system that we'd point to at the moment is the agreement around energy efficiency standards in rental homes, where the states have come together and set a clear time frame and some clear principles around what's going to be achieved, while still respecting each individual state and territory government's mastery over their own domains. That process works well. It has worked well for a number of projects over the years. The Commonwealth government has a very important role in coordinating that and providing the evidence base for the states and territories to make the best decisions they can.

The other element we'd point to is the value for money for government expenditure, where we do have the national homelessness and housing agreements, where the Commonwealth government provides funding to the states and territories for the provision of public and community housing but also homelessness services. At the moment, we would assert that some of that money is being spent in states and territories that don't have tenancy legislation frameworks that support that expenditure. If you have a system where you're allowing the private market to place people at risk of homelessness at an unnecessary rate then the Australian government expenditure in that area is less efficiently spent because it could be focused more directly on the people who need the greater

assistance, where, rather than because of some market failing, that could be addressed by state and territory legislation. So the Commonwealth government could have a conversation with their state and territory colleagues about, 'If we're going to give you \$2 billion a year, maybe we should talk about the framework that we're putting that money into.'

CHAIR: You're not advocating for a universal tenancy law though, are you?

Mr Patterson Ross: We're not advocating for a universal tenancy law. There are some minimum standards that we think should apply across every state and territory. We would also say that, at the moment, because Australian people move between the states and territories and investors invest across state and territory lines, there would be advantages in having more similar systems across the states and territories. There are often misunderstandings from investors who may be investing from Queensland into New South Wales with different laws and different expectations from the local market. If they are using a local property manager, that's going to be mitigated to a degree, but there still remains confusion and there still remains uncertainty about what's expected. So a more similar system could be useful from that level. What we would be advocating for is some minimum standards around the Residential Tenancies Act that ensure a basic platform but with some individual differences across state and territory lines.

CHAIR: Just finally, one of the suggestions that was made to the committee yesterday was that the committee might entertain making a recommendation along the lines of the Commonwealth rent assistance being paid directly to the landlord as opposed to the renter. What's your view on that?

Mr Patterson Ross: We would not support that as a proposition. The reason at the moment Commonwealth rent assistance and an increase to Commonwealth rent assistance may not act as an inflationary measure on rents is that it is received by the tenant as a cash payment and it is essentially an acknowledgement of the higher living costs of a renter versus an owner-occupier, at least over their lifespan. They can use that payment to cover their costs in whatever way works most efficiently for their household. If the payment were being made directly to the landlord, it would essentially be a rent increase. The rents would essentially increase in line with that amount because it is a fixed payment and the landlord knows exactly what it is. It wouldn't look like a direct rent increase; it would look like an inflationary effect over a relatively short period.

CHAIR: Are you aware of any studies that support that theory that—if I understand your position correctly—if the CRA for a particular tenant was worth, say, \$60 a week and that was paid directly to the landlord that the landlord would just increase the rent by a commensurate figure?

Mr Patterson Ross: There are some limited studies of that model. They have mostly focused on the US. There are some studies beginning to happen around Australia and in New Zealand. I'm happy to take that on notice and we could provide a brief summary of the literature we are aware of.

CHAIR: So that's the system used in the US, is it?

Mr Patterson Ross: The section 8 housing vouchers are similar to that, where the landlord receives it directly. But there are more restrictions on the receipt of that voucher.

Dr Mowbray: I think it's also worth pointing out that when the recent income support payments were increased in jobseeker people were concerned about what it would look like for social housing tenants. What we have seen and what we've heard from community housing providers is that actually some of that money is being used to pay back rent arrears. So people are very capable of making sensible decisions and budgeting appropriately. When they do see an increase in their income, they prioritise housing.

Ms CLAYDON: Thank you both for your evidence this morning. I was especially interested in your experiential data, Dr Mowbray, that when people did have an increase in their income they actually used it to pay back some of their rental debt. It's an issue that I am concerned about and would like to just ask you a little more about to try to tease out a little more what you think that rental debt picture looks like in New South Wales. In your submission you outlined very clearly for us the dramatic increase in work for the tenancy advice and advocacy services in the midst of COVID-19. Whilst I know you're putting that as an argument around the need for adequate resources to ensure that free, independent legal advice and advocacy is available for renters, I just want you to talk to us a bit about whether you have any sight over the numbers of tenants who are struggling to pay rent. You've talked about some of those examples. Are you collecting data on that front around the number of people who've sought rent reduction and been successful but are still in a very precarious situation, perhaps, in accumulating a rental debt?

Mr Patterson Ross: I might just answer briefly and then ask Jemima to expand. We are tracking as best we can these elements. The best place for the data to come from, indeed, is government themselves, particularly in New South Wales but it is true in other states and territories as well. The rent reduction negotiations, which is

essentially the model that Australia adopted, has been through government sources, so through the fair trading or consumer affairs or equivalent department and then the tribunal or equivalent in each state and territory. At the moment we don't understand that there is a whole-of-government project looking at that dataset.

Just this week—and so I won't be able to speak to it an authoritative sense, because it's still being analysed—the rental bond data for New South Wales was released. This shows the bonds lodged over a period as well as the bonds returned over a period. For the bonds returned, it shows how much of a bond was claimed by the tenant or who received their money back in full or how much went to the landlord or agent, as well as the length of tenancy. So this is actually a very powerful dataset. It can give us a lot of information. I think New South Wales actually has the best release of this data in the country. I think Queensland started it, but New South Wales is doing it better. But I think every state and territory could benefit from looking at the bonds data for the insights they can take from it.

We also are waiting for the release of a survey that's been done on those bond releases that's actually asking questions like 'What is the reason for the tenancy ending?' that will let us colour-in these questions. It was done over the COVID period, so it will be a very useful and rich source of information.

Ms CLAYDON: Who is conducting that survey?

Mr Patterson Ross: The New South Wales government.

Dr Mowbray: New South Wales Fair Trading.

Mr Patterson Ross: Yes. Very preliminarily, that bond data shows that there has been a significant impact. There's a large spike in tenants losing their bonds in full. Usually the rate sits at around 10 to 12 per cent where the landlord claims the whole bond. Usually that indicates that someone was breaking a lease or that there were significant rent arrears. It's actually rare that damage is sufficient to take the whole bond. For Sydney, that number usually looks like 2,000 or 3,000 people a month. In May, more like 5,000 or 6,000 people lost their whole bond and the bond was being returned. That was probably the April-May people leaving. So there was a significant spike there that really showed that people not only were not able to afford their rent but weren't able to maintain tenancy and had to leave, whether by an earlier eviction or, more likely, from our experience, they had to give up the tenancy. They had to break the agreement and pay the penalty and any rent arrears that had already accrued and actually leave. We know that many of those people didn't leave to another more affordable home; they actually left to their families, to couches and so on. The size of the tenancy sector in some areas—I was looking at the eastern suburbs—actually shrunk by about eight per cent from the beginning of 2020 to now. There are eight per cent less rented properties, which we know because the vacancy rate has increased so much. This is another verification of that. Jemima?

Dr Mowbray: I was just going to reiterate or expand on your points exactly. I think from the advocates and the local tenants advice services, which we're part of the network of, probably the key issue that they're providing assistance on is actually tenants looking to end a tenancy or leave a fixed-term tenancy early. Because they've been impacted financially, they're not affording their rent. Although they've requested a rent reduction, they're not confident they're going to be successful with that, or, even if they do get a rent reduction, that it's going to allow them to stay, because the rent won't be reduced enough to make the property affordable for them. So I think that the data that Leo was pointing to about the bond disbursements is going to be key to helping us understand and see the numbers, because it is really not possible for us to gauge exactly how many renters are building up debts at the moment. But, from the range of queries that we're getting into the services, we suspect there are a whole lot of people who aren't accessing the formal rent negotiation process through the New South Wales government. As far as I know, the number of people who have been going through that formal negotiation process is in the high hundreds or maybe close to a thousand, so they're not significant numbers. The numbers aren't super high, but we were never expecting that to be the case because, for a lot of renters, the choice is between a rent reduction negotiation process that they aren't confident will have a successful outcome, or leaving early. So they've had to make the choice to leave. I think that's an important thing to keep in the back of our minds. It is hard to collect data at the moment, but one thing we have heard is that in the last two weeks of June 784 applications were filed with NCAT—our tribunal, the New South Wales Civil and Administrative Tribunal. That's compared with 554 in the two weeks prior to that. So we need more detail around that, but that could indicate that, once the initial moratorium on evictions was lifted, more applications have been finding their way into NCAT around evictions for rental arrears. But we have to wait and see what that data really looks like, once we get more detail on that.

Ms CLAYDON: Going back to that data that Mr Patterson Ross put forward for Sydney, if I understand you correctly, you are saying that with people who lost their bond in full those figures have now have jumped—almost doubled—to five or six thousand people in the month of May. Is that correct?

Mr Patterson Ross: That's right. April and May were both significantly higher than what you'd expect from the ordinary system. June is also higher, but not as dramatically, because, obviously, with the people who left in a rush in very late March, in April and in early May their bonds are now disbursed.

Ms CLAYDON: I think a minute ago Ms Mowbray was talking about getting a sense of what's happening on the ground through those inquiries—people phoning in for your services or to local tenancy groups. I'm trying to get a better sense of your clients—the tenants who are seeking your advocacy and advice—and whether the face of those people seeking your assistance has been changing over the course of COVID-19. Obviously, you're seeing a dramatic increase. I'm interested in your experience—whether you're seeing people who have never contacted you before and whether the sorts of questions people are asking are changing. I'm just interested in what's happening on the ground, from your perspective, as a direct consequence of COVID-19.

Mr Patterson Ross: The profile of renters has changed and has been changing for a number of years. A broad cross-section of society now rent their homes. The people who are contacting us during COVID-19 have been driven, I would say, by industry and geographic location more than any other demographic feature. We started seeing COVID-19 affecting people in late January and February, with international students who were trying to come back home into the country and weren't going to be able to make it. Then we started seeing the big spike in mid-to-late March. The industries that were initially impacted—hospitality and tourism—were represented first. The profile of the workers in those industries who are coming through tends to be that of younger people, but there are many people who work in hospitality and tourism; they have a diverse range.

In terms of geographic location we saw the eastern suburbs, the CBD, the inner west of Sydney and even the North Shore and the Northern Beaches affected more than Western Sydney and, particularly, some regional areas. There's been a mix of experiences in regional towns. It really does depend on just how badly the economic factors impact those areas.

Ms CLAYDON: There was some evidence put to us that cities—capital cities in particular—might have fared worse than regional areas. Are you getting much of a variation from your members who are located outside of Sydney compared to the experiences of tenants beyond our capital cities?

Mr Patterson Ross: That's right; the cities do seem to have been more significantly impacted, particularly the areas of the cities that rely very heavily on a range of international travel—particularly international tourism, I think. Some particular regional towns—I'm thinking of the Northern Rivers, in New South Wales—were already doing it quite tough with very low vacancy rates; it was very hard to find a new rental home, and locals were feeling displaced by tourism. Some of those areas have not been impacted very badly; some are more reliant on domestic tourism rather than international tourism, so they haven't reported being as badly affected. Many of them have been coming out of a very rough summer with the bushfires, so their lives or their income over the previous summer may have already been significantly impacted before COVID hit. If you're a summer focused tourist town, you're looking to next summer to see whether your financial security is going to be badly impacted into the future, because COVID-19 hit essentially during the offseason.

Ms CLAYDON: You've given us a good sense of people who've already been forced out of the rental market, with an overview of some of the information from bonds received and returned, and of the experiences of people using your service. Are you still getting inquiries from tenants who have maintained their leases, who have perhaps negotiated or sought a reduction in their rents and are hanging on in their lease agreements but are still nonetheless struggling to pay rent? I am fielding concern with you about what happens when the rental laws change and changes to jobseeker and JobKeeper kick in. Are people raising those sorts of concerns, and what do you think are going to be the challenges for tenants going forward?

Mr Patterson Ross: People have been struggling to pay rent, particularly in Sydney, for a very long time. For a lot of people, when their income reduced—even if it only reduced a small amount—they were already paying more than they could really afford—more than we would recommend as an affordable rent. In New South Wales the level that was set to be defined if COVID impacted was a 25 per cent reduction in household income. A 20 per cent reduction in household income is still quite significant, particularly if you're already stressed with rental stress; it's going to put you in a very difficult position. People were concerned about their ability to pay rent before COVID, they became much more concerned about it during COVID and they will continue to be concerned after COVID unless we make some significant changes to our housing system.

In relation to the eviction moratorium and jobseeker payments and similar payments coming to an end, the real concern there is that many of the rent negotiations were done outside of the formal structure. We certainly have heard stories of people saying, 'Oh, I'll reduce the rent for a while and we'll work it out in a couple of months; we'll come back to it,' or of agreements made between tenants and landlords that may not have been as clear as they could have been, and the tenant's memory of what was agreed and the landlord's memory of what was agreed

don't match, and the parties are now in dispute about what they agreed on and what it would have meant—particularly if a tenant needs to leave because their income has changed again. With those two time frames ending at a similar time, my big concern is that people will be forced to go back to their landlords to renegotiate their rent—because they negotiated their rent on the jobseeker level as it was—saying: 'I need to renegotiate. My income's actually gone down again.' At the same time the eviction moratorium that provides protection against eviction when the landlord won't negotiate will have come to an end. That means that the person will be trying to negotiate without the assistance of the structure to do that around them. I can't imagine it going well.

Dr Mowbray: Can I add one thing. It's also worth considering that, at the same time, people have potentially been building up deferred rent debts, and they're trying to negotiate how they're going to pay that back. At the same time the income support that they've been receiving is either dropping away or going to be significantly reduced. It's worth considering the other accumulated debts that renters may have built up over this period. They may have been hoping that things would turn around and been using credit cards or other forms of loans from family or friends or other sources to try and make do until things turned around. Just as the income supports fall away, those other debts, on top of any rental arrears or deferred rent, are also going to be looming.

Ms CLAYDON: It's a very important point that the protection is disappearing at the same time that everyone is calling in these debts. It's terrific data potentially coming out from the bond information. You stressed that New South Wales has really led the way in terms of release of that data. Is that data in fact available for each of the states and territories? I appreciate whether it's publicly available might be a different matter. Do you have any knowledge of whether that data is available nationally?

Mr Patterson Ross: Queensland releases a similar dataset. They don't include as much information as New South Wales does. Significantly, what New South Wales does differently is release the full dataset, de-identified, as open data so that anyone can access it to analyse and to take learnings from it. Of course different researchers have different perspectives and different focuses, so we can learn different things from a broad range of analysts. Victoria and ACT certainly issue reports based on the data, so they're certainly collecting it. Again, I'm not sure that they're doing it in the same detail that New South Wales does. Particularly on bond returns it's not clear whether any agencies—certainly New South Wales government isn't doing it publicly—are analysing the return of bond data to see what trends may be coming out of that. Every state and territory except Northern Territory collects bonds, so that the dataset is potential in each of those state and territories. State collection and keeping in trust of bonds is one of those minimum standards that we would suggest should apply to every state and territory. Northern Territory is the only one that doesn't do it at the moment.

CHAIR: I'm just conscious of the time, Deputy Chair.

Ms CLAYDON: Thanks very much for your evidence. I'll hand back to you, Chair.

CHAIR: Thank you. Colleagues, I'm conscious of the time, and we're already over time with the first witness. I think we need to move to our next witness unless you've got a burning question, Mike Freeland.

Dr FREELANDER: I do have one burning question, if it's possible, very quickly.

CHAIR: Very quickly.

Dr FREELANDER: Thanks so much for your evidence. I'm really worried about the long-term effects on young people of not being able to pay their rent even in spite of an eviction moratorium. I've had a number of people come to me, particularly single parents and young families, saying, 'We will never be able to rent again once this is over because of our record being available to real estate agents.' Is that a real problem?

Mr Patterson Ross: Yes, and we do address it in our submission, actually, talking about the application process needing regulation. This is one of the areas of residential tenancy practice that is currently unregulated apart from more general discrimination law. One of the two risks that people have are that you can be listed on a tenant database colloquially known as the blacklist. Your listing up there is mandated to only last for three years, but we constantly find records that have lasted longer than three years, so people do have to be proactive in getting that listing taken down despite the law saying it should be done anyway. The other risk is the references from the real estate agents or previous landlords, which are unregulated and there is no time limit on that. Although the standard practice is to ask for two previous references, we also know, particularly in small regional towns, that if you get on the wrong side of the wrong agent you are effectively run out of town.

Dr FREELANDER: Thanks very much.

CHAIR: Mr Patterson Ross and Dr Mowbray, your evidence today has been very well received. Thank you for attending today. If you've been asked to provide any additional information, which I know you have, could you please forward it to the secretariat by Thursday 13 August. You'll both be sent a copy of the transcript of your

evidence and you'll have an opportunity to request corrections to transcription errors. Thank you once again for your attendance. You're now free to go.

HAYHURST, Ms Wendy, Chief Executive Officer, Community Housing Industry Association

PINKSTONE, Ms Rebecca, Chief Operations Officer, Bridge Housing Limited

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

[09:40]

CHAIR: I now welcome representatives of the Community Housing Industry Association to give evidence via teleconference. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as a proceeding of the House. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to a general discussion.

Ms Hayhurst: Thank you, chair. Good morning, everyone. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge that we're all meeting on Aboriginal land, which in our case is Gadigal country. Secondly, the Community Housing Industry Association, CHIA, represents the not-for-profit community housing industry, and we would like to thank you for the opportunity to appear before the inquiry. Our core business is rental housing for homeless people and low-income earners failed by the private housing market.

It's understandable that attempts to reduce homelessness have tended to focus on its most visible manifestation: rough sleeping. However, we believe it's important that this inquiry be framed by an understanding that homelessness is much broader than rough sleeping and also that all forms of homelessness are part of a much wider housing market problem. This wider problem must be tackled. Otherwise, although we may devise better ways of assisting affected individuals, the fundamental causes of rising homelessness will remain unaddressed. Not only will the flow of newly homeless households continue to grow but many of those assisted will once again find themselves in need of help.

The fundamental problem is Australia's serious and growing shortage of social and affordable housing, estimated to be around 650,000 units in 2016, and the absence of any plan to tackle this. Two problems flow from this. Firstly, there are too many households living in precarious housing situations that leave them at risk of homelessness. The Productivity Commission estimates that more than half of all low-income households in rental housing face housing costs that are unaffordable. Secondly, the pathways out of homelessness are constrained by the very limited affordable housing options available. As recent AHURI research has found, the private rental market is not the solution. It has not supplied enough dwellings at rents, which at around \$200 or less per week, are affordable to households in the bottom income quintile.

We believe that the sheer scale of the problem requires national leadership and bipartisan agreement articulated in a national housing strategy that includes a framework to tackle homelessness. We argue that there is an immediate opportunity to kickstart both our country's post-COVID recovery and reductions in the social housing shortfall through a social housing acceleration and renovation program—SHARP. This would aim to deliver 30,000 social rental units by the community housing industry. At the same time, we should also plan for an ongoing federal social and affordable housing program which incentivises states and territories—and, indeed, local government—contributions and which attracts institutional investment.

Positively, the cost to governments is far outweighed by the benefits. Research evidence has demonstrated that government investment in social housing produces savings for other public service budgets. More broadly, additional affordable housing can enhance human capital and hence economic productivity. Investing in social and affordable housing also has positive outcomes for the residential construction industry, a key part of the Australian economy and one of the country's major employers.

Finally, we must highlight the value of excellent tenancy management in reducing the incidence of homelessness; this is too often overlooked. Both the approaches to delivering mainstream services and the procurement of specialist support can make a big difference. Our sector is committed to building and improving on current programs and to working with other agencies to help households make a success of their tenancies. Rebecca, who accompanies me today, can talk about a number of initiatives that are already making a difference.

Ms Pinkstone: Thank you, Wendy. I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land that we are meeting on today.

I'm presenting to you from a practitioner's perspective, having worked for over 15 years in social housing, both for the state housing authority and with Bridge Housing, a community housing provider. I've seen firsthand the transformational role of safe, secure and affordable housing for our tenants and their families. In particular, I think it is important for us to highlight the important work that community housing providers, like Bridge Housing,

undertake to assist people experiencing homelessness not just to find a home but to keep it for good. This is where the value of community housing comes to the fore.

Community housing providers provide a proactive and personalised tenancy management service for our residents. We can meet people regularly in their homes, we can identify issues with the tenancy early and we can make sure our residents are linked to local services that can assist them. Our strong links within the local community and service system mean we can ensure that residents are referred to local programs and services to meet their needs and also to reach their goals and potential. This proactive, supportive tenancy management assists people to get and to keep their homes. We prevent homelessness.

Bridge Housing, like other community housing providers, focuses on delivering quality services and fostering innovation. I have a couple of examples of our supportive housing approach. These include driving financial inclusion through initiatives such as our Hand Up Arrears Program, which enables residents to avoid eviction by paying off their housing debt through activities such as financial counselling and other activities that address the causes of their arrears. We also work to harness external funding to implement employment programs, like Bridge to Work. That is a Commonwealth funded program delivered in partnership with CoAct to assist long-term social housing residents to gain access to employment and training.

As our submission has highlighted, a secure home is fundamental to ending homelessness. Community housing providers are well-placed to assist government, both as developers of quality housing and through the provision of quality tenancy and property management services. The community housing sector in Australia has grown from 43,000 properties in 2010 to over 100,000 in 2019. But overall we are part of a social housing sector which has declined as a proportion of all housing from 6.8 per cent in 1996 to 3.7 per cent today.

We require a clear national strategy to grow affordable housing supply and associated services. This requires Commonwealth leadership, and we look forward to working with government at all levels to address the homelessness challenge.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. Yesterday we heard evidence from NIFIC, in particular in relation to the bond aggregator providing significant sums for community housing providers. We've got \$1.6 billion coming from the federal government to community housing providers. But I specifically want to refer you to the moneys raised through the bond aggregator. Can I get both of your firsthand experiences about whether that has benefited your organisation or your members, as they case may be? How is that program running, and are there any improvements that could be made to it?

Ms Hayhurst: The bond aggregator we very much welcomed. We participated as a sector in the affordable housing working group that was set up by the Prime Minister when he was Treasurer and we advocated strongly for what is an equivalent to an organisation that's worked for many years in the UK: The Housing Finance Corporation. We knew that, by accessing the bond markets, the interest rates that our members would pay would be significantly less than borrowing from the bank. So it has been fantastic. It's been great the way it has ramped up. Many providers, including Bridge Housing Ltd, have accessed finance through that. I use the word 'finance' advisably because it isn't a subsidy. It's lower-cost finance, but it doesn't fill that gap that the committee has been told about: that feasibility gap, that gap between what community housing providers can raise in rent and what it costs to maintain housing and pay the interest on the loans taken out to build housing.

CHAIR: Can I clarify something there? You say it doesn't lower the gap, but it must, mustn't it, when you have lower interest rates? We heard from one community housing provider yesterday that was saving \$10 million in interest payments. Mr Dal Bon from NIFIC was saying yesterday that the Commonwealth through the bond aggregator is saving \$190 million in interest payments for community housing providers. If you're paying less money in interest then that's got to be closing the gap.

Ms Hayhurst: I think that's what I said. It hasn't filled that gap that exists. That's why we welcome it: because it has reduced the interest costs. But it hasn't covered the gap that exists that I'm describing. I'm following the question you asked about whether or not improvements could be made. The improvement that we need to be able to increase the supply to start to address that shortfall and meet future needs is an additional subsidy to fill that gap completely. I have no qualms in saying that NIFIC has been a fantastic initiative and we really welcome it. Providers have made significant savings with it.

CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Pinkstone, did you want to add to any of that?

Ms Pinkstone: I'd just reiterate what Wendy has said. We personally at Bridge Housing have benefited from refinancing with NIFIC. We financed approximately 260 dwellings through that arrangement with NIFIC. So those low interest rates have really helped us in terms of the viability of projects, but overall we need to look at how you service the debt over time, and that includes taking into account lower interest rates and also the amount

of rent that a tenant can pay. So it's bridging that gap to create an ongoing program of supply of dwellings that we need to look at. But all of those types of initiatives and NIFIC in particular have been welcomed by the sector as a way of securing long-term finance at very affordable rates for the sector.

CHAIR: How many homes did you say you'd refinanced?

Ms Pinkstone: There were 260 for Bridge.

CHAIR: What saving has that resulted in in interest?

Ms Pinkstone: I can't say because some of them are completely new dwellings.

Ms CLAYDON: If you've been listening to the proceedings of this committee over the last few weeks, you'll have noted that there has been some discussion around the definition of homelessness. I know that you went to that question in your opening statement. I would like you to talk about whether that definition could be changed in any way. Another issue I would like to tease out is the Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program. I am also aware that a rapid housing response fund has been put forward. And there are recent media reports that CHIA, in partnership with some of the industry super funds, has been in discussion for more than 12 months about an affordable housing subsidy program. I'm interested in whether these are all matters that are currently before the Commonwealth government and possibly predating COVID. Have you had a response from government? At what stage of discussion are these excellent proposals that you've been putting forward? Where are we up to in terms of seeing any kind of commitment or implementation?

Ms Hayhurst: That's quite a long question. I will start with overcrowding. We are not experts in definitions but we are experts in tenancy management—and I have wide experience in the UK as well. I have been listening to the proceedings of the committee, and I have been concerned about comparisons that have been made in the definition of homelessness between Australia and the countries I know—England and Scotland. The enumeration of homelessness in those two countries is very different. The census isn't used. There is a statutory obligation to provide assistance to homeless people. And there is a definition that looks at not only the current conditions someone is living in—in terms of whether they have a roof over their head—but the reasonableness of those conditions as well. As someone who headed up the housing department in Scotland and had that responsibility for ensuring we kept the legislation—'reasonableness' would have included overcrowding. It probably would have included overcrowding unless extreme circumstances are included in the definition of homelessness in Australia. That's because of the impact severe overcrowding has on families.

We've listed a few of those impacts in the submission. Behind that, we have research done by many academics on child development, family relationships and domestic and family violence. In Australia, we're talking about four bedrooms short. That means we're short of a lot of toilets and kitchen facilities; we're not talking about just having one bedroom. If the definition of overcrowding is not included in homelessness—it is still a massive problem that requires a solution. So we have no opposition to overcrowding being included. We think that extreme overcrowding is equivalent to homelessness.

On the other question you asked, about the initiatives that we've put forward, the COVID responses are complementary. The first one, rapid rehousing, is to provide an exit strategy for the fantastic job that many state and territory governments have done in rehousing people from the streets. We know that those are temporary measures and so we need to plan for what happens when income supports go and when those temporary accommodation leases end. That allows us a breathing space. Fortunately, a couple of state governments have already taken action—Victoria announced theirs earlier this week, and New South Wales have already announced one—but that is not going to cover all the people. We think federal government could assist the states and provide leadership and an approach that's consistent across Australia.

The SHARP is based very much on the Social Housing Initiative, which was the most successful stimulus package after the GFC. It worked. The independent review from KPMG demonstrates just how successful it was. We've updated it. As the chair has highlighted, we have NHFIC now, so community housing providers can do some of the hard lifting by borrowing and we can achieve more units for less cost. It sounds expensive. I don't think it is. We've had modelling done by SGS Economics to look at the economic output as well as the jobs output. It would be a start in getting down that shortfall in social and affordable housing.

I can talk about the institutional investment work that we're doing as well, but I'm conscious I'm going to go on and not allow you to ask me questions. All that I would say, with all the initiatives, is that we've taken them to government. The institutional investment one we're still consulting on, but we have had DSS and NHFIC involvement in the consultations we've done. I can't say that, with the SHARP and the rapid rehousing, we have had a response that says, 'Yes, this is what the Commonwealth government will do.' We have had a response in the sense that they're being considered. We remain hopeful, and we'll continue—forever—arguing the need for

the federal government to take leadership on socially affordable housing, until we do see those shortfalls coming down. Thank you.

Mr LAMING: I have a question about the amount of work that's done to transition people out of social and public housing, in particular whether any work has been done with jobactive providers to help raise household incomes above the Henderson line and to make sure that people can afford the lowest end of the private market. Do you know what that level is and how many hours of work are required for a typical household of different configurations to achieve that point? How much of your resources do you invest in getting people out of public housing, rather than into it?

Ms Hayhurst: We're going to share the answer to that question. Rebecca will talk about some of the particular initiatives that Bridge are doing. As to the statistics on what people need to pay, it's going to depend, as you would well know, on what the prevailing market rents are. In regional areas, they're generally going to be lower, but quite often incomes are lower as well. If we look at the second-lowest quintile of income earners and think about what they can afford on average, which I think is a pretty good benchmark for people who are in low-wage jobs, people need to be able to afford rents that are about \$350 or less per week. We know from things like the National Rental Affordability Index that in many parts, certainly in metropolitan areas, there are not many homes that are rented at that amount each week, so it is difficult. That's why we are a bit one-tracked here. We need more options for people to transition from social housing into housing—to feel they can take a chance on a job which may be casual or which may be short term. Being able to have a stable house that you know you can afford gives you a bit more security to take that chance. But we do try, as a sector, to transition people out. Rebecca will describe in a bit more detail the program she highlighted in her introduction.

Ms Pinkstone: The thing to understand about transitions out of social housing is that primarily social housing over the last 10 to 15 years has been very targeted at the most vulnerable people in society, and so those households are less likely to transition out into the private market. Where we've had success is with our affordable housing tenants, who've been able to get some shorter-term assistance, enabling them to save and then move out into other accommodation types, in some instances even buying their own home. But that's also dependent on the type of work, and I would say that's very much in the pre-COVID context. We have seen a dramatic impact on many of our affordable housing tenants as a result of losing work because of the COVID pandemic and the lockdown.

The work that we've been doing is with CoAct, which is an employment service provider working with the most vulnerable long-term unemployed households. We've been able to engage our tenants in that employment program to help increase their income level. What we've seen primarily is that people are getting one or two part-time jobs and being able to then build up enough capacity to pay more rent. The biggest issue faced is the barrier of taking that jump out into the private market when your income level isn't as high.

AHURI did research which looked at the combination of what they called 'workforce disincentives' for social housing residents—the interplay between an increase in rent and the amount that you would have to earn—and they found that, at that stage, households would have to earn at least \$50,000 a year to be able to afford to move into the private market. That was 10 years ago, so I'd say the research would need to be updated; it would be a higher amount now. So there are a number of barriers to people moving out into the private rental market. Programs that support people to increase their income are part of the solution, but it's the lack of stability within the private rental market and the lack of other available options that then become more of a barrier.

Ms MURPHY: Thank you for your evidence today and for the work that you do. One of the things, as you're aware, that the inquiry is looking at is causes of homelessness and housing stress. I know that you've touched on it in a number of your answers and through your submission. I wanted to give you an opportunity to talk about the various factors that lead to both homelessness and precariousness or risk of homelessness in society at the moment. There is a perception out there that homelessness is predominantly related to people being drug addicts, for example, or not managing their own lives well. I wondered if you might address that.

Ms Hayhurst: Yes, I'd be pleased to do that. There are multiple causes of homelessness, but financial pressures underlie most of them. If you have a drug addiction, you can be from any part of the income hierarchy, but it's far easier to deal with that if you have resources. It's understandable that people often feel that homelessness is the result of drug addiction, because a lot of poor people who have drug addictions won't be able to find any other way of resolving their housing accommodation. I always caution people that there's cause and effect here.

There are multiple reasons. We've seen increases in homelessness from groups such as older women. We've never seen those totals before. Again, that is primarily a financial factor. Women often don't work such long hours. They don't have the super. There's a rising incidence of relationship breakdowns when people get older. So

this whole group of people who have no other need but simply a roof over their head are finding themselves couch surfing and also reluctant to come forward. We don't really know the scale of women's homelessness.

You talked about veterans yesterday. That's another category where people have been highly functioning in the armed services—but it is an institution. They come out of the institution quite often potentially affected by the experiences that they've had there. They may have been in the armed services for a long time. They don't know the housing market or whatever, so that's why we're seeing an increasing number of veterans and why we're concerned about ensuring that they know about the options that community housing can provide.

People with mental health problems too—and that affects all stratas too. Again, it really leads often to people not being able to maintain jobs and then being at risk of homelessness. So there are a whole range of issues, but we must never forget that people who have lower incomes find it much harder to cope with issues—relationship breakdowns, domestic and family violence—and therefore will be overrepresented in the homelessness statistics.

Ms Pinkstone: I'll just add to what Wendy has said. We've seen firsthand the increase in people seeking housing assistance through our offices. New South Wales is just one example where we've seen a dramatic increase in the rates of homelessness in society as well as a dramatic increase in unaffordable housing and a decline in social housing. In New South Wales alone there are 60,000 people on the housing register, and every day we are being approached by people who perhaps won't have a priority need but are homeless because of the circumstances and the lack of financial support. They might have been renting completely in the private market, but the availability of affordable housing means that they're also being pushed into social housing as an option and other private rental assistance options in our state. So I think there's a correlation between the rising rates of homelessness in groups that we traditionally haven't seen at high numbers—for example, older women—and the rapid decline of affordable housing in states and territories across Australia.

Ms MURPHY: I think you say at page 8 of your submission—and it's a point I think is worth remembering—that quite properly we've been focused in a lot of our hearings on the need to help people now who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness because of COVID and how we can have more social housing but that there are also other systemic issues that a government needs to look at to explain why some people are in a circumstance of financial insecurity, which leads to housing insecurity over and above simply the current circumstances of lack of housing. Is that a fair comment?

Ms Hayhurst: Yes, we would agree with that.

Ms MURPHY: Terrific. Thank you very much again for your evidence.

Mr RAMSEY: Wendy, Rebecca, thank you very much for your evidence. I think we saw the figure yesterday that CHIA member organisations are responsible for the management of a \$40 billion plus housing portfolio. I come from a large regional electorate where population has not been keeping up with the rest of the statewide average. Consequently, I represent a lot of communities that have quite a stock of low-cost housing—not always of high standard, I must say, but they're certainly available. Of that \$40 billion, is there any breakdown between the actual land value of the portfolio and the housing value that sits upon the land?

Ms Hayhurst: I think individual providers would have that information because they need to do valuations. I don't have that to hand, and I'm not quite sure if it would be available nationally. I certainly have information on what it costs to build in different areas and what the value of the construction is, as opposed to the value of the land. I've got that down to census area 4, including your area in regional South Australia, so I certainly could give you an idea of what the breakdown is. In most cases in metro areas, the land is a very large proportion of the development costs. Construction costs, though, are extremely high in remote areas.

Mr RAMSEY: I would agree with that. We focus, quite rightly, on the value of housing in Australia, yet a lot of it is land availability. I think it's useful to actually be able to divide the two up so we understand what the real issues are.

Mr SIMMONDS: There are two issues that I want to drill down into. You spoke a lot about the importance of getting new stock online, but, in the experience of your members, why is stock being lost and how do you think that might be assisted by changes in state and local government policy to try and retain some of that stock? Secondly, in relation to the impressions of your members who are working more with veterans, are there some examples of good ways that some of your members are assisting veterans? What's working and what's not?

Ms Pinkstone: I might answer the question about stock being lost. Overall, we see that there's been a decline of social housing, and we're used to that, broadly. While there's been growth in the supply of housing by community housing providers, largely that decline has been through state housing authorities having to repurpose stock and sell stock to be able to meet the ongoing costs of their portfolio. So the large growth that we saw in social housing under the last stimulus program under Rudd still didn't address the overall decline in social housing

that we've had across the state. And, while community housing providers have been at the forefront of growth and new programs and delivering new properties, overall many of the state housing authorities have been left in a situation where they've had to sell off stock in order to be able to maintain the properties that they have. So that data is overall for community and public housing, but the decline has largely been in terms of public housing and the lack of growth of supply overall through the state housing authorities.

Ms Hayhurst: Some of the public housing was built a very long time ago and has reached the end of its useful life, and I think, occasionally, in terms of the sustainability of spending a lot of money on the upgrading, it isn't cost-effective. That's another reason why it's reduced.

I'll answer your question on veterans. One of the reasons that we wanted to partner with the Department of Veterans' Affairs was that we felt that this was an area where there are some really good initiatives but it's not widespread. And part of that is that there's just been some unfamiliarity that we have with working in the veterans community. But there are some good examples. I'll highlight one national member, Housing Choices Australia. They have partnered with the RSL in Victoria. With funding from the state government, they were able to provide five units of accommodation for transitional housing for people exiting the Defence Force or finding themselves homeless afterwards. The services are provided by specialist support services organised by RSL Victoria, and the tenancy management is done by Housing Choices. It's a fairly new initiative, but it has been evaluated, and I think shows the benefits of that. Many of the people who've been accommodated there have not required supported housing for a very long time. They just needed it for that transitional space, if you like. They've got their experience in the military, which is transferable. I've met an individual from that accommodation. He was explaining to me how having that stability for a year and a half or so has enabled him to complete a carpentry course and get a job and sort himself out, but he wouldn't have been able to do that without that. Many of the veterans are not going to be considered to be priority needs and eligible for social housing, so some of these specialist initiatives—and it's one of the reasons we put in our prebudget submission a request for a fund for veterans' accommodation. Many of them are not going to qualify or be eligible or get anywhere near the top of the list and that's a concern, I think. Because many times in so many occasions, these are high-functioning individuals who just need something for a short period of time before they can, as I say, make their own way.

Dr WEBSTER: Thank you, ladies, for bringing us your presentation. I have to admit that I came in late due to other commitments, so the question I ask may be redundant, but you can decide that. Following on from Mr Laming's question regarding the investment into programs to develop skills for work, what percentage of clients do you have who go on to long-term employment?

Ms Hayhurst: That's probably quite a difficult statistic to get at a national level because I'm not sure that any agency is collecting that. At the moment, it's probably fair to say that, because many of the people we house are in the priority needs category—it's over 80 per cent of the people that we're housing at the moment—many of them are probably going to not be in a position where it's very easy to transfer to employment. However, having said that, community housing providers do in many cases provide services to help people transition into employment. I'll hand over to Rebecca to answer in a bit more detail, but one thing I'd say is that providing a household, a family, with secure and stable accommodation is great when they have children. It's much easier for a child to achieve at school when their parents are in stable accommodation. So, even if those parents aren't working, you're giving that child a better opportunity of securing employment in the future as well. Rebecca has mentioned one of the programs, but it's probably just worth mentioning what the benefits are from that.

Ms Pinkstone: We're working with CoAct, an employment services provider to implement Bridge to Work, which is a Commonwealth funded program. What we're finding is actually we're having luck at engaging residents who have never been engaged in employment of any type through our program. They might have been on the long-term disability support pension or out of the workforce for a very significant period of time. We have about 70 people that have been actively engaged in that program and, of those, 35 have secured work. That was pre COVID. We have seen a drop in some of the work that people have been able to gain through that program, but what we're finding is that people are able to get into at least the first step, which is some part-time work. The importance of that is the ability to then raise your sense of wellbeing and the benefits that you get from work and engaging in the workforce. And what we've also seen is people then going on to other types of work, part-time work and also training and education. So we've had about 35 of our residents engaged in that program who have never been engaged in employment services to that extent before. So we're really positive about the additional benefits that community housing providers can bring to their tenants by working in partnership with non-government organisations like CoAct.

One thing I will say is that we are not seeing a dramatic increase in income levels that will guarantee that you would then transition out of social housing. As an inner-city community housing provider—the costs of private

rental is so high that making that jump from social housing to affordable housing rental is very difficult for the residents in our community. So we haven't seen that transition out of social housing. We've seen increased benefits for our residents and their families in terms of more income level and obviously higher rents for Bridge Housing.

Dr WEBSTER: Thank you. I have a lot of questions but I'll try and make a brief comment. I've worked in this sector myself, so I am aware of the complexity of needs and how important stable housing is, and preferably private housing. I do understand. It is a bit of a chicken and egg situation, because you want to assist people to live independently where possible but the investment is extensive. I'm very interested in intergenerational transition to stability and how that works. I understand accommodation housing is an important part of that but also the support for parents to parent and to assist kids to make school a normal part of their lives et cetera. It's just a massive issue. I think it's very easy to simplify, and I know it's not simple. But thank you for your input.

Ms Pinkstone: Thank you.

Ms Hayhurst: Thank you.

CHAIR: I just wanted to clarify one thing. I think it was Rebecca Pinkstone that said that CHPs can produce more units for less cost. Was that you, Ms Pinkstone?

Ms Pinkstone: No. I think that was—

CHAIR: Was that Ms Hayhurst, was it?

Ms Hayhurst: I don't think either of us has said that we can produce more units for less cost.

Ms Pinkstone: We certainly get the benefits of GST savings that private firms don't have or even the state housing authority has. We also have access to xx 10:27:10 finance which creates benefits but the cost of the dwelling is very much dependent on where it is being built, the cost of land is a large component of that, as aside from the building cost. So I think it's difficult to create that sort of argument because it is so site specific.

CHAIR: What I'm trying to determine is where we get our best bang for buck. Do we get our best bang for buck by providing assistance via the \$1.6 billion to community housing providers or by providing assistance to the states directly? We all want to see more social and affordable housing. I'm just trying to determine whether those dollars are best spent in the hands of CHPs or state governments.

Ms Pinkstone: You'd be surprised if I didn't argue—

CHAIR: I would be very surprised, which is why I'm trying to give you a Dorothy Dixier here.

Ms Hayhurst: I'm going to try and justify it for you. Rebecca has explained that building costs are a little bit fixed. We do have [inaudible] charitable organisation—the not-for-profit sector anyway does have advantages in that we don't pay GST. We don't have to make [inaudible] that just goes back into services. There was independent work done by [inaudible] I think I've quoted it in my submission. It's the cost-effectiveness—

CHAIR: Sorry, I've just lost you. Hello?

Ms Hayhurst: Hi. We can hear you.

CHAIR: Sorry. I just lost you for a second there.

Ms Hayhurst: I was talking about independent research which I thought was probably the best way of demonstrating the value of community housing. AHURI conducted research that looked at the cost-effectiveness of both the public and community housing sector. It looked both at their costs but also what was the outcomes from that [inaudible] It showed us in a very good light. We are generally well-liked by our tenants. Whilst we have higher staff ratios to properties, we're still not spending any more on services. So I think there's evidence out there to show that community housing providers will spend government investment extremely wisely. We are also regulated, so we're much more transparent, and the regulator looking at us across several performance areas and 10 outcomes, from probity to governance to financial management and compliance assessments—and they're online. So they're there for all to see. We're also, as you probably noticed, developing our own industry founders. We've got an affordable housing one with DVA [inaudible] veterans' homes [inaudible] So we're not complacent but we want to demonstrate that we're providing excellent tenancy management. We're in this business, and it is a business, because we want to rent to tenants and we want to rent well and provide excellent services.

CHAIR: When you say you're more regulated—you're more regulated than who?

Ms Hayhurst: Well, public housing isn't regulated. There are three regulators across Australia. Unfortunately [inaudible] national regulator [inaudible] national. So just [inaudible] housing provider is one that has applied for registration and in a sense passed that test, and then on an annual basis is assessed against [inaudible] community standards. That doesn't apply to [inaudible]

CHAIR: Sorry, you just dropped out there again. You're just dropping out there again. Ms Hayhurst?

Ms Hayhurst: —is regulated but it isn't here. So community housing is regulated, as I say, and information on its performance and outcomes is published in an annual report, but the Victorian registrar and the national registrars do.

CHAIR: Alright. I think we're going to have to leave it there, Ms Hayhurst, because you do keep dropping out. But thank you both very much for your evidence and for your attendance at today's hearings. If you've been asked to provide any additional information, could you please forward it to the secretariat by Thursday, the 13th of August. You will both be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence and you will have an opportunity to request corrections to transcription errors. Thank you both very much for your time, and you're free to go.

Ms Hayhurst: Thank you.

Ms Pinkstone: Thank you.

PEARSON, Mr David, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Alliance to End Homelessness

WALSH, Ms Karyn, Director, Australian Alliance to End Homelessness

[10:32]

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

CHAIR: I now welcome representatives of the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness to give evidence via teleconference. Although the committee does not require witnesses to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as a proceeding of the House. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. I invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to a general discussion.

Mr Pearson: I'll make a few opening remarks and then Karyn is going to add to that. Thanks for having us to present evidence. I guess the key message that we'd like to share with you is that ending homelessness in Australia is eminently possible, and the response that we've had in relation to COVID-19 has demonstrated this. In the evidence we presented in our submission, the Australian Alliance has shown that, when it comes to rough sleeping—and there are about 8,200 people who sleep rough in Australia on any given night—we have estimated that there are about 7,000 people who've been temporarily sheltered. So that is 7,000 temporarily sheltered in response to COVID-19, in comparison to the 8,200 who sleep rough. It shows the point that we're trying to make—that ending homelessness is eminently possible, and of course we're talking about rough-sleeping homelessness, the most prominent and obvious form of homelessness.

I wanted to talk a little bit about the work that we do and how that's possible. Whilst homelessness and many of the issues that are talked about through this inquiry are incredibly complex issues, we'd argue that the solutions are not. The solutions are very well known. We've known the solutions to ending homelessness for quite some time, and it starts with housing. We know we need more housing. When it comes to rough-sleeping homelessness, we know that that's just not enough. When it comes to housing, we support all of the arguments that many of the other people presenting to this inquiry have submitted, and particularly Wendy from the Community Housing Industry Association, who's just presented. We support all of those calls to improve the investment stack and get more social and affordable housing out there into the market—that's absolutely needed. But the Australian Alliance says that, if that's all we do, we won't solve the problem of rough sleeping.

The problem of rough sleeping requires us to provide housing, but it also requires us to provide the support and to better coordinate the support that goes with that housing. So that's the focus that we have. It's not just about support that comes from specialist homeless service providers that are funded; it's about the support that comes from all levels of government. Local governments are involved in this issue. The federal government is involved in this issue in terms of veterans affairs, disability and aged care. So the solutions to rough-sleeping homelessness require all levels of government to work together, and they all require different parts of communities to work together. That's what our work is, as the Australian Alliance—to help communities work better together to solve and end this problem of rough sleeping. In fact, the work we're doing is very much modelled on the work that's been done in a number of communities around the world. So far 13 communities in the United States have ended a rough-sleeping homelessness for either veterans or the chronic homeless in their communities, and almost 50 other communities have achieved significant reductions in homelessness in that same way.

It works like setting a goal. We need to have an end state that we're seeking to have. So often what we're dealing with in the homelessness space is that we're helping people who come to us—the people who come through our doors—and then the next person comes through our door and we help them. But we need to be more strategic about how we deal with this problem and to set a goal to end homelessness in particular communities and, broadly, to end homelessness in Australia. That's how the method works—set that goal. Once you've done that, the most important thing to do after that is to go out and understand the names and the needs of everyone sleeping rough. Our method is understanding the names and individual needs of every person who's sleeping rough and keeping what we call a by-name list and keeping that list up to date and using the data and the insights that list provides to drive reductions in homelessness. By doing that, that's what those communities in the US have been able to do—to drive reductions and, in many, to end homelessness. So that's the broader point: ending homelessness is eminently possible.

I just want to touch briefly on why the rough sleeping starts. It's not the only form of homelessness. We absolutely need to walk and chew gum at the same time. We need to take better efforts to tackle the broader problem of homelessness. But, as I said before, if that's all we do—if we don't better coordinate the service systems that respond to the incredibly vulnerable needs of people who are sleeping rough—then we won't solve this problem and it'll get worse. The reason why we focus on rough sleeping is, yes, all of the things I've just

said—that it's the most visible manifestation of inequality in our society—but the most maddening thing about rough sleeping is it actually costs us more as taxpayers to leave the problem unaddressed than it does to solve it. And we have research after research that's shown this—that it's more expensive in terms of the hotel rooms, police call-out costs, health costs and all the rest of it than it is just to provide support and permanent housing. The other thing of course that's not the economic argument but is the moral one is that people who sleep rough die, on average, 30 years younger than those who have a home.

Finally, the argument I started with is about COVID-19. If you don't have a home and if you don't have somewhere to socially distance and practise hygiene practices, then they're not only at risk of contracting the virus but also at risk of potentially contributing to community transmission. Whilst this is the most important time that we've had to be able to tackle homelessness, the work we've done in relation to COVID-19 in the last few months gives us this incredible opportunity to end homelessness in Australia for good and lift what we call the social safety net in Australia off the street. But it needs that focused effort by all levels of government to support this work. That's the work that many communities across Australia are doing. I'll leave it there. Karyn might want to add a few things to that.

Ms Karyn Walsh: Thank you. I think the only thing I'd add is that COVID has demonstrated that we need to work together across departments. Never before have we seen the need for health and homelessness services to work together or to integrate healthcare into homeless services. Everyone benefits from the health system and the homeless service system, but, most importantly, the people who require both housing and healthcare benefit.

We have worked since April with over a thousand people in the COVID response in the intersections between health, housing, corrections, mental health, substance use, child protection and domestic and family violence, and across all ages from birth to aged care. It's really clear that we need to look at homelessness from a population base with a diversity of responses to the different population groups within the overall homeless population, including rough sleepers. If people weren't placed in hotels, we would have seen many more families, children and pregnant women sleeping in cars or tents. We know that the intersection between rough sleeping, couch surfing and access to crisis short-term accommodation is the pattern of being homeless. Our vision to have homelessness as a solvable problem is that the service system can make homelessness a rare, brief and non-recurring event rather than a repetitive event and a lifestyle that people are stuck in, in some cases for many years.

When we first started doing the methodology that David outlined with 50 Lives 50 Homes, the average length of time that people were on the street was 15 years. We know that we've reduced that over the last 10 years to less people being chronically homeless in Brisbane and to people being homeless for five or six or seven years, which is still way too long for people to be stuck in a lifestyle of homelessness. I support all the things David said. We're very passionate about wanting to see rough sleeping decline and be a rare event if not a completely non-event of people living on our streets. We believe the methodologies that the US, Canada and Europe have implemented are all slightly different, because their social service and healthcare systems are different, but we adapt them according to those local place based circumstances. Both Canada and America have made enormous progress through supporting local communities. In Europe they've made progress through some of their government and local government partnerships.

CHAIR: Thank you. On that point, can you just be a little bit more specific about the Canadian zero homelessness methodology, what we can learn from that and how we can use that here in Australia?

Ms Karyn Walsh: Yes. We have been working for over 10 years with Community Solutions in the US, who, 10 years ago, also started working with Canada in how they could implement the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness and look at a methodology which involved having a target. Sometimes that's the best thing to start with, but, ultimately, what is important is that our target is zero. Initially we were counting up to get people into housing. Now we're counting down so that we get to zero.

The key components of that are having a common assessment tool, having coordinated access and having a know-by-name list for every community that's very local. Then services can collaboratively, together, match and look at what sort of housing is appropriate by age, culture, disability, family circumstances, individual circumstances and what services are needed to wrap around. Then that leads to understanding that what every community needs is a certain level of support of housing—that we don't just put people into a mainstream social housing mix without support, because we know that that creates a lot of return to homelessness and it doesn't necessarily improve the quality of life. So it is having communities supported in the methodology and having robust real-time data, which is what the know-by-name list is: it gives you a place based knowledge of the circumstances for each community. For example, during COVID, on our list we had hundreds of people who were engaged in the mental health system. We know that we need to do more work in how mental health and homelessness services work together, both in what is the appropriate housing type and what are the appropriate

services that can meet the needs of people with mental illness. It's not one size fits all. Obviously, one of the components of using that methodology is that people need training and support to do it. I think the most exciting thing about the methodology is that we are tracking our progress and we can celebrate successes as well as understanding where we need to look at quality improvement.

Mr Pearson: One thing I'd add to that is about the count-up/count-down thing that Karyn just talked about. One of the key lessons they had in the United States was that they ran a thing called the 100,000 Homes Campaign where they got access to 100,000 new properties for people who were sleeping rough, and they did that very successfully and did it in a short period of time. When the data came out to show what the rates of rough sleeping were in the US, they thought, 'Well, hopefully we will have reduced homelessness by 100,000 people.' The data came out and showed they had reduced homelessness by, I think, about 30,000 people. What they realised was that they were counting the wrong way. Rather than counting up to an output of housing people, you need to count down to the outcome of zero homelessness. When you put people into housing, often what happens is that there's churn: people go into housing and they fall back out. The zero goal is about making sure that people don't fall back out of housing and that we can help prevent people from falling into homelessness in the first place. That's a really crucial part of the lessons that we've learned from there.

CHAIR: Thank you. I just want to take you back to what you said earlier in relation to your submissions and about counting down to get to zero. You've set out the ways and means by which that should be done. It's a very personal, individualised approach, it appears to me, and you say that there's a greater role for local government to play in doing that. Can you just expand on that, because we heard from the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors yesterday that they are keen to get involved in this space. So what more can local government do?

Mr Pearson: If you think about how we solve social problems in Australia, often what we do is announce a fund and ask people to competitively bid for what they can do out of that fund, and we create a new service that fits within a new silo. The issue that you rightly point out on homelessness is that every person's story and issues are different, and they fit within all the many different silos that we have: child protection, mental health et cetera. What local government has is a strong role in coordinating people in place in a particular location, coordinating all those silos and getting people to the right table at the right time to talk about the particular issue we're trying to solve. When it comes to rough sleeping and homelessness, a number of local governments around Australia have really stepped up and done that. But, at the end of the day, this isn't a core responsibility of local government. They can provide a capability, particularly around that local coordination, but it really is on federal and state government agencies to better work together, and local government has a role, as I was saying before, in helping with that coordination.

Ms Karyn Walsh: Yes. I don't think there is one role for local government. I think every local government, in a place based way, can certainly participate, but certainly they have a role in whether there's land or opportunities to increase the supply of housing. And, when you say it's a very individualised approach, it's an individualised approach that informs systems change, so the two things work together. We know that we can resolve homelessness one family or one person at a time, but we're not doing it on the scale that is needed, and that's where our systems change needs to occur so that we can actually scale up and invest in what we know works in communities where it's working and make sure that we get a greater number of people off the streets than we're capable of doing at the moment.

CHAIR: Thank you. Deputy Chair.

Ms CLAYDON: Thank you, Mr Pearson and Ms Walsh, for your evidence this morning. In your submission, you make reference to—and I must say I really appreciate your opening statement—this issue and the scale of homelessness in Australia being both preventable and solvable and that we really should focus some energies more to take advantage of the momentum to do so. You make a very strong case as to why we should be acting and that this is the right time for us to seek an end to homelessness in Australia, and in particular you focus on rough sleepers.

I note that you've written an open letter to the Prime Minister, mapping this out and congratulating all levels of government on the phenomenal effort, already, to really respond to homelessness in Australia in COVID-19. You point out that there is a need for some key investments to be made. You note that there are already a number of very substantial submissions that are on the table for the Prime Minister and government to consider. That includes your proposal around Homes beyond COVID. CHIA, along with some other groups, has made proposals for the Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program and indeed the Rapid Housing Response Fund. So we know those three submissions are already on the table, and you make the point that Commonwealth involvement in housing and homelessness has been a feature of Australian life since at least the end of the Second World War. You've said you want to work collaboratively with the government. You've made a very urgent plea

to have the Commonwealth develop a COVID-19 national rough sleeping homelessness pandemic response plan. Could you step us through the response you have had from the Prime Minister and the time frames that you think you'll be working with the government on now.

Mr Pearson: Thanks for the question. We wrote that open letter, as you say, and received a response from the Prime Minister saying he was unable to meet with us but to talk to the assistant minister, Luke Howarth, and we've been in conversations with him and have some further conversations coming up, but no solid commitments at the moment. So we're continuing to work with the Commonwealth on that.

Ms CLAYDON: Have you already been able to meet with the assistant minister, Minister Sukkar?

Mr Pearson: We haven't—

Ms CLAYDON: Have you met with him previously around any of those proposals that are before the government?

Mr Pearson: Many of the other organisations, like CHIA, have met with Minister Sukkar, I understand, about some of those proposals. As the Australian alliance, we've sought to meet Minister Howarth, given the sort of service coordination element that is really important to the work that we're pursuing. So we have met with Minister Howarth before, and we're seeking to meet with him again.

Ms CLAYDON: Are those discussions ongoing or have you actually got a concrete plan of action from government on any of the matters you've raised?

Ms Karyn Walsh: No, there's no concrete plan.

Mr Pearson: No.

Ms Karyn Walsh: I think one of the frustrations for the inquiry to consider is that we really need to shift the conversation to a sort of a blame game between Commonwealth and state and really ask what the policy points are that need to change so that we can have a collaborative approach to solving this problem, as we saw with the national cabinet approach to addressing the pandemic. It's very frustrating as a community to be constantly caught in this—what's the Commonwealth's responsibility, what's the states' and what's the local? It's actually everybody's responsibility. We need to shift some of those barriers to policy settings about why, when and who can respond, how they can respond and how they can invest. We know that we had a national housing crisis before the pandemic hit and the pandemic has demonstrated that that's not going to ease quickly. There may be some pressure on rentals in some communities. However, the level of vulnerable people who have relied on government assistance to be accommodated during COVID is something that has put a spotlight on this being something we could really follow through and make sure we try to plan. In the short term we might have to look at subsidies in the private sector. In the long term we need to build the appropriate supportive housing that this population of people needs.

There has been evaluation after evaluation about the benefit to the hospital system in preventing frequent EDs, the benefits of preventing recidivism and the outcomes for people when they can participate in society and their communities in a more productive way, if we make these investments. If we keep neglecting the most vulnerable people in Australia, the cost to the overall government service systems just continues to rise. We see children being removed from families because of homelessness. We see the child protection bill go up every year. I think it is an opportunity for governments at all levels, as well as within governments, like the Department of Health and Human Services to be talking—in state—for the departments of health, housing, child protection and mental health services to be really planning and nutting out what is the reality in each community. But we need a shift in attitude in order to make this cross-sectorial change that we need to see happen. If we're not going to see it, with the next few years of economic hardship we're going to see people fall into homelessness at greater levels.

Mr Pearson: The veterans affairs part of the Commonwealth government is probably really important here. The communities in the US that have ended homelessness have largely done it in relation to veterans and other groups. It's a particular part of the Commonwealth could take a much stronger role in this. The last thing I'd say is that this task is really urgent. We have all those people I mentioned in hotel rooms right now—7,000 people who have been supported. But we know that some of the most vulnerable are already starting to fall out and are back out on the streets. So, this isn't something that can really wait—

Ms Karyn Walsh: For women and children it's women returning back to homes that are unsafe, with their partners. All these issues are connected and housing is a foundation for resolving some of the safety of women and children, the health care of very vulnerable people and the support of people with a disability.

CHAIR: Ms Claydon, if you have more questions I might get you to hold off and we'll see how we go after everybody has asked theirs.

Ms CLAYDON: All right, I will. Thanks again for the evidence this morning—very insightful.

Dr WEBSTER: Thank you very much for coming in. I agree with the deputy chair that it is very insightful. I'm a sociologist. I have questions around homelessness, in terms of the evidence of what we commonly call anomie. The question that I have is around *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*—I am sure you are familiar with those terms that Tonnies developed—comparing community life with the market driven life. The reality is that we are where we are in the 21st century; we are a market driven society. I am wondering how much you see homelessness, being such a serious problem, having to do with our lack of connectivity, if you like, in communities.

Ms Karyn Walsh: It's definitely associated with the quality of community, but I don't think you can look at our economy and our communities as inseparable. We are in a market driven economy, but I believe it is the role of government to intervene when the market does not provide for the most vulnerable in the community. I think we need to put greater emphasis on where the link between the economics and greater community outcome can be achieved. I think homelessness is a great example of where any worthwhile investment into homelessness is good for the economy. We know that if you invested in social housing, it would be a great economic stimulus; that's been demonstrated before. We know that the outcome of that economic stimulus has created homes in which people have been able to be greater participants in community. So the evidence is there. But we can't rely on the market to create community for very poor people. We have to invest in the creation of community, we have to invest in social capital and we have to believe that it's the role of government and citizens to be the beneficiaries of that investment.

Dr WEBSTER: I hear what you're saying. I'm concerned that there is a tremendous weight that is placed on government at all three levels to meet the need. I agree that, when people fall through the gap and are vulnerable, assistance must be provided. I am concerned that there is a bit of a tendency to stop there—to meet the needs of the vulnerable becomes the focus rather than preventative measures. I would like to know a little bit more about what those preventative measures are.

Ms Karyn Walsh: I think that prevention is a critical part of any response to ending homelessness. Some of the preventative measures would be ensuring that we're working with people to not fall into homelessness by providing some rental assistance—making sure that we can help people get back into the workplace by joining up the economic and employment outcomes that we want people to have with making sure people have a home. I think that no-one stops at just saying that we look at the vulnerable; we want to prevent people from getting into lifestyles where they're homeless for many years and can't return to work. People can't return to work because of their health, but, once their health has stabilised, they can. But we do need to accept that there is a percentage of people who cannot work because of their disability. But they still can be supported to have meaningful activity and participation in the community.

Mr Pearson: Yes, and that's a more specific—

Ms Karyn Walsh: But on the prevention [inaudible] funds that people have put up, again, they need to be place based. Looking at the local issues around work, rent assistance and what training and support people need, certainly for young people, the four-year model of housing focuses on getting young people ready through education and training. There's a lot of evidence about what could be done in that area, and I think it would be great to see a national prevention fund.

Dr WEBSTER: Mr Pearson, did you have any comments?

Mr Pearson: I was just going to add that the—

CHAIR: Sorry, we're going to go to the next questioner because we are running tight on time. If we have time, we'll double back.

Dr FREELANDER: Thanks very much for your evidence today. First of all, you asked for support. I'm very concerned about some of the health issues. I agree entirely that this needs to be approached on an individual basis. It seems to me that there's very little health support for people who are sleeping rough—people who are homeless. Do you think there's a better way that we could organise health support for these people?

Ms Karyn Walsh: There's emerging evidence across Australia of integrating health care into homelessness services through assertive outreach teams with nurses, specialist GP clinics and specialist mental health teams embedded in them. I think we could do a lot better. People are patching it together with bits of funding. It's non-recurrent. I think that it'd be fantastic if the health department would look at making more substantial and stable investment so that we know that the healthcare initiatives that have been mainly in the capital cities could easily be adapted into regional cities.

Dr FREELANDER: My view has been that we should have a national homeless health strategy.

Ms Karyn Walsh: That would be great—

Mr Pearson: That's one of the things we've called for as well.

Ms Karyn Walsh: and you would need to include [inaudible] health and mental health.

Dr FREELANDER: You've called for that? Sorry, I missed that in your submission.

Mr Pearson: Yes, sorry. Karyn was saying it should include mental health as well as physical health.

Dr FREELANDER: Absolutely.

Mr Pearson: A national health and homelessness equity statement is one of the things we've called for. To give you an idea of how the method we used around this by-name list practically helps with the coordination of those health services, when you do the common assessment and you understand the needs of everyone, you get data that shows you what's going on. For example, in my home state of South Australia, in Adelaide, we did some assessment. Sixty per cent of the people who were on our by-name list earlier this year had trimorbidity—that is, had a physical health issue, had a mental health issue and had substance use issues that they needed help with. That was 60 per cent of the people sleeping rough in our inner city. So you are absolutely right. We need health services to better be aligned to help deal with this problem, because rough sleeping homelessness is not just a housing issue; it's a health issue too.

Dr FREELANDER: It is a health issue, and I'm very concerned about women and young children—those families who often struggle with housing, sometimes because of domestic violence and sometimes because of other reasons. They often have a combination of problems as you've suggested—mental health, substance abuse et cetera—and the children are the ones that suffer. They often have multiple school placements and multiple health needs as well as learning problems. I think that needs to be combined with a health—

Ms Karyn Walsh: A two-generational approach to working with families is really important. So you're looking at the parents' healthcare and other needs, like their housing needs and their other needs in relation to work, child care or whatever as well as the child's needs, and that's with child and infant health. We know that, with domestic violence, all these things are connected. But, as I said earlier, most of the health initiatives in this in this space are not recurrently funded. They're not embedded in a long-term strategy. I think that COVID has demonstrated just how much that is needed. I know, just from January to April, we had over 2,000 incidents of health care provided to people.

CHAIR: Last question.

Dr FREELANDER: Would you also agree that the only way that could possibly happen would be with a national policy rather than an electorate-by-electorate or a state-by-state policy?

Ms Karyn Walsh: I think a national policy gives people the ability to adapt to place based. The national and the state systems would work collaboratively, because you're working with state based health systems as well. The PHNs have a role. The PHNs have funded some of the emerging practices that have been evaluated, but there's no stability that these initiatives will be ongoingly funded. So I think the PHNs, the Commonwealth and the state need to work together in a national health and housing—including improving mental health—strategy.

Dr FREELANDER: I don't want to take up too much time, but have you looked at how housing will need to be modified because of COVID-19?

Ms Karyn Walsh: I think we need to make sure that housing is accessible—that it's well ventilated, that it's of a high standard and that it's not overcrowded housing where you've got too many people. Many people had to leave overcrowded situations in order to put follow public directives that households could only have two visitors. But we need make sure the standard of housing that people are living in is good for their health, good for their children's health and affordable. We can kick this off by using solar panels and things like that.

Mr RAMSEY: Thank you, David and Karyn. Your recommendations are calling for a national homelessness policy. I'm given to reflect that, over about 120 years of federation, we've seen inexorable mission creep by the Commonwealth government as we move into areas where states have failed. We prop up the funding and often do not control the outcomes but are held increasingly responsible for those outcomes, even though in many cases they are still administered by the states. We can look across a whole range of different services in this area. It just makes me wary of how we put together a structure that looks like a national policy within the restraints or limitations of the federation and achieve a fair and equitable outcome. Do you have any suggestions on how we might go about that task?

Ms Karyn Walsh: This task is one that people keep referring to, but it's perfectly solvable. It's about getting the right policy settings and the right reporting and it is about collaboration and it is about shared vision, shared outcomes. I don't know that it's mission creep as such. I actually believe it is the responsibility of both the

Commonwealth and the state and, where possible, local governments to ensure the sustainability of our communities and the quality of life of citizens. I think it's really important that there are ways in which better reporting, better policy setting—if you involve the community sector as true partners, I think you will get better outcomes. It is something that does need a shared vision and collaboration between all parties. I think it's a failure that has occurred, and we have paid the price for that, in government constantly saying that they haven't had the evidence they need. But, from a sector point of view, we've been implementing new programs and evidence for many, many years, and often they fall on deaf ears. If we can get a better collaborative approach, with better reporting requirements, I think it's a perfectly solvable problem.

Mr RAMSEY: That may be the case, but I'm just looking at what has happened in other areas. If you take the situation with education, for instance, the Commonwealth initially had no responsibility at all for funding state schools and now it has a significant task—certainly not the majority but a minority task. It would appear to me that, if anything is failing in the schools, it has almost by default become the Commonwealth's fault. I'm just making the point that, if we are to embark on a national collaboration, it needs to be something that is a little reflective of the real roles that each level of government has, and they need to be held responsible. That might sound easy to do, but in practice—

Ms Karyn Walsh: No. I understand how hard it is, but I think it's solvable. I'm not for a minute thinking it's easy, but I do think it's solvable.

Mr Pearson: The advice I'd add—

CHAIR: I'm sorry, Mr Pearson. I know that you're about to make a statement very shortly for the individual statements. We're going to need as much time as we can get for this next session.

Ms Karyn Walsh: We're happy to finish.

BEBBINGTON, Ms Samantha, Private capacity

GANT, Mr James, Volunteer, Neami National Street to Home

PEARSON, Mr David, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Alliance to End Homelessness

RICHARDS, Mr Scott, Peer Support Officer, Neami National

SWINDLE, Ms Michelle, Private capacity

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

[11:14]

CHAIR: I welcome you to give evidence this morning of your lived experience of homelessness. At the outset the committee would like to thank the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness, who has assisted us in arranging this session. Mr Pearson, would you like to make a short statement to give the committee some background before we begin the discussion?

Mr Pearson: Yes. We are very appreciative that the committee has taken this opportunity to hear directly the voice of people with a lived experience of homelessness. As we were talking about in the last session, each individual person's story is different and we need to better meet those needs, so it is really important that the committee in its deliberations hears directly from people with a lived experience. We have a couple of people willing to share their stories. Some of those people have with them support workers who have helped them over their time. Some people have just been receiving services recently. Other people are happy to share their more historical experiences. I'll leave it to them to tell their stories, but thanks very much for the opportunity to have these voices heard.

CHAIR: Ladies and gentlemen, we have around 10 minutes to speak with you each. Our discussion will be broadcast online and a transcript will be published at a later date. Are you happy to proceed on that basis?

Ms Swindle: Yes.

Mr Richards: Yes.

Mr Gant: Yes.

CHAIR: I invite in the first instance Mr Scott Richards to begin by telling us a bit about his experience and then we'll go through the remaining witnesses as well. Over to you, Mr Richards.

Mr Richards: Thanks for the opportunity to speak today. If my story and experience will somehow benefit people currently experiencing homelessness, I'm really happy to be here. Thank you for that. In 2011 I went through a marriage break-up. I was with my wife for approximately 11 years. Things went pear-shaped for me. I didn't really know how to handle that emotional upheaval. I left the family home in Brisbane and flew to Adelaide to be closer to family. However, I was quite toxic at the time in regard to substance use and my family really had to keep me at arm's length, which left me in a really vulnerable situation.

I wasn't really that skilled at asking for help at that time either. I was still quite proud and trying to sort things out on my own. I found myself in backpackers initially. I struggled to find backpackers that would take a citizen of Adelaide, plus I was struggling to even pay my rent, due to addiction. I soon found myself in the parkland, sleeping rough in the CBD. I'd sleep in the streets in the outer skirts of Adelaide, and spent probably the best part of that time—to about 2014, where I was imprisoned—homeless. So there was like a four-year block where I was sleeping rough for about seven months, but I was homeless couch surfing for a majority of that time during that period. So I've had about a four-year experience of using services in Adelaide's CBD and on the outskirts for people experiencing homelessness. I guess I really struggled to lean on services. I found, with the windows I had when I was reaching out for help, there was just too much of a delay. It felt like forever. When I was on the street, when they said that they'd get back to me in a week, it felt like a month, and so much could happen in that week. I'd either lose interest in what I was asking for help for or thought I'd come up with an alternative game plan to try and get myself out of the hole. I just kept looping around, back through that cycle. It was like that for what felt like a very long time. I found myself in prison. That's what ended my homelessness: a bout in the prison. I then went onto the drug court program and back into a boarding house accommodation, with some stability under my feet.

What I'd really like to speak to is that, during that period, I actually lost a lot of life skills. I'd actually lost the ability to communicate with people. I'd walk into a shop; I'd look at the ground. I'd struggle getting on a bus. I'd always try to sit right at the front so I didn't have to look at people, or I'd sit right up the back so I didn't feel like people were looking at me. I was quite riddled with shame and guilt. And by this stage, my family really did keep

me at a distance, because I had failed rehab attempts, leading up to prison. It was a really dark period. Coming through the drug court program, I got a little bit of ground under my feet and managed to get into a boarding house. What really started to turn the social stuff around for me, so I could change my playmates, was a cert II at TAFE. There was adult entry, and it's a shame it doesn't run anymore. It was a TAFE access course. It was three hours a week on a Monday, and that was the start of me clawing my way back into the social scene, out of the depths of what felt like hell for a number of years. That three hours every Monday for six weeks was my green light. It was my hope. I'd go there, and it was really just about me actually rocking up, staying for the three hours and not running, and just being used to being around people that weren't high on drugs or that actually were getting on with life but had also been through their own issues.

I found the lecturer who was teaching that course really forgiving. She understood that, if you're in your 40s and you're doing a cert II and trying to get some skills up, maybe life hadn't worked out for you as you'd thought. She was really quite compassionate, and it made it easy for me to return week after week. I started to build some self-esteem. I started to be able to look people in the eye, hold simple conversations, go out for a coffee after a day at TAFE and really start practising those social skills which I'd lost.

From there, I went on and did a cert III at TAFE, and that was two days a week. I did that for two days a week and slowly kept building up my confidence. I really struggled with the housing side of things, trying to maintain a boarding house on Centrelink. That was a real struggle, but I got through it. I seemed to manage it okay. I guess I just made the most of it and really learnt to live within my means. I guess that's a benefit of being on Centrelink for a number of years prior: (a) it kept me alive, those benefits, and (b) I really learnt to go without and not want for anything more than I get, which still serves me really well.

The next step of my social engagement, which was a total turnaround, was that I got employment. I'm still currently employed at the same agency. I actually came across an organisation that saw my past as one of my biggest assets and employed me because I'd been to jail and because I'd been homeless, not just because of that but also because of the things I've done in a recovery lens to pull myself out of that. That's why they gave me the job, to try and share that to maybe assist someone else going through similar things. Honestly, I haven't looked back. So I guess if I could spruik anything about how to break that cycle, break that chain, that circuit breaker that kept me looping week after week, month after month, year after year from couch to couch or parkland to parkland was easy-access education courses that were free at TAFE—they didn't want any money; I couldn't afford it if they wanted money—and employment.

I currently work for a homeless service here in Adelaide—Street to Home. I'm very fortunate to draw on my experience to assist those transitioning from the street into homes. I feel quite blessed to have found an employer who would give me a go when no-one else would. I try to express my gratitude by rocking up and doing my best. It's a struggle a lot of the time being amongst people again and watching my P's and Q's because, like I said earlier, I've lost all those graces; all those social graces were gone for me.

CHAIR: Mr Richards, we will leave it there. Hopefully, we'll get a chance for some of my colleagues and I to ask some questions but we'll see how we go for time. I want to thank you very much for being so open and honest. It is very inspirational, so well done. Mr Gant, would you like to tell us a little bit about your story?

Mr Gant: For me, I lot of my stuff started with childhood trauma. I grew up in a household with extreme family violence. I was abused by both parents and, by the time I was 14, was told I had to follow the rules or I had to leave. I took the second option, which was leaving. I was 14 and living at the houses of school mates.

I wasn't even able to get Centrelink for about a year because at the time, I would say, domestic violence wasn't quite the issue it is today. I was told, 'Why don't you just follow your dad's rules?', which, I thought, was quite cold, especially for someone coming out of an extremely violent house at the age of 14 or 15, but eventually I got the living-away-from-home payment. I then spent probably the next three, four, five years just moving from home to home, living with people I'd met randomly, living in sheds, living on couches, even sleeping outside. I found myself joining a gang because I had run out of friends, burnt my bridges, and had nowhere else to go. So very quickly my life changed. I wasn't able to see people outside of these affiliations. I spent a lot of time there.

Eventually it started to eat away at my values so deeply that I decided I was going to run away. I moved interstate to live with my grandmother. That was probably the first time I had a breath of fresh air in my whole life. That's when my trauma started really resurfacing and I took it out on people who were trying to help me. I became a pretty out-of-control alcoholic. I started finding myself in mental institutions. I didn't know why I attempted suicide a few times by the time I was 19 or 20. I was in and out of court for drunken rampages. By the time I was 21, I actually had alcohol-induced insanity, which was indescribably painful.

I ended up moving back in with my parents, who were completely underprepared for what the reality of my issue had become. I spent a lot of time sitting on the edge of my bed just repeating the word no. I had a lot of bad hallucinations and a lot of trips to hospital. That's where my homelessness actually began, because a doctor at the hospital told my parents that if I was to receive any half decent help from the government I would get more of a chance being homeless than I would being housed. This is because there were more services for homeless people than there were for housed people. My mum took that as gospel. She just wanted some peace in her household, and she figured it was the best thing for me somehow. So by the age of 22 or 23 I found myself actually living on the streets. I spent a lot of time sleeping in parklands because I didn't even know the first thing about homelessness: where homeless people slept, what they did. I was out of my element. I was met with a lot of violence. It was quite a hard time in my life actually; it's kind of hard to talk about.

I ended up moving into the city by sleeping in the CBD of Adelaide. I slept on Hindley Street a lot of the time. I was very paranoid and I thought that if I slept in front of the cameras then that was my best bet, and it actually paid off really well. So, yes, lots of street violence. I ended up getting into using some pretty hardcore drugs on the street, which only seemed to make my life worse.

I was touching base with the HYPA youth service by the age of about 24. They did a lot of great work. They got me into my first home, which actually proved to be detrimental to my mental health, only because some of these housing trust complexes are 90 units large and they only house people with drug addictions, mental health problems and criminal histories. Because I had all three, the housing trust decided that they'd move me into there by default. They didn't really take into consideration that for six months I hadn't even been using drugs and I was trying to turn a new leaf on my old life. I ended up spending nine months living in there using really hardcore drugs with some pretty tormented people. Within nine months I actually ran away and went back to homelessness. I actually found homelessness was a lot easier by that stage.

By the time I was about 26 I'd lived in two houses—sorry; becoming homeless was actually becoming easier to live with. I got more money than I would from Centrelink. I got all my meals kind of dumped on my lap. It came with its hardships. I've been spat on, pissed on, told I was a fake, told to just get a job. In reality, I was suffering from some untreated mental health issues that the system was all too willing to ignore by this stage. All the hospitals wouldn't take me and I had nowhere else to go, so I just kind of leaned headfirst into that life of drug addiction and homelessness.

CHAIR: Mr Gant, can I get you to tell the committee about your current situation. Are you still homeless?

Mr Gant: No, I've been living in a house for about a year now.

CHAIR: Can I also get you to talk about, if you have turned things around, how you turned things around.

Mr Gant: Okay, I wasn't quite sure what the format—

CHAIR: That's fine; no problem.

Mr Gant: I spent a lot of time going into housing trusts and speaking with the workers there. Eventually, by chance really, a house popped up and it was brand new, and that's what I wanted. I said, 'I need a house that isn't 90 units of people with drug addictions and criminal histories.' That is what I've got now. It's in a nice neighbourhood, and the house has become quite conducive to a stable recovery for me. I'm not paranoid that the people living next door are going to break into my house. I'm not paranoid about things like that anymore. My environment constantly reminds me that I am safe and that I can unpack the years of trauma that I've accumulated.

It was really hard in the early days. It was actually really hard to even sleep on a bed, I guess because of the toxic shame and guilt that was still residing within me. But these days, through repetition, practicing and learning to live with it, I do sleep in a bed and I do take two showers a day and I feed myself regularly. I get up at a normal time. I work a recovery program. Yes, there has been a lot of digging deep and constantly taking on new responsibilities, like doing my job search and having job prospects, and just knowing that whether I fail or succeed in any area of my life that it is not a reflection on my self-worth. That has taken a really long time. Was there anything else you wanted to know?

CHAIR: I understand you are currently volunteering.

Mr Gant: I actually gave up that position.

CHAIR: Right, so you're not volunteering or working at the moment?

Mr Gant: No.

CHAIR: Are you doing any form of study?

Mr Gant: No, but I'm hoping to go back to TAFE next year to begin my bachelor of applied social science in social work.

CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you very much, Mr Gant, for your evidence today. It has been very frank, and we really appreciate it. Please stay on the line. Ms Swindle, thank you very much for appearing before the committee this morning. We're just wondering if you can give us a brief rundown of your personal experience with homelessness.

Ms Swindle: I'm a mum of six kids, three of whom I have with me. I'm homeless due to a sexual assault in April this year. I've had to seek help from family and friends, which sometimes has also put me in dangerous situations. Currently I'm on domestic violence with my brother. I've not known where to go, who to turn to, what are the safest options for my children. I've been separated from my children and have slept in my car. In order to have my children with me and for me to keep them safe—and myself as well—I've had to turn to Micah, who have been absolutely great. We're currently staying in motel rooms at the moment through Micah. There are not a lot of options for homeless people, especially ones with families. So, yes, it's hard.

CHAIR: So you've been homeless for around 12 months—is that right?

Ms Swindle: No, since April this year.

CHAIR: And your children range between five and 17—is that right?

Ms Swindle: Yes, that's correct.

CHAIR: And you've got the care of four of them?

Ms Swindle: Three children.

CHAIR: How are you managing school with them?

Ms Swindle: It's very hard. I have to travel. My two youngest go to school only a couple of kays from where I am. Micah try to keep me close to the schooling. I've just had my 14-year-old son back with me for two days now, and it's a 20-minute drive at least to get him to school. But we make it work to keep them happy, I guess.

CHAIR: So you're getting assistance through Micah?

Ms Swindle: Yes, Micah Projects.

CHAIR: What are the short-, medium- and long-term plans and goals for you?

Ms Swindle: I have housing applications in. I've applied for private rentals nonstop the whole time that I've been homeless. It's an income barrier for a mum with some kids. I think people who have family homes, if they're not willing to put a family inside their home—you know, four couples inside a four-bedroom home or whatever—I think they shouldn't be allowed to own a family home. I think they should only be allowed to own a unit. Some people just don't want families, and that makes it the hardest.

CHAIR: Is there anything else that you wanted to add?

Ms Swindle: No.

CHAIR: I want to provide an opportunity for my colleagues to ask some questions, so please stay on the line and perhaps just mute for the time being. Is Samantha Bebbington on the line? It doesn't appear that Ms Bebbington is with us, so I want to just invite any of my colleagues to ask any of the witnesses a question or ask for some clarification. Deputy Chair, do you want to jump in there?

Ms CLAYDON: Thank you, Chair. I just want to enormously thank all of you for providing your lived experience of homelessness in Australia. Your insights are unique and very useful. One of the things I just want to explore a little more—I think it was from Mr Richards's evidence at the beginning—was flagging the importance of being able to access a free, quality education through the TAFE system as one of the things to break that cycle of homelessness for you. I'm just wondering what you, or indeed any of the other witnesses, think about just how critical it has been to have those sorts of support services ongoing in your life to put you in a place where you are building confidence and esteem as well as having, eventually, a safe, secure and affordable place to live.

It's been something that a lot of people have raised, that we have to provide housing. That's important, but there are also some really necessary support services that have to operate in conjunction with the bricks and mortar of housing, so to speak. Could you perhaps talk to us about how important those supports were and what you think the next challenges ahead in life are. Do you still make use of those support services or, indeed, new ones now?

CHAIR: Who is that question directed to?

Ms CLAYDON: I think Mr Richards might want to bounce off it first, given his terrific evidence about the need to have a free and accessible education system available.

Mr Richards: Yes, thank you for your question. It is really a mixed emotion for me in hearing that come back that way. I realised, listening to that, just how far I've come since those really dark days and just how paramount

that easy-access TAFE course was for me. Honestly, the only reason that led me into work, because I was trying to maintain a boarding house at the time, was because it was free and accessible. I was trawling through free courses just to try to break the rut. I needed something more in my life other than just paying my rent and trying to sustain a house. That stuff could get heavy for me really quickly, and without something else on offer beyond that—it was getting mundane. I remember being really desperate just to try to bring something else into my day and I was really mindful that I needed some social interaction away from services.

I accessed that TAFE course, firstly, because it was free and it wasn't a heavy weight to bear—it was really casual and informal, and there wasn't heaps of stuff piled on me. It was easy to access; I think I did my application over the phone. They made it really simple for me to be able to step into that without bogging me down in paperwork and criteria. It was easy access, which was just about where I was up to, and I needed that. It really opened that door to me having a positive experience with services. I remember that the TAFE staff were just so pleasant with me and something grew from that where I was now open to something else. Because I had a positive experience it wasn't like, 'Oh, I don't want to do anything like that again, that was like it's always ever been.' It wasn't like that; it was very different and it encouraged me to have the confidence to try something else.

I'm currently 3½ years into a bachelor's degree. That cert 2 led to a cert 3, which led to foundation studies and then led to uni for me and that's where I am today. So if it weren't for that course, which was easily accessible and where I didn't have to get into a whole heap of backstory—they got it. They understood straightaway; I was in my 40s—like I said earlier—and I was accessing an adult-entry course. They got it, 'We're not going to make this any more difficult for you.' They understood that if I just got there then that was a big deal. And it was.

Dr WEBSTER: Thank you, Mr Richards, and well done to you! My question is regarding that particular first TAFE course. What was it? What was the purpose of the course?

Mr Richards: What was the purpose of the course?

Dr WEBSTER: Yes, what was the title of the course?

Mr Richards: It was called a cert 2 adult entry—I think it might have been cert 2 community services. It was the last semester it was offered. I got into the very last intake of that course before they cut the funding and stopped the course.

Dr WEBSTER: Yes.

Mr Richards: I can remember when it ended that the lecturers were really sad, because they had experienced a number of people coming through it and going on with things, and now the community was going to lack this cornerstone, entry-level course. That was in 2015. In South Australian TAFEs, that was the last time that adult entry was offered. And I remember it was called adult entry—whether it was community service, I'm not really sure now; I'd have to look at my parchment. But I remember that it was specifically tailored at re-entering adults into that field.

Dr WEBSTER: Thank you very much. That was excellent. And thank you Mr Gant and Ms Swindle also. It takes a lot of courage to do what you've done. So, thank you very much.

Dr FREELANDER: Thank you to all of you for your evidence. It must be very, very difficult to share your lives with us all. It's very important, of course, and I thank you very much. There are questions I'd like to ask all of you, but in particular I'm interested in Ms Swindle's story. If you don't mind me asking, I just wanted to ask you about your children. You've got six kids. I've got six kids myself, and I know it's very difficult in the best of times to manage six children—and I'm by no means a perfect parent, let me tell you! I just wondered how difficult it has been for you to maintain the kids' schooling.

Ms Swindle: It's extremely difficult. Most mornings we don't get to school until at least 10 o'clock. The stability side of things is so hard, and the routine. My youngest is five, and she doesn't like to play along at the best of times. So, if we're getting to school at 10 o'clock in the morning, we've got a win.

Dr FREELANDER: So, it's been hard to get them moving in the mornings. Have they been to many different schools?

Ms Swindle: Yes. We've jumped from school to school. We're at Nundah school at the moment. Before that, we were at Kilcoy, but then the coronavirus hit.

Dr FREELANDER: How many different schools would the kids have gone to?

Ms Swindle: At least six.

Dr FREELANDER: How are they going in terms of their education?

Ms Swindle: They are extremely behind.

Dr FREELANDER: All of them?

Ms Swindle: Yes, all of them. My son, who is in year nine, is probably stuck at a year-seven level. My daughter, in year three, is extremely dyslexic and is probably stuck on a year-one level. I'm yet to find out exactly where my little one, who is in prep, is at, but of course she would be behind. We've had weeks of missing school and sometimes months of missing school.

Dr FREELANDER: How supportive have you found the education system?

Ms Swindle: At this school now, where my two girls are, they are absolutely great. They have helped me out with uniforms, books and all the supports to help me with their education. The lady in the office knows about how my youngest daughter doesn't like to go to school, so she rings me every morning and leaves an audio clip saying, 'We expect to see you at school,' and that kind of gets her moving. Every day not knowing what's coming is the hardest.

Dr FREELANDER: You've been in a motel since April.

Ms Swindle: I've been in this one for four weeks. The one before that was for two weeks, and eight days—

Dr FREELANDER: Do any of the kids have health problems?

Ms Swindle: Not medical health problems—just some mental health, some psychological problems.

Dr FREELANDER: Thank you very much. There are many more questions I would have liked to ask you all, and I really do feel very privileged that you've been able to give evidence to us today. So, thank you all so much.

Mr SIMMONDS: Thank you all very much for your candour. It's been very, very helpful to the committee's work. One of the speakers—I believe it was the middle one, and I apologise that your name's escaped me for the moment—spoke about the difficulties in terms of being housed with other homeless individuals who had their own issues to deal with, and the importance of having your own separate housing. Has that been everybody's experience? If you don't have that issue yourself, have you observed your friends struggling when they've been put into a group scenario as opposed to individual housing?

Mr Richards: My lens is a little different; I'm in private rental now. However, I do work in the industry and I'm fortunate enough to work with people we transfer into housing who are in high-density blocks. It's such a mixed bag. I see the importance of working in this industry. I am new to it, and I don't pretend to have solutions, but I have noticed the benefits of having the services meet people and of removing the expectation that people should meet the services. You can break ground and chip away a lot of ice with somebody experiencing homelessness when you go to them—to their street, their corner or their park—and build that relationship. I wanted to say that because outreach services are saving lives and keeping people's hopes alive. I will pass to James. He might be more current with your question.

Mr Gant: I know a fair few people around my age who have been given housing. Most of the homes go to women because men are generally viewed as either criminals and drug addicted or mentally ill. People like me don't often get homes like this; it's a very rare privilege. Most men do find themselves being put in unit complexes. I believe that houses like this integrate people back into society a lot better than unit complexes do. When you throw someone a home that is connected to 90 other homes where criminals, drug addicts and the mentally ill are condensed into one area, you create ghetto neighbourhoods. Having said that, a lot of people aren't ready to transition at the level I am; they aren't ready to give up drugs. Some of them might never regain their sanity. The reality I have witnessed is that poverty isn't an external issue; poverty lives within the person. Poverty is throwing a million dollars at a homeless man and watching him return to the street a year later. More money needs to be money spent on mental health for homeless people, people living with drug addiction and the mentally ill. Institutionalising someone by sending them to prison will only recreate and intensify their shame and guilt, leading them to further drug addiction and mental health issues, which creates more suffering for society collectively.

Mr SIMMONDS: So your view is that it's important that individual housing be available not on the basis of age, gender or anything else, but should be about identifying those who are ready to turn things around and then ensuring that they have individualised housing where they can make that change?

Mr Gant: Yes.

CHAIR: Ms Swindle, do you want to comment on any of that?

Ms Swindle: No. I think they've covered pretty much everything.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with the committee about your experiences. As my colleagues have all noted, it takes a lot of courage to do that. We very much appreciate your candour. In some cases it has been uplifting and in other cases it has been quite sad. Thank you again. That brings this session to a

close. Thank you to all the individuals who have shared their experiences with the committee. It's important for the committee to hear the stories of people with lived experience of homelessness, and we are grateful for the opportunity we've had to speak with you all today.

Proceedings suspended from 12:00 to 12:46

KLERCK, Mr Michael, Social Policy Manager, Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

CHAIR: Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as a proceeding of the House. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to a general discussion.

Mr Klerck: I'll just make a brief opening statement. To provide some level of context, Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation is an Aboriginal community controlled organisation. It was first incorporated back in 1979. We've got corporate members, which are the 16 town camp housing associations, and we've got about 600 individual members. The board of Tangentyere is composed of the elected presidents of the town camp housing associations. Tangentyere delivers services to over 10,000 people across a region of more than 800,000 square kilometres and we've got significant Aboriginal employment. I think about 60 per cent of our 270 workers are Aboriginal.

By way of background, there have been town camps on the outskirts of Alice Springs since the 1880s. People were dispossessed from traditional land. Some people are Arrernte people from this region but other people moved from more remote areas. The purpose of the original housing association was in order to get access to some form of security, tenure housing and essential services. From the seventies through to the late-eighties, 16 special purpose leases or Crown leases in perpetuity were granted to town camps, and this was for the purpose of setting them up as Aboriginal community living areas. Tangentyere was itself founded by these town campers.

Between about 1979 and 2009, Tangentyere was an Aboriginal community controlled housing organisation, but in December 2009 an agreement between 11 town camp housing associations and three town camp Aboriginal corporations was reached with the Executive Director of Township Leasing on behalf of the Commonwealth and the CEO of housing on behalf of the Territory. This agreement also paved the way for housing management agreements or under-leases with the Northern Territory government. Since that time the Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development has been the housing authority for the town camps.

Tangentyere does a significant amount of work which aligns with the social, environmental and behavioural determinants of health. It delivers programs that align with child protection and wellbeing, children's schooling, community safety, alcohol and other drugs, tenancy support, employment, aged and disabled and chronic disease care coordination, family violence prevention and a range of housing related services. I note that many Aboriginal people in the NT are impacted by multidimensional disadvantage, and this includes homelessness, including access to adequate dwellings and living in overcrowded dwellings. These are both issues. We're focusing primarily on the town camps but we also reflect a little bit on Alice Springs and the National Partnership for Remote Housing Northern Territory footprint. Our responses are largely informed by the local context, but we feel that a lot of our observations will be relevant to the broader region.

We've responded to the terms of reference, but we haven't necessarily responded to every aspect of the terms of reference. We've certainly focused on things related to housing, adequacy of dwellings, environmental health and housing and infrastructure standards. We've made some kind of comment on mainstream processes around housing management and how they cut across cultural considerations. In some places we've been able to provide qualitative analysis. In other places we've provided a quantitative analysis. Our data's not complete, but we're working on that. I should also note very briefly that we reflected a lot on public housing, but there's been a local decision-making agreement that's been executed between Tangentyere and the Territory. We think that this local decision-making agreement paves the way for a process of transferring from public housing to community housing. We've also been funded by the Commonwealth to engage the National Affordable Housing Consortium to help us in the development of a community housing model, which would be delivered by Tangentyere's subsidiary Tangentyere Constructions and a related party the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company. For the time being, that concludes my statement.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. It's difficult for me—and I imagine for many people who may be listening to this on the internet or on radio—to really get an understanding of just how large your area is and the vast remoteness of it. It's 873,894 square kilometres. My electorate of Fisher is 1,170 square kilometres.

Mr Klerck: Yes. Look, I should qualify that. In terms of the region that we talk about, Tangentyere delivers services across that region. I would say that Tangentyere is the primary service provider for the Alice Springs town camps, but it's one of a group of service providers for that broader region. Tangentyere was founded as an organisation to deliver services on town camps, and it's grown over time, but our delivery of housing related

services in that broader region is limited to some clusters. Where we intensively deliver services is really Alice Springs and its town camps.

CHAIR: In your submissions you speak about the prevalence of rental debt in remote public housing. Can you just expand a bit on what you mean by that?

Mr Klerck: I'll try and keep it brief. A number of years ago it became apparent under the public housing model on the town camps in particular that there were significant numbers of households in rental arrears. We tried to understand what was causing that, because it was a systemic issue. We investigated this issue, and it turned out that there was an issue of rental rebate renewal. If you live in a public housing dwelling and you're on a low income, you're entitled to a rental rebate renewal. The issue with the rental rebate renewal is you have to apply for it every six months, and you're notified by receiving something in the post that you're expected to respond to. A number of years ago, a number of the town camps weren't in receipt of postal services; they were supposed to be in receipt of postal services—I won't go into the details—but they weren't. That meant that a lot of mail was getting returned to the sender—in this case, the department of local government—so people weren't filling out those rental rebate renewals. Even where people are filling out rental rebate renewals and get access to rental rebate renewals, literacy and numeracy, along with the amount of material that needs to be provided in order to get these rental rebate renewals, can be a challenge.

It seems to me that what happens in practice is: people set up direct deductions, whether it be through Centrepay or income management deductions, and these deductions come out of their payments regularly. But then the amount of rent payable by them will invisibly increase, because they haven't completed a rental rebate renewal form. All of a sudden they're supposed to be paying more rent, but they don't necessarily realise that the deductions keep coming out at the lower rate and over a period of time the rent will increase.

It also comes down to the rent model at the moment. The rent model is quite difficult for people to understand. We're mostly used to this idea that we know how much rent we're supposed to be paying for a dwelling; you might be renting a dwelling for \$500 a week, and if you're splitting the rent between four people it's \$125 each. But the way the rent is calculated in remote public housing is more difficult. They talk about market rents and they use rental rebate renewals. When the numbers of people change the amount of rent that's payable by the group might increase; it might be calculated based on the number of adults that are there, even though some of the adults aren't actually in receipt of income support. I would say that the rental rebate renewal system is one of the big contributors to this debt.

CHAIR: Yesterday we heard evidence of various factors impacting upon Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. One of them was the wet season. I'm specifically referring here to overcrowding issues in town camps; overcrowding may be less of a problem in the dry season, but more of a problem in the wet season. Would you concur with that? I notice that you talk about cultural observances with sorry camps. I'd like you to go into a bit more detail on what sort of impact that has on overcrowding as well.

Mr Klerck: In terms of the impacts of overcrowding, Tangentyere talks a lot about the issue of population and mobility. One of the other issues coming up is with inaccurate estimates of the populations of different localities. In our supplementary submission we managed to get information from the Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development around the number of households in each of the national partnership agreement footprint communities. We also got data about the number of registered occupants and the estimated resident population, which is a lot higher than the number of registered occupants, plus information from the ABS. You can see from those numbers that, as expected, the registered occupants versus the estimated resident population are different, and the ABS figures are again different.

We undertook a population and mobility study on the Alice Springs town camps back in 2005. From our perspective, that demonstrated that the number of people living on town camps was far higher than ABS census figures. ABS census figures are developed through what people self-report, and people might have reasons to underestimate the number of people living in their houses—for example, the amount of rent payable or fear of government systems around children and welfare type issues. What was really clear was that our population estimate of 1,950 back in 2005, with a service population of about 3½ thousand—that's taking into account residents and visitors—was compared to an ABS estimate of maybe 800. That shows that there's a significant discrepancy there.

On the issue of mobility: a lot of people from very remote Central Australia access Alice Springs as a service centre, and there are limited options as far as visitor accommodation goes. When I say 'limited options', I'm talking about limited types of diversity of accommodation versus limited types of actual accommodation. People will choose to spend time with family in the town camps and, indeed, in urban Alice Springs. People will access Alice Springs for a range of reasons; some are about accessing services, some are about accessing retail—there

are number of concurrent inquiries going on at the moment—and the issue of consumer choice is one. Other people will access Alice Springs for other reasons which are less ideal—the ability to consume alcohol, for example. In short, people utilise town camp dwellings and public housing dwellings for temporary accommodation while visiting Alice Springs.

The impact of the seasons here is probably different to the impact of the seasons in the Top End. There are a number of reasons why people might access dwellings more or less at different times. There are different cultural obligations at different times of the year. There is also access to potentially better housing infrastructure in Alice Springs; maybe houses function better in periods of extreme heat in Alice Springs and some of the outlying remote communities, for example. So there are a range of drivers of mobility, but we would say that the issue of mobility is something that happens at all times of the year. Sometimes it might be linked to specific things, like a football carnival or some event that's happening in town. I would say that there are a range of drivers.

CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms CLAYDON: Thank you very much, Mr Klerck, for the work of Tangentyere Council. Tangentyere has a very long history in the area of housing in your region; I'm familiar with some of those early days. I want to ask you questions on a couple of matters. In your submission—I think on page 9—you make reference to Tangentyere working with the University of Newcastle, in my beloved home city, on a guide to housing and infrastructure standards for town camps. Can you talk us through the importance of that body of work, and then I will move to the issue of energy insecurity.

Mr Klerck: Absolutely. We think about the issue of housing and infrastructure standards from the perspective of homelessness. We think a lot about the adequacy of dwellings. The Commonwealth and the Territory spend a significant amount of money, \$100 million, on housing and infrastructure in the Alice Springs town camps as part of the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program. Primarily, that delivered 85 new dwellings but also led to the upgrading of the majority of the rest of the dwellings. I should note that refurbishments were less substantial upgrades and generally not structural upgrades.

One of the things we've identified is that when this investment was made as part of the SIHIP, certain National Indigenous Housing Guide healthy living practices, or health hardware imperatives, were addressed more solidly than some of the other healthy living practices. That in itself is an issue. The government focused on some primary ones, and that was really good. But what we started to consider over time was: what is the build requirement of the Alice Springs town camps like, compared to the rest of Alice Springs?

And it's quite clear that in some respects, even though this investment was made, the Alice Springs town camps, for example, don't match up with the Alice Springs Town Council subdivision guidelines, which is an issue for things like crime prevention through environmental design, road safety, street lights and even some environmental health-type considerations. Initially, one thing that we emphasised early on was the lack of parks and playgrounds. If you live in Alice Springs generally, you're supposed to live three to five minutes' walk away from a large local park. This wasn't the case on the Alice Springs town camps. We were quite concerned about the impact that that had on children, for example.

On the other side, the National Construction Code is something which is in place to guide building and construction across Australia, but there are certain areas of the NT, generally remote areas, which are exempt from the National Construction Code. That doesn't include the Alice Springs town camps, but we're curious about how the National Construction Code relates to town camp housing, because obviously the new housing would have had to have complied with it and, for any old housing that was structurally upgraded, those parts of the houses that were structurally upgraded would have had to comply. But other housing stock that maybe just received a non-structural refurbishment may or may not comply with the National Construction Code.

There are other things that we're interested in as well, such as the Australian standard for adaptable housing, because that has a direct impact upon people with mobility issues. We're also interested in how energy efficient the houses are. A number of years ago Tangentyere advocated quite strongly because we were supposed to receive a review of future housing and infrastructure needs on the Alice Springs town camps as part of the Alice Springs community living areas subleases. That didn't happen for a number of years. We pushed hard; we advocated strongly for that. What we ended up with was a town camp review that was undertaken by Deloitte of all 43 town camps across the NT. Unfortunately, that review didn't consider things like passive and mechanical cooling. It didn't consider how the housing matched up things like the National Indigenous Housing Guide and the National Construction Code. We're now interested to know how the housing matches up with that, because the long-term goal of organisations like Tangentyere is to transition public housing to community housing. Before that happens, it'd be good to know the state of the housing stock relative to these really important industry

standards, so we've asked the university to investigate and to develop a guide based on those standards so that we can investigate this issue together and also inform future housing infrastructure reviews.

Ms CLAYDON: Yes. Indeed. You've covered the interface of poverty and rental debt and current best models and the issues of impact of trauma. But there's also a section in your submission that goes to this issue of energy insecurity. It may be useful; not all committee members might be aware of the somewhat unique system that operates, in terms of a power supply to housing in town camps and the impact that that has for these issues that we're looking at now, in terms of safe, affordable, stable and adequate housing for Australian citizens, wherever they might be.

Mr Klerck: Yes. I'm really happy to talk about that. It's one of my favourite topics actually. Obviously, energy insecurity—

CHAIR: You need to get out more often!

Mr Klerck: has been prevalent for some time, but recently, and by 'recently' I mean 'by the final quarter of the previous financial year', the old prepayment metres—a prepayment metre is something that people are buying, a bit like a prepayment phone; people are buying electricity upfront, rather than having the standard account arrangements that people generally use. Most town camp residents and, indeed, most residents of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing footprint communities have prepayment metres. Prior to the beginning of last year, prepayment meant that you would buy a card which would have a certain amount of credit on it and you would put that into your prepayment machine and that would upload the credit. At the beginning of last year the old prepayment metres were replaced by these new smart metres. That seems to have also led to an increase in tariff rates, but we'll just park that for a second. What we found was that once the new prepayment metres were installed a lot more people were reporting to us anecdotally that there was an issue with keeping the power on, with a number of what we call involuntary self-disconnections. Jacana refers to them as self-disconnections, but a self-disconnection occurs when you don't have any credit on your pre-payment meter.

We became quite interested in this issue. We were getting anecdotal information, but we wanted to get some hard data to sort of talk about the issue. We approached Jacana to find out if there was any way that we could get consent for Jacana to provide Tangentyere, a third-party organisation, information about disconnections. Initially there wasn't. So we approached the Territory government—Minister Wakefield—and from there we had really quite a useful conversation with the minister's office, but then with Jacana. Jacana set up a consent process and we started to collect consent.

The first cohort of clients was from one town camp—23 households—and we collected data which indicated that the average household was having somewhere in the vicinity of 51 involuntary self-disconnections over a 12-month period, equating to 238 hours worth of self-disconnection. But we also had some de-identified data from Katherine, Alice Springs and Tennant Creek from the final quarter of the last financial year which demonstrated that something like 62 per cent of 2,374 Jacana pre-payment meters had at least one involuntary self-disconnection, and the average duration was in the vicinity of eight hours for each one of these self-disconnections. There are two systems. For one thing we've got Territory Generation, which generates the power; Power and Water, which generally controls the infrastructure; and Jacana, which is the interface with individuals in urban and regional centres. Then there's also the Power and Water subsidiary Indigenous Essential Services in the remote areas. Tangentyere has formed the opinion that the profile of involuntary self-disconnections is probably quite likely similar between these remote areas and in the town camps, and that's something we're seeking to investigate.

The issue with self-disconnections, as you can imagine, is that if you've got no power it doesn't matter how adequate your house is with power; it becomes inadequate. You can't prepare and store food, you can't wash people, you can't wash bedding and clothing, and you can't manage your internal ambient temperatures. In a sense, there are a whole lot of potential health issues that arise from that, particularly with people with chronic diseases, the aged—people that are less able to get out of their houses.

Ms CLAYDON: Absolutely. Thank you so much. I'm on another inquiry, which is looking at food insecurity in remote communities, and this has been a very hot issue. But it's a good reminder for us, in terms of our thinking around homelessness, that there are bricks-and-mortar or corrugated-iron issues that we need to attend to, but there are essential services that need to be delivered as part of housing, and we should not forget that in our thinking. Thank you so much for your evidence.

Mr Klerck: Would you mind if I just add one more thing to that. I think I failed to capture something else. One of the issues with energy insecurity is that we've investigated this idea that, at the moment, people are forced to go to a retail outlet to buy power, and we put to the Territory that it would be far better—if you've got a post-

payment or a credit account, you can use income management or Centrepay deductions or direct debits or whatever, but with a pre-payment meter the energy retailer has a relationship with the meter, not the person. So at the moment it's not possible to set up upfront income management or Centrepay deductions, and that's really something that we would like to see happen. If we can get a reasonable prediction about how much energy someone uses, they can have a direct debit from their Centrepay or income management account into their pre-payment meter and hopefully keep the power on. At the moment in this period of COVID-19 epidemic people are still forced to go to an energy retailer, as in a shop, to buy power, and that to me just seems like a ridiculous situation.

Ms CLAYDON: Thank you. It will be very interesting to follow your negotiations transitioning across to a community housing model. I've probably exhausted my allocated time here and will need to hand across to colleagues. Again, thank you so much. I think this issue around the lack of energy efficiency in residential accommodation, whether it's a community model or private rentals or whatever, is a very big issue to contemplate. Thank you for bringing it to the table.

Mr RAMSEY: There are quite a number of issues I'd like to canvass, but I'll try and get to point as quickly as possible. I have the APY Lands in my electorate. In fact, I have all the remote Indigenous communities in South Australia in my electorate, much like Lingiari for that matter. There were a number of things that you brought up on the energy issue that would appear to apply to the town camps around Alice Springs. Is that the common way of supplying electricity right across the remote lands? It's not the way that it works on our side of the border.

Mr Klerck: Yes. There's a different provider, but most of those remote communities in the NT have got pre-payment meters. The majority have now got the smart meters, which are different to the smart meters in urban areas but they are smart meters. Some of them have got the older pre-payment meters with the cards that you punch in them. I would say outside of Mutitjulu, which has got an unusual system because of its relationship with Parks, all the remote communities in the national partnership agreement footprint, some 73 communities, would have smart meters and would be supplied in this way. The homelands are different, but the big communities would be similar, yes.

Mr RAMSEY: As far as I'm aware, for the Housing SA stock in South Australia the electricity is included in the rentals.

Mr Klerck: That's my understanding too.

Mr RAMSEY: The concept of a meter is almost out the window. In South Australia, those regions are calculated on a per adult in the house arrangement, as far as I'm aware. How is that rental calculated in the Northern Territory?

Mr Klerck: This is a good question, and I'm going to try and think about the most straightforward answer. In most cases there's this idea that an individual dwelling has a value in terms of market rent, which is an interesting concept because most of these houses are in places where there isn't actually a market. Essentially, in reality, if you had enough income and you were living in the house, you'd pay the full market rent, but most people are on income support, so it tends to be rebated. I don't really understand exactly how the rebate system works, but generally it's rebated. The influence of that is you go, 'Well, the more people living in the house, the more collective income there is and the closer you get to this idea of the market rent.' But, for most people, the market rental value of their house is unclear. At times we've tried to get to grips—there's one town camp in particular where they always ask representatives from the department of housing: 'Can you tell us what the market rent of these houses actually is? What's the market rent of a four-bedroom house or a three-bedroom house?' That stuff's not particularly clear. So it's somewhere between the idea of a dwelling based rent model and an individual based rent model, and it confuses people. To be fair to the department, they are doing a review of the rent model, and some of the options that they were coming up with did actually make a bit more sense—this idea of being really clear if it's dwelling based or individual based. To my mind, we're sort of stuck somewhere in between here, whereas what you're talking about is based on the number of individuals, which makes sense. It's clear for people, I would say.

Mr RAMSEY: You talk about market rental. I can see why it is so hard to come to a figure. If the market had to give a return on capital where these houses are costing typically \$700,000 or so to put in place, they'd be off the scale, and no-one would be able to afford to live in them, so it is a complex area. In that area of a rental market, I understand that you have made some progression towards the 99-year leases of property and I'm interested in whether or not that can actually lead to an ownership model for individuals, which is what Noel Pearson talks about? Whereas, in South Australia there is no pathway to private ownership on Indigenous lands, and a lot of us think this is a real handbrake on their possible advancement.

Mr Klerck: To be honest with you, I don't see much progress in terms of this idea of private homeownership in the NT. For example, the town camps are underpinned by special purpose leases in perpetuity. Currently, as it stands it's not possible to subdivide or even sublet. Actually, to an extent there are provisions for subletting, but there's not much in the way of an ability to subdivide in town camps. They're divided into administrative lots, but this is kind of a bit theoretical or a bit administrative in a way. Then on top of that at the moment the Executive Director of Township Leasing, which is a Commonwealth statutory body in a sense, holds an Alice Springs living area lease, which was struck in December 2009 and ends in December 2049. Then there's a housing management agreement, which is a type of underlease, which is under that, which expires on [inaudible] 2023. At the moment I would say that private home ownership is not really possible on the town camps. In the remote communities in some places maybe there's been some progress made towards this outcome—maybe in the Top End. But I don't think there have been significant steps taken throughout most of the NT.

Mr RAMSEY: One would hope that we are going to make advances in those areas and that whatever policy we set in place is not an impediment. I think the idea that people can live and work all their lives and never own a house that they live in is a drawback. Of course, you can't borrow against it. You can't do a lot of the things that other individuals can do.

I'll move along to the next issue quickly. I've noticed through your stock holding, your inventory of housing, that you have quite a lot of housing that is listed as homelands—as I do across my electorate as well. I do not have a high value of the past policy of homelands that've seen these isolated houses that are difficult to maintain, difficult to get kids to school from, difficult to access health services from and often lead to families having more than one house. They can have a house in the town and a house on the homelands. Then we've seen this issue in South Australia where it becomes, 'Whose responsibility is to maintain the homelands?' That's been an ongoing issue that we haven't still settled, as far as I know, with the South Australian government. Do you have anything you'd like to feed back about that model?

Mr Klerck: Tangentyere is one Aboriginal community controlled organisation. In terms of this region, Ingkerreke Outstations Resource Services has more to do with the homelands. A lot of the homelands are a good alternative for people. There are a lot of homelands that are a significant distance from major service centres like Alice Springs, for example. I guess one of the issues is how well-resourced those homelands are, being outside of the NPA footprint. I would say that that's a challenge for people.

Mr RAMSEY: We have to, somewhere, reach a point of decision on whether they are a basic weekender or whether they are actually viable accommodation.

CHAIR: Before I throw back to the deputy chair, do any of my other colleagues want to ask a question?

Ms MURPHY: I don't, but I just wanted to say thank you for that evidence. I found that incredibly educational and really important, so thank you for that.

Mr Klerck: No worries. Thank you.

Ms CLAYDON: I'm wondering whether or not you could run me through the current funding of homelands and outstations? We took some evidence earlier in the inquiry where it was suggested that the Commonwealth had bowed out of all responsibility in terms of funding of homelands and outstations, following a settlement of a one-off payment that was given to the Northern Territory government. In terms of the community groups that you're working with, what's your understanding of the Commonwealth's responsibility, if any, in terms of funding for homeland outstations?

Mr Klerck: In terms of funding for things like municipal and essential services on homelands and homeland maintenance services, my understanding is that the Territory government funds those activities. I also suspect, and I can't confirm this for certain, that the Aboriginal Benefits Account, which is auspiced by the National Indigenous Australians Agency, does have some funding available for the upgrade of homelands. Certainly, during the period of the COVID-19 epidemic—which is obviously still ongoing—there was funding available that came via the NIAA through the land councils for the upgrade of homelands to support people to remain at home on the homelands during the period of the epidemic. So I think that there are opportunities for Commonwealth funding for infrastructure upgrades, but, primarily, service delivery is funded by the Territory government.

Ms CLAYDON: We're meeting with the Northern Territory government later on, so we can chat to them about it. Enormous thanks again, and a special tribute to Tangentyere for the decades of work you have done in housing, and also for the rapid response to COVID-19 and the work that you have been doing through the COVID-19 pandemic keeping people safe.

CHAIR: As a past builder, I'm keen to understand why there are certain exemptions that are available to town camps under the National Construction Code.

Mr Klerck: Going back to that point, the town camps in Alice Springs aren't exempt from the National Construction Code. The exemptions to the National Construction Code seem to be more applied to very remote communities. The town camps themselves are quite close to a regional centre. Generally, the National Construction Code applies. But, in some very remote areas—and, for that matter, in most of the footprint of the National Partnership Agreement—the National Construction Code doesn't necessarily apply. There are exemptions, I believe, that the Territory government has provided to itself in those very remote areas, whereas with the town camps the National Construction Code will apply if you were to build a new dwelling or if you were to structurally upgrade existing dwellings. I think one of the issues with the town camps is: where are the trigger points for ensuring that buildings comply with the National Construction Code? At the moment if you were to, say, structurally upgrade the kitchen, the kitchen would have to comply. But a lot of the time the work that's done on the houses isn't structural in nature. So I wonder if with social housing in general—not just with town camps—there need to be some other trigger points to see that buildings comply. Normally, if you were buying a house, you would want to get a building inspection. But that doesn't come into play when we're talking about long-term rental dwellings.

CHAIR: Help me out here, because, I admit, I'm very much all at sea on this area. With the very remote areas that you're referring to that have those NCC exemptions, is that simply because the housing standard is so low in some of the very remote areas? Is that why they've got an exemption?

Mr Klerck: To be honest, I'm not sure what the motivation is. I have a suspicion, but, again, this is just a theory. In the last few years when the Commonwealth and the Territory have become responsible for the housing stock in remote areas, it was probably quite apparent that the housing stock wasn't up to the standard, and the level of investment required to get the housing up to the required standard was probably beyond the reach of the Commonwealth and the Territory. So maybe these exemptions were granted on that basis. But, I would have thought, at least with new housing stock and housing stock which was structurally upgraded, the exemptions shouldn't exist. But I'm also curious—and I made this point in the submission—that when you look at the National Partnership Agreement for remote housing in the NT, we're talking about an agreement which is for \$1.1 billion. I think that the target is to construct the equivalent of 630 three-bedroom houses. It should be really clear. That level of investment is significant. You would think that you would be able to deliver more housing stock with that quantum of money.

CHAIR: We're hypothesising, I suppose.

Mr Klerck: Absolutely. We're hypothesising—indeed.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your evidence today. It has been very helpful to the committee. If you've been asked to provide any additional information, could you please forward it to the secretariat by Thursday 13 August. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence, and you'll have an opportunity to request corrections to any transcription errors. Thank you once again for your time and the preparation of your submissions.

BARNES, Ms Jane, Chief of Staff, Wintringham

LIPMANN, Mr Bryan, Chief Executive Officer, Wintringham

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

[13:30]

CHAIR: I now welcome representatives from Wintringham to give evidence via teleconference. Mr Lipmann and Ms Barnes, although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as a proceeding of the House. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. I invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to a general discussion.

Mr Lipmann: Wintringham is an organisation I started in 1989, largely as a product of working in the very large night shelters for homeless people in Victoria. The largest one had 300 beds in one building. There were all ages and both sexes in that building. But it was a typical night shelter. In other words, people were all in some form of crisis while they were living there.

The major problem that prompted the establishment of Wintringham was the large numbers of elderly people who were living in the night shelter and their inability to access mainstream aged-care services. This only became apparent to me when my parents needed aged care. I was able to access it for them and found out how good it was, and then I was appalled to go back to work and see elderly men, primarily, dying in the most appalling circumstances in a night shelter. I was unable to make any placements in church or charitable aged-care services, who chose not to take homeless people, so Wintringham was established.

It is now, some 31 years later, the largest provider of elderly services to homeless people in Australia. We have six Commonwealth accredited aged-care facilities, including a nursing home, which is the only nursing home for homeless people in Australia and maybe one of the only ones in the world. We've also started construction in Tasmania. On top of all of that, we have a very large range of housing, something like 700 housing units, and about 800 homecare packages.

What makes Wintringham unique, I suppose, is firstly its commitment to elderly people. We classify 'elderly' as 50 years and above, and that's largely because of the Aboriginal argument of premature ageing, which we have used and the government has accepted. Governments of all colours since then have continued to accept that. As a result of that, many hundreds of millions of dollars have flown from aged care into homelessness. This is a really important issue, because the care that's provided to a person in an aged care facility is vastly different from a shelter. To give you some idea of that, at Gordon House we had 300 clients and we had 20 hours of personal care. When Wintringham passed the 300 bed number, I asked my staff to count up the hours, and it's somewhere between five thousand and eight thousand hours a week. That's the difference. You can clearly see that it's impossible to find any form of appropriate aged care in a night shelter. That has created significant issues for this, because the aged care industry is really designed for people such as my mum, rather than for a homeless person. With goodwill from bureaucrats and a succession of ministers we have been able to survive, but it is clearly still a major problem to remain viable in this industry, because we don't have combination bonds or contributions from families.

You may be wondering why I'm talking about aged care so much, given it's a committee on homelessness, but the intersection with aged care for an elderly homeless person has to go through aged care—it can't go through homelessness. For us, the problem arises when we have homeless people who are not in aged care but are living in housing either owned by the state or us, and we input that into aged care, such as home based care. The level of support that we receive is insufficient to address the needs of elderly people.

The major problem that we face is the lack of affordable housing. I have fifteen hundred people over 50 years on my waiting list. I just want you to think about that for a second: fifteen hundred people at the moment—in fact, that was pre COVID and it could well be significantly more—over 50 years old who are homeless and require our services but which we cannot meet.

The appalling lack of affordable housing in Victoria and Tasmania, the two areas I want to talk about, is a disgrace for such a wealthy country. We're now seeing the consequences of that. We need a dedicated pool of some form of capital funding so that we can build housing. I would ask, as a recommendation, that the Commonwealth engages directly with an organisation, such as Wintringham, rather than filtering it through the state. That may not be possible, but that is the only way I can see the funding going to the elderly homeless.

We need better connections with aged care. The great advantage of working with aged care is that we can provide a permanent, in the words of my wife, home until stumps—that is, so that we can provide appropriate

levels of support, from the moment an elderly homeless person is found by our outreach workers, until death. That's not possible through the homeless service system. The homeless service system and the aged care system really need to work collaboratively.

There are a number of other issues, which I've listed in the report. I can talk to them, but I might ask my colleague Jane to see if she has anything to add to this. We're not in the same room—we're many miles apart from each other—so we can't really bounce off each other. I might ask Jane if she's got anything to add.

Ms Barnes: Thank you, Bryan. I really don't have a lot to add. I think you've opened really well and covered most of everything that we would want covered. Just as background for the committee, I too worked at Gordon House many, many years ago. I then went over to the Salvation Army, where I worked at another night shelter—'the Gill' in Melbourne, for you those of you who are familiar with Melbourne's old night-shelter scene—and I was a key person in shutting down that shelter and opening up alternative options.

The only other thing I'd like to add to what Bryan said is that the ability for us to engage with elderly homeless people when they are out on the streets is extremely difficult—particularly at the moment, when we're seeing increased numbers. As Bryan said, the intersection with aged care needs to be greatly improved. We also have some significant concerns about the number of people now coming to us who have not necessarily been homeless for a long period of time but are homeless, primarily, as a result of poverty.

Mr Lipmann: I think that's a really good statement. Jane and I have done this work—cumulatively, we realised—for 70 years, which is quite daunting when you think about it. Although we've worked at different organisations at one stage, we're both together again now. It is very clear to us that there is one unifying factor that accounts for homelessness, and that is poverty. People become marginalised once they lose their job, when there's an illness or a divorce, when they age—there are myriad reasons. Potentially, all of those people who are marginalised become at risk of homelessness, and some of them actually do become homeless. In some cases, the resolution of that can be very quick: simply some support and some appropriate housing. For other people, who have got some cognitive damage or mental health issues, it can be a very long process. But what kicks it all off is poverty.

CHAIR: Thanks very much. I'm very disconcerted to hear that I'm now in the elderly age group.

Mr Lipmann: Can I tell you that when I started Wintringham I was only in my 30s. I picked 50 and I thought that was so far away. Now I'm older than most of my clients. It's a bit disconcerting.

CHAIR: I want to congratulate you on the outstanding work that you do. By all accounts, you do an absolutely terrific job. Thank you so much. My first question to you is: can you give us a bit more of an understanding as to why aged-care providers seem to be so reluctant to take elderly homeless people?

Mr Lipmann: I guess it's related to what I said before; it's poverty. There's no money in providing services to elderly homeless people. Aged people, such as my parents, pay an accommodation bond which can range from \$20,000 or \$30,000 to—I've heard stories—\$2 million. So that is an accommodation bond that is entirely lost to a provider if they take a homeless person.

CHAIR: I understand that for those aged-care providers that require money upfront, but there are also many that don't—at least in Queensland, and I know some in Victoria as well. Is it as blatant and as outwardly discriminatory as that—that if you're homeless they're not interested in you?

Mr Lipmann: No, it's not. I guess it's camouflaged. But let me tell you that in the two years I worked at Gordon House, prior to setting up Wintringham, I didn't make one placement in a church or charity based aged-care service. Those people who know me—and Jane will attest to this—know that I'm not a wilting violet. I didn't make one placement. I guess the evidence should be that Wintringham has gone broke because there are no clients, because everybody else is picking up those people. In fact, we grow at something like 20 per cent a year, and we have for 30 years. We now have over 700 staff. So this is clearly an indication that in terms of market there's very little competition on service provision. It's appalling. Our guys still are not getting into aged care.

CHAIR: I'm certainly not doubting the veracity of your evidence. It's just that I personally know at least one person who's got into an aged-care home in Victoria, and I know that it happens quite regularly in Queensland. I'm not doubting your evidence; I'm just trying to reconcile it. That's all.

Ms Barnes: Poverty is one barrier, as Brian was talking about—the ability to pay bonds. For people—particularly those who have experienced chronic homelessness or long-term homelessness—as Brian said before, it's not just about poverty; it's often about mental illness or drug or alcohol addictions. I think that for many providers that challenge is beyond what they are willing to accept. Again, that's an observation.

I would also just note the way that the Aged Care Funding Instrument is applied. Once you're in a residential service, they apply a tool that looks at three key areas where a resident needs support. One is in the clinical area, one is in their activities of daily living—things like what sort of assistance with a shower they need—and the third area is the behaviour area. This is the area that is the lowest funded of all of the aged-care categories, and it's also one that our client group traditionally require the highest level of support in.

Mr Lipmann: All of that is correct. The government introduced some significant reforms to the aged-care industry and changed everything about the way that it was recurrently funded, as Jane has explained. When Wintringham first started, we were able to access the same amounts of money as the mainstream providers. Nowadays that's totally changed, and that's why we've had a lot to do with the royal commission in explaining how that happened and the consequences of that, because we won't remain viable unless they make some significant changes. But I guess the important point is that, when Wintringham first started, the level of funding for homeless services and behavioural issues was pretty well the same as mainstream. It's only in the last 10 years that it's become significantly different.

I think Jane is right in the sense that it's to do with perceptions. I think the perceptions of looking after a homeless person are probably more important than the actual consequences of doing it. In other words, I don't necessarily think it's that hard to look after homeless people, and I think mainstream service providers could be able to do that. They tend to accept some strange behaviours, perhaps, from mainstream clients and not from a homeless client, which doesn't make a lot of intuitive sense. But the end result is that homeless people do struggle to get into aged-care services.

CHAIR: Thank you. Just before I hand you over to Dr Freeland, I note that one of the express terms of reference is dealing with how we address homelessness for people over 55. We know that many of the studies that are coming out are showing that it's one of the fastest-growing demographics for homelessness. My understanding is that that's particularly so for women over 55. I have my own theories as to why that's the case, but I'm keen to hear if either of you have a view on that.

Mr Lipmann: Why it's growing so rapidly has a lot to do with the increased numbers of women coming through, the inability to accumulate significant amounts of super and spending large quantities of their potential working life caring for the family. Those certainly have a lot to do with it. I would caution the Senate. There is a lot of conversation about elderly homeless women, and there are significantly more than there were when I started, but the homeless are still primarily male.

CHAIR: Right. I think the stats that I'm referring to show that it's the largest growth area rather than the largest demographic.

Mr Lipmann: Yes, it is. I can tell you another one that is even more spectacular than that, and that is the number of elderly prisoners, which is growing rapidly. This is a cause of great concern to Wintringham. There are a lot of people who end up in prisons, often for relatively minor things but nevertheless some for significantly important ones, particularly sex crimes. The fastest-growing population in prisons is the elderly, and all of those people, if they do come out, are at extreme risk of homelessness.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. Dr Freeland.

Dr FREELANDER: It's okay; I'll follow Ms Murphy. That's fine.

CHAIR: Ms Murphy.

Ms MURPHY: I think Dr Freeland is graciously ceding to me because you might have heard me introduce myself as the member for Dunkley, which means that Frankston is the majority of my electorate, and Wintringham has a relatively new facility down here.

Ms Pinkstone: I was just speaking to Gillian Koh 10 minutes ago, coincidentally. You would probably know her very well.

Ms MURPHY: I'm very well aware of her from the council. I was wondering whether you might briefly explain to the committee and others who are listening why it is that Wintringham set up a facility in Frankston and just how it operates down here.

Mr Lipmann: Certainly. We perceived a gap in our service delivery. We run a nursing home and we run five additional aged-care services. We also run a large quantity of housing and provide home care to that housing or other people's housing. But there was a gap in the service for people who are not frail enough to go to an aged-care facility but are not able to live independently. In Victoria that's covered largely with abilities called SRS and SRH. These are supported residential. They receive no funding from government and they operate throughout the whole price spectrum, from extremely expensive ones worth literally thousands of dollars a week to the ones right

down to the end which are pension only. They receive no government funding and they're not subject to any of the aged-care assessments or quality reviews.

The pension-only ones are usually very poor services. They were totally dominated by for-profits. There was no not-for-profits running these services, largely because it's not viable. But I was able to secure a philanthropic grant which purchased an SRS. We renamed it the Angus Martin, and that is a service where we don't have to pay a debt on it, because it was paid for, and we don't have to pay tax, obviously, because we're not for profit. So the place is not viable, but the board has made the decision that at least in the interim we'll continue going with it until we can find an alternative way to make it viable. But it is an in-between service, if you like. It's a service that sits in between independent living in housing and aged-care services where you've got 24-hours-a-day staffing.

Ms MURPHY: I should tell you I live pretty much down the road from it. Isn't it really a form of social housing for people who, as you said, aren't able to pay the thousand dollars a week accommodation? Would it be fair to say that the residents of the Frankston service are people who would be at significant risk of homelessness or, certainly, entirely inappropriate housing if it weren't for the service that you provide?

Mr Lipmann: Absolutely. And it is not a significant number; it is every one. I would say that every one was at risk of homelessness or had come from a homeless background. It's interesting; I had never really thought about it until you mentioned it, but, yes, I suppose it is a form of social housing. The point is you provide—and council's been great with a lot of support, and we do appreciate it—somewhere in between the 24-hour-a-day care of a nursing home or an aged-care facility and a person living totally independently.

Ms MURPHY: Would you say that there is a growing cohort or that the number of people who are in that situation is fairly steady? There are people on pensions or have been or are unemployed and are not of significant age. Fifty doesn't seem that old anymore. But what where would that group of people go if there weren't some form of social housing?

Mr Lipmann: I think it's important to clarify this '50 and above'. It's not 50 and above; it's 50 and above who exhibit premature ageing.

Ms MURPHY: No, I understand that; sorry.

Mr Lipmann: I certainly don't consider you in that category. It's a category of people who for lifestyle or other reasons have aged prematurely and are 50 and above. Yes, as I said, we've got 1,500 people on our waiting lists now, and that by any stretch of the imagination is just touching the surface. And bear in mind that that's just one state and Victoria has by far the greatest number of services for elderly homeless people because Wintringham is there. Wintringham doesn't really have an equivalent in other states, so those numbers would be even higher if we were based elsewhere—say, Sydney or something.

Ms MURPHY: And that is the cohort of people who are particularly vulnerable to things like pandemics of coronavirus, I would assume.

Mr Lipmann: Absolutely.

Ms MURPHY: Given what is happening in Victoria at the moment with our stage 3 restrictions and the significant outbreak we're seeing in predominantly private aged-care facilities down here, I note that in your submission you've made recommendations about COVID related responses and the need for more places, which I think is entirely reasonable, but are there other COVID related responses that you would see as urgently needed for the aged people that you are caring for in this form of social housing in these circumstances?

Mr Lipmann: There are. I'll ask Jane to talk to that, but I will have a quick go at it. One of the great problems is that we have a significant number—and it's not by any means a majority; it is just a significant number—of people who have some cognitive problems. My father had them, for example, but it was just called dementia. But we also have other forms of problems that are cognitive disadvantages, and that will mean that some people will just not understand that they have to isolate. It's not as though they're like those two in Queensland who just nicked off because they were just, I don't know, naughty or bad. These people are not bad or naughty; they simply don't understand the consequences of doing it.

We're not allowed to physically lock them in their room, of course. We're going through this problem at the moment. We're trying to work with the government and will, in the next few minutes after this meeting, be returning to that meetings. But what do you do with people who do not understand the principles of and the reasons for isolation? So we would certainly look for some type of direction that would support people staying in their self-isolation. Do you have any comments, Jane?

Ms Barnes: The only other thing that I would like to add to that is that, as we've seen before, support is such a critical element to keeping someone housed. All Wintringham housing comes with support attached to it. What

we're seeing now is the benefits that that has for us in having strong relationships with the majority of our tenants. But, when it comes to crises—and we saw it with the public housing quarantine situation in Melbourne—the existing relationships between a support provider and clients or tenants become absolutely critical. So many of our people are single and isolated. They're extraordinarily vulnerable and often are quite resistant to someone from, say, the public health unit getting on the phone and saying, 'What do you need?'

If I were saying one thing that we would want to make sure is not only maintained but significantly increased, it would be that, as we get new housing, it comes with support, because otherwise I shudder to think what could have happened without that.

Mr Lipmann: I will amplify that. We all live with supports. I can't see all you people around the table, but all of you have supports of some form or other, whether it's your family, income, friends or whatever. When you take all of those supports away and then add age and probably illness, it's terrifying. I remember very clearly when I came back to Melbourne and started working at Gordon House. People said, 'What was it like to live there?' and I said, 'I guess you could live there yourself, but you sure as hell wouldn't want your parents or grandparents living there.' That's really the space that Wintringham tries to address: these people who have no supports at all. The mere provision of housing will not solve homelessness. If there's one message I want you to go away with from Wintringham—there are a lot of messages, but that's the most important thing. The mere provision of housing will not solve homelessness. That's the clear lesson I've learnt over the years. You need appropriate levels of support. For some people that support can be just literally picking up the rent, saying, 'Everything okay, Dick?' and then leaving him alone and not seeing him again for weeks afterward. But for other people it can be daily, and without that support people go

I was able to tell the Prime Minister recently when they visited that we have no recidivism at Wintringham, and he was quite amazed because in homelessness recidivism is the same as jail's: it's a constant. It's something you live with. We have no recidivism at all. It's quite amazing. That is a direct result of support.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. Mr Ramsey.

Mr RAMSEY: Your fourth recommendation is that capital funding be established primarily for organisations that are supporting the homeless as opposed to a general pool. How is your access to public capital funds at the moment? What are the impediments, and how would you see that being set up? Do you need to make a co-contribution when you're actually seeing public capital, for instance? Would this perhaps not require that? How do you imagine it might work?

Mr Lipmann: Are you from Victoria? I can't—

Mr RAMSEY: No, my accent should give me away. I'm South Australian; I'm sorry! So I don't necessarily understand what happens in Victoria.

Mr Lipmann: I asked because it would frame the answer to your question. In Victoria there are established growth vehicles called housing associations, and those housing associations—of which there are nine, and Wintringham is one of them—are seen to be by the government the major growth vehicle for social housing. The key principle of the plan at set-up was that there would be leverage. So a housing association would lever, say, 25 per cent of their funds and they would receive 75 per cent government funds. In order to do that they either had to offer up land, which very few do, or they have to borrow and then make that leverage. If you borrow, you have to pay back the debt. A service that concentrates solely on homelessness doesn't make enough profit to service a debt. So it's just like if you or I went out and bought a \$10 million or \$20 million house; you couldn't service the debt because your wage isn't high enough.

My answer to all of that is that the leverage thing is totally inappropriate for homeless services. The other housing associations aren't homeless services; they're more social housing. We're working right at the very bottom of the of the poverty level, and we cannot make a profit to service a debt. So that is why I've suggested that you deal directly with Wintringham. A capital pool is set up that we can access. We can leverage, but we can't leverage capital; we can leverage experience and we can leverage Commonwealth aged-care dollars to support someone in their housing. At the moment we have to enter into tenders which are highly competitive and extremely difficult to get. For the balance I spend a lot of time with philanthropy and have been able to secure a lot of money from philanthropy, but it's hard work. Frankly, I think the governments of any colour should have a responsibility in this area, particularly in Victoria. Victoria has the lowest form of social housing in the country. That should be stated.

Mr RAMSEY: Thank you for that. I think you said earlier that there is no other organisation like Wintringham in Australia. Do you have any view on how these seemingly similar demands in other states are being met at the moment?

Mr Lipmann: No. There are welfare organisations in other states and they're all doing a fine job. Jane is probably be better equipped to answer some of those ones. A lot of them are in the faith based field. There's nothing like Wintringham. There's a very large organisation in Sydney called HammondCare. The HammondCare CEO was on television recently and said, 'If you are elderly and homeless, come down to Victoria,' because they don't have it in Sydney—not to the extent that we do. The lack of capital to build appropriate housing is a major problem all around Australia, but particularly in Victoria.

Ms Barnes: If it helps to clarify, Wintringham is a housing provider. We pretty much only provide housing to singles, whereas other social housing providers are able to create a matrix and provide housing to a different range of people. They are actually able to manage their stock and to allocate their stock in a way that does generate some money to furnish a debt. We're accommodating only singles who are at the very lowest end of poverty. They're all off the priority list on the public housing waitlist. They're literally only paying the barest minimum. I think that was really what Brian was saying. There's no-one else like Wintringham. There's no-one else that solely focuses on elderly homeless people. Our capacity around the ability to furnish debt is very much informed by who we are accommodating and their income.

Mr Lipmann: Thank you for that; that's right, Jane. There are some real advantages in being such a specialised agency. One of the problems, or one of the first things that struck me when I moved into homelessness in the 1980s, was that the staff and the workforce were well-meaning people who were doing multiple tasks; there was no real specialisation. We decided to stick to our knitting and just do one thing. As a result, we understand the needs of elderly homeless people. We don't make any suggestion that we understand the needs of homeless children or any other cohort. I think that's some of the advantage. And, as a result, we have a very strong relationship with Commonwealth aged care which a homelessness service would never have.

Dr FREELANDER: Presumably a lot of your clients would be under 65. Do you get NDIS funding for many of them?

Mr Lipmann: Some of them. It's an area we're looking into. We can't make it pay at the moment, but we have I think 30. It's something that we really don't want to do, because it's not our area, but, on the other hand, it has such great advantages to the few clients where we are doing it.

Dr FREELANDER: Many of your clients would have disabilities and could apply for NDIS support, surely?

Mr Lipmann: They can apply for it, but whether they get it is another thing. Nearly all of our clients are disabled, whether it be financially, intellectually or physically. There are all sorts of disabilities. But the classic forms of disability that NDIS pick up is not our focus at all. Having said that, we do have clients who have done very well out of NDIS and are receiving more money than they got before. But perhaps I can raise a really key point here that was not put up in our submission, I don't think. When I set up Wintringham I was able to argue that premature ageing should enable people to enter aged care, and that argument was accepted. And we used age 50; we just plucked that number out, largely on the basis of the Koori population. So, people under 65 and those aged as low as 50 could access aged care.

A key part of the whole development of Wintringham was that we were able to provide aged-care services to prematurely aged people. This has changed dramatically through the introduction of NDIS, because now, if someone comes in under 65, instead of going straight into aged care because they are prematurely aged they have to go through the NDIS hoops first. That can be a very long and slow process, which often ends in tears, and then the person has to go back into aged care to try to get through the system, and through all that process they can die; we literally run out of time. So, what sounds like a terrific innovation—and it is—has some unintended consequences. The key one for us is that it's messing with our principles of premature ageing allowing you to access aged care. It's still possible, but it's much harder.

Dr FREELANDER: Sure. I believe my colleague Ms Murphy had one other question she wanted to ask you.

Ms MURPHY: I just wanted to finish up the line of questioning I was asking earlier, briefly. Given that you're providing social housing to, as you said, prematurely aged people—and we've seen in Victoria the federal government having to step up what it's doing in privately run, for-profit aged-care facilities as a result of the spread of coronavirus in those facilities—is there anything you would like to see the federal government doing for your social housing for vulnerable older people now in order to try to make sure that they and your staff are protected from coronavirus?

Mr Lipmann: Perhaps first off I could clarify something, because it took me a little while to understand it. When people are talking about private, I believe that what the government is really saying is any service that's not state-run. When I talked about private, I only talked about for-profit, but I believe that Premier Andrews is saying 'private' meaning for-profit and not-for-profit, who are not state-run.

Ms MURPHY: I'm not sure about that, but—

Mr Lipmann: I think it is, but anyway; it doesn't matter.

Ms MURPHY: I was really trying to target it to your social housing situation.

Mr Lipmann: Yes, sure. The level of outreach support through programs through CHSP is nowhere near sufficient. There have been boosters a bit through COVID, but it's nowhere near sufficient. All of these arguments go back to what Jane was talking about, and that's support. Primarily our support dollars come from the Commonwealth—we have some from the state, but they're primarily from the Commonwealth. It is not sufficient. If the homelessness system, particularly the rationale behind it, could understand and make better linkages with aged care, you'd get better service outcomes for homelessness. I have said for many years that the answer to homelessness should not rest with one department or one program. There's an intersection. We're currently seeing that with corrections. Primarily the way that Wintringham operates is that we intersect between housing and homelessness, which are separate departments and separate jurisdictions. We need more housing. We need more support. The aged-care services that we operate need the homeless supplement, which is nowhere near sufficient.

Ms Barnes: I want to add to that a really straightforward, blunt answer to your question. In terms of us being as prepared as we can for our tenants who get COVID, we need support dollars. We need to get many staff being in touch, giving advice and making sure those people who do return a positive diagnosis have contact. Our biggest fear is that something happens at one site and we put all of our staff over there and we can't bring them back if something else happens somewhere else. For our tenants we need to ensure that we have adequate quality support for them so that they can get what they need when they need it.

Mr Lipmann: Well said. It's really important to note that the preoccupation with aged care and COVID issues is understandable, but the issue of homelessness amongst large populations, including the Kooris in the town camps, is just terrifying. We have so little ability to control an outbreak in unsupported housing.

Ms MURPHY: Thank you very much for your evidence. I look forward to coming out to the Frankston Wintringham when times allow us to.

Mr Lipmann: Please do. Make sure you contact us. I'd be delighted to show you around—and anyone else from the committee who comes to Melbourne.

CHAIR: Thank you. I believe Dr Webster has a clarifying question.

Mr Lipmann: Chair, I just want to say that, if there are any questions subsequent, please direct them to Jane and me through email and we will respond.

CHAIR: Thanks very much, Mr Lipmann.

Dr WEBSTER: Hello. Thank you very much for your presentation. It's a vitally important area of homelessness for us to be aware of and learn about. I'm interested in the gendered subject of homelessness. Your graphs in particular at the moment show it's pretty well equal male and female. I believe that female homelessness is on the rise at a more rapid rate. Are the figures in your presentation from this year or last year?

Ms Barnes: It was 2018-19.

Dr WEBSTER: What growth have you already gone through this year in terms of women being disproportionately represented in older peoples' homelessness?

Ms Barnes: Could we take that question on notice and come back to you with some information?

Dr WEBSTER: Sure, that would be great.

Mr Lipmann: We can't give you that figure off the top of our head, but we can tell you that it is increasing. I can also tell you—and it has been a while since I looked at that graph—that for us the aged population in residential care is primarily male and in home care it's primarily female. Would that be right, Jane?

Ms Barnes: Yes.

Dr WEBSTER: Is that by the choice of the client, or is that just the way that you organise your clients?

Mr Lipmann: No—nothing to do with organising. I don't even know if it's choice; it's probably a fact of living. We need to remember that we're dealing with a clientele that is probably different to what it was. Young men today know a lot more about cooking and caring for themselves than my father's generation did. I think that a lot of the guys ended up in aged care because they had lived in environments where they hadn't really been able to look after themselves as well as the women did. That's just a guess; I'm not quite sure about that. But, certainly, there's no question that the cohort of elderly women who are no longer prepared to live in violent situations or because their partner has died, or for a whole lot of other reasons, is increasing.

I might just say—very quickly, because I know we've finished our time—that a little while ago I went to a town in Victoria called Maryborough and met half a dozen elderly women who were living in our housing. I didn't think that any of them had been homeless, but I stayed there and talked to them for a while and every single one of them had literally been homeless. They didn't look it at all; they looked quite presentable elderly women, no different from what you see anywhere else. But all of them were either couch surfing or even rough sleeping before they came to Wintringham. It was quite a disturbing sight.

Dr WEBSTER: Thank you for that. Maryborough is actually in my electorate, so I'd be very interested if there's scope for me to visit—that would be great.

Mr Lipmann: Yes. Wintringham is in Maryborough.

Ms Barnes: Absolutely—again, just let us know.

Dr WEBSTER: Okay.

Mr Lipmann: We're all around that region: we're in Shepparton, Euroa and all around that area.

Dr WEBSTER: Thank you very much.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your attendance this afternoon, Mr Lipmann and Ms Barnes. Thank you for your submissions and thank you for the outstanding work that you do for our community. You have offered to provide additional information, so I'd ask that you please provide that to the secretariat by Thursday 13 August. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence and you will have an opportunity to request corrections to any transcription errors. You're now free to go, thank you very much.

Ms Barnes: Thank you very much.

Mr Lipmann: Thanks.

FITZGERALD, Ms Christine, Executive Director, Strategy, Policy and Performance, Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development, Northern Territory

WALSH, Ms Karen, Acting Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development, Northern Territory

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

[14:24]

CHAIR: I now welcome representatives from the Northern Territory government to give evidence via teleconference, and thank you for being flexible with your time this afternoon. Ms Walsh and Ms Fitzgerald, although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as a proceeding of the House. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to a general discussion.

Ms Fitzgerald: Firstly, before we start, I'd like to acknowledge that we're here on Larrakia land in Darwin and acknowledge elders past, present and future. I'd just like to let the committee know that we've had our caretaker writ issued today, and we're now in caretaker mode ready for our August election. We'll do our best to answer your questions, but, as I'm sure you're all aware, there may be some questions looking at future policies that we may not be able to answer. We also note the committee has been very interested in the definition of 'severe overcrowding' in homelessness, and we'd be really pleased to discuss that with you today. Thank you for the opportunity, and we're very appreciative that we can actually speak to you.

CHAIR: Excellent. Is that the extent of your opening?

Ms Fitzgerald: Yes, thanks.

CHAIR: Alright. Thanks very much. Well, let's go straight to that: the issue of severe overcrowding and homelessness. The committee has received evidence that Australia is the only country in the OECD that includes severe overcrowding and rates of people living in boarding houses within the definition of 'homelessness'. Should we continue to do that?

Ms Fitzgerald: Yes. I thought I might set some context for you and then explain why. In the Northern Territory, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are approximately 30 per cent of our population, so it's a much higher representation than the other states. Yet, when you look at the homelessness data from the 2016 census, 88 per cent of our homelessness is Aboriginal people. Predominantly, that's because 11,000 of that 13,000 are people living in severe overcrowding. And 96.8 per cent of that is Aboriginal people, so 10,709 Aboriginal people are living in houses that need more than four bedrooms. This is a rate of 483 per 10,000, which is much greater than the Australian rate of 21.8 per 10,000. That 10,000 people actually equates to 18 per cent of the Aboriginal population in the Northern Territory. Four bedrooms is significant. I don't think any one of us would like to live in a house that required four extra bedrooms and that had at least eight extra people. It's just an enormous stress on families—I think we all know that from when we've had visitors. We do acknowledge that the rate of people needing four or more bedrooms has decreased and a lot of that can be attributed to the NPARIH and now the national partnership we have, with the significant investment the Commonwealth and the NT governments have made into building in remote communities. But I think we also need to look at houses that require one to three bedrooms, because that's still significant. When you look at that population group, there's 31,000 Aboriginal people still living in houses in the Territory that need one or more bedrooms. If you were living in that condition day in day out, it could get incredibly stressful. All up, that's about 42,000 Territorians living in overcrowding.

For Aboriginal families obviously we need to put a cultural lens over this, because they have such strong family relationships and they also have a very strong connection to their traditional lands. In terms of how we define 'homelessness', we also need to look at it with a cultural lens from the perspective of Aboriginal people, and also, I'm sure, other culturally and linguistically diverse communities across Australia in other locations. I've visited houses in these communities. You will find old broken down cars out in the backyard that young fellows are sleeping in overnight because there's no room in the house. I've been inside houses where I've seen whole families—the adults and kids—living in one small bedroom that's probably big enough for a double bed and a side cupboard. They often have a fridge in there so they can secure their food, because there are so many people living in the house. I've seen tents in living rooms and I've asked why they're there. In fact, they're there because that's where the old people sleep, so they have a little bit of privacy. If we think about the definition of homelessness, it's a bit about having privacy and a private space.

If we look at it from a different cultural lens, is this severe overcrowding on the eastern seaboard? You'd probably see that as couch surfing—that would be the comparison—or, if it's not couch surfing, it's rough sleeping, because, if these people weren't inside those houses on the mattresses on the floor or in old car bodies or on the veranda, they'd be sleeping out under the stars in the spinifex, in the long grass and in the saltbush. That would be defined as 'rough sleeping' under the homeless definition. That's why we feel that severe overcrowding should continue to be assessed as homelessness. It is homelessness. A consequence of that is huge mobility. Often, because it's so stressful, people will move to other areas. In particular they moved into our urban centres. We did a survey of 230 rough sleepers in early 2018, and almost half of those people were in town rough sleeping, because of the stresses, the humbug and the pressure. They just needed a break from living in those severely overcrowded houses.

The other point I want to bring to your attention is the impact of overcrowding on rheumatic heart disease. Rheumatic heart disease should not exist in a first world country like Australia. I want to take you to the community of Maningrida, which is probably an hour's flight east of Darwin. It's got a population of 2½ thousand and there are 277 homes there. Currently the overcrowding rate in that community is 77 per cent. That means that 77 per cent of those homes need one or more bedrooms. We've done some modelling to determine how many bedrooms we would need to eliminate the overcrowding, and it's 400 new three bedroom homes or an additional 12,000 bedrooms. With the Commonwealth's \$550 million through the national partnership, and our matching of that, our program, because there are so many communities to work in, is probably only going to deliver 88 homes and another 50 additional bedrooms added to existing homes. That's only 345-odd bedrooms. That's probably just over a quarter of the need.

Just this week a study has been published by Josh Francis, a well-known paediatrician here at the Menzies School of Health Research, and other medical experts. They undertook a survey in 2018 in Maningrida of all five- to 20-year-olds in the population. They did echocardiographic screenings of that population. Now 613 young people in that age group participated, which is 72 per cent of the total population in Maningrida and the surrounding homeland, and 97 per cent of that group was Aboriginal. In that screening they found 32 young people with rheumatic heart disease; 20 of those 32 had not previously been known. Five of those were incredibly severe cases and three of them had cardiac surgery immediately. That study found another 17 young people who were borderline RHD, so they were developing it. So when you look at that population of 849 young people at Maningrida, 10 per cent of them, that's 88, are receiving secondary prophylaxis, which, for those people who don't know, is a penicillin injection once a month every month for 10 years to try to maintain their health. These are shocking statistics, and the evidence suggests that it's strongly linked to overcrowding.

I guess the last stats to look at there are these: when you look at that, Maningrida has a rate of 5.4 young people in that age group per 100 population. That is the highest reported incidence in the world of rheumatic heart disease of any population that has been recorded. That's a shocking statistic for us to have in Australia, and it's a consequence of overcrowding. As I said to you earlier, that pushes people out of those communities. So not only is there a huge health impact, there's also an impact of people moving into urban centres or other places where they sleep rough and are homeless.

The Closing the Gap targets have been released today, and it's very welcoming to see a housing target in there that will require 88 per cent of Aboriginal Australians to be living in appropriate housing by 2031. That means a house that is safe, secure and doesn't need additional bedrooms. It's really important for us to reflect on the situation in Maningrida, which currently has 23 per cent of its population living in appropriate housing. In fact, the NT only has 38.4 per cent—this is 2016 census data—of people living in appropriate housing. That means we've got almost 30,000 Aboriginal Territorians who are living in crowded housing, and we need to address this.

I hope that has given you a sense of the context here in the Territory, and why we believe severe overcrowding is absolutely homelessness and should continue to be considered as part of that collection. Thank you for the opportunity to provide that information.

CHAIR: Thanks very much, Ms Fitzgerald. Can you elaborate a little bit more on—I hope I'm not putting words in your mouth, but I believe you said that you need to look at overcrowding through a cultural lens. What do you mean by that?

Ms Fitzgerald: Aboriginal people would probably not see overcrowding in the same context that I would, as a non-Aboriginal person. I might be strict at a far earlier point than an Aboriginal family, who will accommodate more people in their house because that's family land. So the Canadian National Occupancy Standard is a slightly blunt measure, because it's age and relationship that determines it. In fact, there's an AHURI research project underway at the moment that is looking at whether there is another way of better measuring overcrowding in Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities across Australia. That research commenced only

this year, so it'll be important for us to have a look at that research and determine whether there is a better way we can understand overcrowding. The Canadian National Occupancy Standard might be a little bit blunt in terms of the way it has two people per room and the age and relationship of people.

CHAIR: Do you know when that AHURI research paper is due to be presented?

Ms Fitzgerald: Perhaps we could follow up with Michael Fotheringham.

CHAIR: No, we can do that.

Ms Fitzgerald: I understood it was a 12-month project, but COVID may have impacted on it, because they were due to travel to the Territory and visit some of our remote communities to meet with families. So it would probably be best to check that with AHURI.

CHAIR: We'll do that. I've just got one more question before I go to the deputy chair. You say in your submissions that the Northern Territory accounts for 11.79 per cent of national homelessness yet receives only 4.63 per cent of the homeless funding allocated through the NHHA.

Ms Fitzgerald: Yes.

CHAIR: This may seem like a question with a self-evident answer, but you're calling for a reassessment or re-examination of how those funds are distributed. What would you like to see?

Ms Fitzgerald: Firstly, this current NHHA funding agreement is based on 2006 ABS data, and it hasn't refreshed the calculations since that time, even though data from 2011 and, I think, 2016 was available at that time. So I think it's about currency of that. I think it's understanding the need. As you can see in the table we presented, we've got homeless rates much higher than a couple of other jurisdictions that have a higher allocation of that homeless funding component of the NHHA. The issue for us is that, if you look at the Commonwealth Grants Commission 2020 review, that actually shows that the cost of delivering housing in the Northern Territory is 4.33 times the average level of the cost to deliver services, so, for every dollar New South Wales gets, it costs us \$4.30 to deliver the same service, basically. If you look at the ratings for the welfare services—because obviously, as your previous speaker said, it's not just about supply; it's also providing the wraparound supports that people need—that costs us 2.3 times what it costs other jurisdictions. So we have a huge need, as I think the data shows, but it's also about giving us the capacity. We need the support to address that need. Because of our remoteness and our small, dispersed population across the jurisdiction with the third-biggest land mass, it's incredibly costly for us to deliver services and to have the same impact that the same investment does interstate. Just giving us our funding based on our per capita share, which is currently 0.97 per cent, makes it very difficult for us to address the high need and the complexity of the need in our service delivery environment.

Ms Karen Walsh: Can I just jump in here. I just want to add to what Chris has just said. If there were a different formula—more scientific and more needs based but also looking at the entrenched levels at homelessness, the levels of poverty and, as Chris said, the geography of the NT, with those criteria being layered into a funding formula for the future for the jurisdictions—that would be a much fairer approach to allocation of funding, because without that we're actually, in effect, going backwards.

CHAIR: Thank you. I'm going to throw now to the deputy chair.

Ms CLAYDON: Thank you to both of you for your evidence today. Your submission really does a terrific job, I think, at highlighting some of the unique features of homelessness that exist in the Northern Territory and explaining why some of the highest rates of homelessness rates in Australia are in the Northern Territory. One of the most unusual components of that is the really high levels of population mobility that we've been hearing about in Tangentyere and other organisations, including yourselves in the NT. In light of that very high level of population mobility—which you've explained is in part a result of the extreme overcrowding as well—could you take us through some of the emerging best practices developed in the Northern Territory for addressing some of these issues around homelessness that are specific to the Territory.

Ms Fitzgerald: I'll start and then I'll hand over to Karen. We had an innovation trial in Katherine. Katherine township, along with Darwin, has one of the highest rates per 10,000. It's something like 94 or 95 per 10,000 people who were homeless on census night, which is incredibly high when you compare it to other urban based centres. We funded the Salvation Army there to run a day centre, a drop-in centre, because most of the homeless people there sleep along the Katherine River in the bush. So providing them with access to dignity services—showers, washing machines and food—was really important. From that, people began to build relationships with the staff there and started to connect with other services that can support them within Katherine.

For instance, they did a one-day survey—a snapshot. They usually have about a hundred people a day. They surveyed 50. Of those 50, 17 people had come into town for appointments to address health issues. Sixteen of

those 17 were sleeping rough in the long grass. That is a huge cost for the health system. It means people are not addressing their needs. In Katherine, through the hospital, they also started the Katherine Individual Support Program, you will hear it referred to as KISP. Dr Simon Quilty was pivotal in the beginning of that. Those services started connecting people, and a lot of people are keeping their medications at that drop-in centre, so they're actually taking their medications. Some people will choose to sleep rough over accommodation but that has resulted in savings to the emergency department at Katherine Hospital. Their early evaluation showed that they saved a bit over a half a million dollars for 95 people. The maths on that is about \$5,000 a year. And that's just one small component.

So, through starting to connect and engage with people, and starting connect them into appropriate support services, there's an ability to have cost savings in other areas. So one of the things we want to focus on in the NT is how we can get that early engagement and, critically, get people housed initially then support their needs. That's a really important way forward. I will hand over to Karen who will follow on there for you.

Ms Karen Walsh: Thank you. I want to take this opportunity to talk about something the NT government did during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that is looking at how we can respond to the needs of Aboriginal people who are visitors and also rough sleepers and how we worked with government agencies and the NGOs across the Territory to enable a Return to Country program. That program was coordinated by the Department of the Chief Minister, in collaboration with a whole range of other agencies and NGOs, to enable country men and women to return to country, back to remote communities, so that they could go back to family and stabilise, rather than staying in the regional centres and towns. Return to Country program's initial response was about assisting them to return to the safest place, which was their communities, and that involved the Aboriginal interpreter services and community education to educate Aboriginal people in multiple languages about the risks of COVID and how they can actually stay safe. That in itself was a huge piece of work.

There were, I think, around 280 rough sleepers within the Darwin area alone at that time. Through the number of months that that operation was underway, they returned 3,839 people back to their communities at a total cost of about \$1.4 million. We've got a breakdown of the numbers for specific locations. We also provided quarantining beforehand within hotels and motels across the Territory, largely in Darwin, Alice Springs and Katherine. People would be quarantined for 14 days before they returned to community, because there were biosecurity restrictions in place. It also linked in with the project that Chris just talked about—the dignity services—as well. We also established some dignity services with existing specialist homelessness services, particularly in the Darwin, Tennant Creek and Katherine areas, where we provided interim accommodation, brokerage funds and additional case support to the specialist homelessness services during that time.

Subsequently, we've also opened a visitor centre with 50 units within Darwin, which was a response to the biosecurity rules opening up, and knowing that there was quite an influx of people returning from remote communities back to the regional centres. So we had to do the opposite to make sure that we were able to respond to the COVID pandemic to protect people to go to their communities but also for when they wanted to return to the major centres when medical services, including renal treatment and other services, were opened. There was certainly a response that we had to do there, otherwise many of those people would have been rough sleeping or homeless.

Ms CLAYDON: Thank you. Is that—

CHAIR: Sharon, we might come back to your question if you've got more questions.

Ms CLAYDON: Okay.

CHAIR: Mr Ramsey.

Mr RAMSEY: Thank you. We were speaking earlier to NT Shelter and I had some queries around how the move to private ownership on Indigenous lands was going in the Northern Territory, given that it has been one of the places where progress has been made on the 99-year leases. They thought there not been much. I'm wondering whether you are going to report the same. And, if there's not much, what do we do to try and accelerate and progress this pathway?

Ms Fitzgerald: We set up a specific program in 2014 to support remote home ownership in Aboriginal communities. Sadly I have to report that there was only one person that went through and purchased their home, on the Tiwi Islands. Obviously there are underlying land tenure issues. The Aboriginal land rights act provides that residents would need to apply to their local land trust, through their land council, to get a section 19 lease, which would enable them to lease a particular plot of land, a lot, with their house on that land. We had 27 people interested in that program, and they were all in the five communities where we had 99-year leases with the

Executive Director of Township Leasing, which is a Commonwealth statutory role that holds the lease over those lands. We did it there because of the 99-year leases, whereas a lot of the other communities only had very short-term leases on them. Of those 27 people, 14 withdrew, eight were ineligible and five went through the process but then pulled out. Only one was completed. It was almost three years of work, and only one sale was completed.

There were some lessons we learnt during that process. IBA were involved in that. There were a lot of educative programs so that anyone who applied understood their obligations in terms of mortgages, insurance and maintenance; there were some definitive modules. I think that's why a lot of people ended up withdrawing—after they gained that additional information.

We did some maths around it. We looked at remote public housing dwellings out in some of those communities. If it was a newly built three bedroom, the rent was capped \$230 a week. We did the numbers for, say, a \$150,000 loan. Council rates were about \$3,000 a year. Obviously you need to put money aside for repairs and maintenance, and at the 10- or 15-year mark there needs to be major upgrades. If there are a lot of people living in those homes, there's obviously high fair-wear-and-tear pressure. We did the numbers—I don't have them in front of me—and the weekly rate actually exceeded the rent. I think a lot of people, when they understood the true costs and the responsibilities, made a decision to pull out.

The other thing I want to say is that the one sale that went through was in a large community that has onsite plumbers and electricians. Many of our small communities—there are 15 major communities that would possibly have those trades present, but the others don't. So when you think of the cost of getting a carpenter or a specialist out of Katherine to drive six hours to Ngukurr, you're paying for six hours travel each way plus a couple of hundred bucks to do something not too big. I think we've got a long way to go. The Northern Territory government is supportive of it. If people do want to purchase their home, were certainly open to working with them. But there are a lot of issues to work through there.

Mr RAMSEY: That then means that we've got rentals that are heavily subsidised, even though they may not look all that cheap to rent, to the point that it destroys the ambition for home ownership. Is that what you're saying?

Ms Fitzgerald: No. With our rents—and I think Michael from Tangentyere talked about it before—we want to go to the new model. Yes, there is subsidised rent out there at the moment. But, because there are so many adults in each house, they actually end up paying maximum dwelling rent, as we call it, so they will be paying \$230 a week. We don't take any more than that. It wouldn't be right, because there's such severe overcrowding, so we cap—

Mr RAMSEY: No, I would agree with that. I understand that 230 bucks a week is a fair bit of rental, but it's nothing like a return on capital, is it. It's obviously subsidised beyond that point.

Ms Fitzgerald: Yes—if we don't add the cost of capital in the new rent model we worked through that Michael talked about. We looked at all our operational costs to run our remote housing—repairs and maintenance, tenancy management rates and those expenses that the department has—and we came up with a per bedroom cost, which was the easiest way. Then you could work out what the cost was for a one bedroom, two bedroom and three bedroom. It was slightly less than \$230 a week for a three-bedroom house, and that was after recovering 100 per cent of our costs.

On the rent model we ended up looking at that we're considering, we put a 25 per cent reduction on that. Equity, in terms of our urban public housing tenancy, only paid 25 per cent of income. If you look at community housing providers across the country, people can pay up to 74.9 per cent of market rent per week. Look at NRAS and those other affordability programs. People get rent deductions of either 20 or 30 per cent. We did that in this model because, if we transition those homes back to community controlled housing providers and they can access Commonwealth rent assistance, it puts them in a position to pretty much cover the costs of that house but not the capital cost to build a new one.

Mr RAMSEY: I have just one more question. Does the Northern Territory government—as, I presume, the ultimate owner of the housing—pay rates in remote communities?

Ms Fitzgerald: We do, but we do not own the houses. We lease the houses. The land trust owns the houses. The land trust and the Commonwealth, in most communities, accept the 99-year lease. They took out a 40-year lease, and then the department of housing subleased so that we can manage the housing. Yes, we have a sublease to manage that housing, but the housing is technically owned by the land trust of that particular community.

Mr RAMSEY: So who pays the rates?

Ms Fitzgerald: We pay the rates to a local—

Mr RAMSEY: So you pay rates to a landholder to provide subsidised housing on their land?

Ms Fitzgerald: Yes.

Dr FREELANDER: I'd like to thank you very much for your presentation today. It's been very comprehensive and very well thought out. I have some concerns about the health aspects of overcrowding and homelessness. I'm familiar with Josh Francis's paper, and I've discussed rheumatic heart disease issues at length. It seems to me that this should be seen as a national health emergency. The only other patients I've seen with rheumatic heart disease have those who've immigrated from third-world countries. There are also other health effects of overcrowding. Has there been any overtures from the Commonwealth about remediation of this issue on an urgent basis?

Ms Fitzgerald: As I'm sure you're aware, we have a national partnership agreement with Commonwealth investors under NPARIH for 10 years, and now we have a five-year agreement. The Commonwealth contribution will deliver another 650 three-bedroom houses. Our needs assessment demonstrates that we probably need between 4,000 and 5,000 dwellings out there to alleviate overcrowding. This is a very long-term need. Like you, we understand the importance of housing, particularly on children. And if you look at the Australian Early Development Census, the AEDC, the vulnerability of our remote children is significantly higher than others. Look at skin diseases, look at a otitis media—

Dr FREELANDER: Renal disease.

Ms Fitzgerald: Yes, renal disease. These health conditions shouldn't be there. One of the key outcomes of the national partnership with the Commonwealth is to address overcrowding. Ironically, with Closing the Gap coming out today, improving housing is going to contribute so much to those other outcomes. Menzies have proven that overcrowding significantly contributes to the non-attendance of young children at school. That's been done through longer-term studies, so there are many impacts on children as well as trauma. If we want to continue to work with the Commonwealth, we very much need a long-term investment there. We know that, if we can continue to work with the Commonwealth to address severe overcrowding, we're going to have much more opportunity address those other key determinants around education, employment and health outcomes for everyone.

Dr FREELANDER: Absolutely. But, at the present time, would you say that the level of need is, say, ten times what the funding is providing at the present time?

CHAIR: I think they call that leading the witness.

Dr FREELANDER: It probably is, but I'd like some view.

Ms Fitzgerald: I'll look until 2024 to 2025—when the agreement will finish. The Commonwealth contribution, as I said, was just over 1,900 bedrooms. The NT with our contribution will add about 2½ thousand. There are 4½ thousand bedrooms there, and we feel that we need anywhere between 13,000 and 15,000. We've got a long journey ahead of us and need much more than the others. The other big issue is that there's no service plan. We put \$500 million aside in this five years. We're having to upgrade sewerage systems, water sources, power—and it's not only the head works but also the underground pipes and servicing lots, and servicing a lot is costing us about \$150,000 to \$200,000 before you even start to put a house on it. And then the cost of building houses in remote areas are so much more than in the urban context. We did some costings the other day. It's probably 40 per cent more than building a house in Darwin, and Darwin is significantly more expensive than the east coast.

CHAIR: I understand the deputy chair has a very quick question to ask you.

Ms CLAYDON: I think that's the chair leading the deputy chair! I'll try to be brief. There have been some really significant efforts made by the Northern Territory government, whether it's during COVID with return to country or the establishment of visitor centres. But you've also got some big investments—\$1.1 billion for remote housing, and you've got a pathways out of homelessness strategy underway. You've made some recommendations about what you would like to see from the Commonwealth to help address the profound issue for the NT. But, in light of the announcement today that housing will be one of the Closing the Gap targets—I won't go into the details—I understand the aspiration is for 88 per cent of Aboriginal families not to be living in overcrowded homes by 2031. What do you want to see mostly from the Commonwealth at this stage? Would you hope that a Closing the Gap target would bring additional funding commensurate with that aspiration of the target? What are your thoughts around what the Commonwealth needs to do to work in collaboration with the NT government?

Ms Fitzgerald: We would be very keen. As you probably know, the Northern Territory is dependent on Commonwealth funding; it's probably almost 80 per cent of our revenue. With such a small population, we have very little opportunity to raise their own revenue. So, we are really keen to partner with the Commonwealth. A lot

of this is legacy from 20, 30 or 40 years of under-investment in those remote communities. We certainly want to work together. I think it's that early investment approach, if we're all in this together. I think that's why we think a national strategy is very important to join up all their efforts. At the moment we have a ministry and Treasury, two in DSS and Minister Wyatt in NIAA, who are all supporting housing and homeless outcomes here. We know that the Commonwealth Department of Health is building some rental houses here and there. We think that fits that strategy so that we have a really joined up effort across Australia and then the flexibility to address the different jurisdictional needs. We're certainly keen to continue the work there. I might hand over to Karen.

Ms Karen Walsh: On that point, number one for us definitely would be a national housing and homelessness strategy that is absolutely evidence based that is tailored to respond to the needs of each jurisdiction. It needs to consider alignment of all of the subsidies and policy settings, including things like Commonwealth rent assistance, the tax settings, the welfare policies and the impact of how they actually influence each other, so that there's actually a coordinated response at the Commonwealth level, from a policy and planning perspective. I think it needs to be absolutely systemic, it needs to be long term and it needs really solid investment for the long term. We've noted today the widening gap between the resources that we have and what's actually needed. We cannot solve homelessness by simply providing more funding to additional homelessness services, because those services do not have exit points. They don't have long-term housing to exit people to. We actually need investment for long-term, safe, affordable housing.

CHAIR: I need to jump in there, because we are running short on time. Dr Webster?

Dr WEBSTER: I note that your submission is really—also, if we take a step back—looking for a national housing and homelessness strategy. Why do you feel that is better than a state or territory based strategy?

Ms Karen Walsh: We do have both strategies. I think we can get much better outcomes by being joined up and looking at it as a systems response rather than individual housing and homeless agencies. The fact is that the homeless service system is a safety net catching people who have fallen through other systems, whether it is exit from hospitals or corrections et cetera. I think it also offers the opportunity to reduce duplication. The Productivity Commission did a study earlier this year in the Northern Territory of Commonwealth and Northern Territory funding for children and families crises services. In that they found \$538 million of funding through nine different agencies—that's Territory and Commonwealth. There were 700 grants and to more than 500 service providers. Out of that has come a recommendation—and that came through our royal commission—for a joint funding pool that is much better joined up. That demonstrates that, if we had a national strategy where we were joined up and aligned, we may be able to reduce some of the duplication we have both within our own state systems but between the Commonwealth and ourselves, and actually across different portfolios, to achieve much better outcomes for the clients that many of us are working with in our separate portfolios.

CHAIR: I'm going to jump in there. Thank you very much for your evidence here this afternoon. If you've been asked to provide any additional information could you please forward it to the secretariat by Thursday 13 August. Thank you very much for your evidence and for the submissions. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence and you'll have an opportunity to request corrections to transcription errors.

McBRYDE, Mr John, Vice-Chair, NT Shelter Inc.

McMILLAN, Mr Peter, Executive Officer, NT Shelter Inc.

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

[15:15]

CHAIR: Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and, therefore, has the same standing as a proceeding of the House. The giving a false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. I will now invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to a general discussion.

Mr McMillan: I'll make the opening remarks in respect of NT Shelter. We thank the parliament for the opportunity to appear before the parliamentary inquiry into homelessness. I'd like to acknowledge that I'm calling from Larrakia country, acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where we are up in Darwin and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

First of all, we would say that many submissions have been made to this inquiry reflecting the extent of the challenges of housing and homelessness in the Northern Territory. Many people across Australia rightly refer to Australia's homelessness crisis, but in the Northern Territory the situation, as you've heard already, is particularly dire, with 12 times the national rate of homelessness and a frontline homelessness service response that's severely overstretched. This, as you also heard recently from the Territory government, is a result of decades of under-investment in housing, as well as a chronic lack of funding for specialist homelessness services and an absence of infrastructure right across the housing continuum, and that's both in absolute terms and also relative to other states.

The Northern Territory is Australia's smallest jurisdiction. It's got a very limited capacity to meet the extensive capital and ongoing operational costs to address our homeless and housing challenges. This creates, in our view, a perfect storm of issues, problems and challenges resulting in unacceptably slow progress to tackle homelessness in the NT. The result of that is a very real and disproportionate burden on Aboriginal persons. It creates a myriad of consequences for wellbeing and life prospects. It also impinges on the progress against closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage through a lack of housing and poor quality housing, as well as poorly performing housing across the Territory.

Quite frankly, it is difficult to be optimistic about the prospects as things currently stand, given the year on year increases in the demand that we're seeing for specialist homelessness services in the Territory and the painfully slow rate of net new builds. I say 'net new builds', because even though there has been a fair investment over the last years in remote housing, for example, they've only been one 136 additional homes built over the past three years, so progress is slow. We need to see a step-up in the level of response to social and affordable housing in the Territory, or we'll continue to see entrenched disadvantage for future generations.

Of some comfort to us is that the extent of the housing shortfall and the condition of housing is really apparent and is not disputed. Indeed, the Northern Territory government's own submission to this inquiry makes for very sobering reading. What we say is missing is a clear and credible plan of sufficient scale to tackle the problems of homelessness and rental unaffordability, and this needs to be a priority of all governments.

We stress the importance of completing current programs that are in place to deliver remote housing to Aboriginal communities. The inquiry may be aware that an independent review was conducted, with an expert panel noting the need to protect the investment made by government in housing over the past decade, and that half of all the remaining severely overcrowded houses were in the Northern Territory, the jurisdiction with the least fiscal capacity to meet demand. We don't finish infrastructure projects in Australia halfway through, and it's vital that the Australian government continues to partner with the Northern Territory government past 2023 until the job is completed in full. There's also a significant funding shortfall and gap to get housing issues addressed in town camps and community living areas, as well as waiting lists for housing in urban communities for social housing of up to eight years. Without going into detail, another layer of the homelessness context in the NT is the issue of mobility between regions and a need for appropriate short-stay visitor accommodation in our urban centres.

We believe that funding for the Northern Territory is overwhelmingly inadequate and inequitable, and that's due to the affordable housing and homelessness challenges we face, as evidenced by the data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and others, which shows that Northern Territory has six per cent of all daily national requests that are unassisted. So we have six times the rate of instances where people cannot get any assistance with what they're looking for. We've seen demand for services increase by 50 per cent over the last

seven years, according to the Northern Territory government's submission. In the past twelve months alone, demand increased by 3.4 per cent in the Northern Territory compared to a fall of one per cent across Australia.

Discussions involving all states and territories on an alternative distribution formula under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement need to begin now. We ask that this inquiry recommend that happen. We also submit that there is sufficient evidence before this inquiry to support a recommendation for interim additional funding being provided by the Australian government to the NT in the form of a supplementary payment that recognises the sheer level of demonstrated unmet demand and acute housing and service shortfalls in the Territory.

Finally, Commonwealth and Northern Territory government investment in housing over recent years is making a difference—I want to stress that it is making a difference—but much, much more needs to be done. The Productivity Commission was correct when it described Australia's public housing system as broken. This inquiry provides an important opportunity now for you to recognise that and to recommend pathways out of homelessness. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thanks very much, Mr McMillan. The first point I want to take you to is the issue that we heard evidence on earlier today from the Tenants' Union of New South Wales. You've said in your submissions that the Northern Territory has the least protection for renters in Australia, with no-grounds evictions and short lease periods contributing significantly to the risk of people entering homelessness. How have you reached that conclusion, and how have you compared it to other jurisdictions?

Mr McMillan: Our understanding, on a comparative basis, of the residential tenancy legislation across Australia is informed by a report that's been undertaken by Choice, by the National Association of Tenant Organisations in Australia and by National Shelter comparing the periods for evictions—either no-cause evictions at the end of a fixed-term lease or after a periodic lease. In all jurisdictions, the Northern Territory has the least notice period that's required to be provided by a landlord or real estate agent to tenants. For example, if they've entered a fixed-term lease it's as low as 14 days. That's different at the present time due to COVID; there have been some extensions to that of up to 60 days. Notice required after a periodic lease is 42 days, which is the lowest across Australia. So the notice periods are very short. Our knowledge of exits into homelessness from private rental is informed by information provided to us by our members. NT Shelter is a peak body, and tenancy advice services here in Darwin and in the Northern Territory do tell us about clients they've had that have been threatened with eviction and have been evicted.

CHAIR: We have covered off on a lot of the things that you've raised here with previous witnesses. I will go to the Deputy Chair, and if there's something else I want to cover I'll do that when we wrap up.

Ms CLAYDON: I'm sorry, I might have missed the great finish that I'm sure NT Shelter had. I really wanted to go to a couple of issues that you highlighted in your submission. One was the extraordinary number of young people impacted by homelessness in the Northern Territory. If my memory serves me correctly, there was a figure of 48.6 per cent of the Northern Territory homeless population being under the age of 25. Is that correct?

Mr McMillan: That's correct. That's certainly the order of magnitude. I don't have that number right in front of me. The disappointing thing or the concerning thing is that the client group or cohort of interest for 15 to 24 increased in the Northern Territory in the last 12 months, whereas nationally we've seen a slight improvement in that figure for young people presenting alone to homelessness services. Sadly that number is on the rise in the Territory. We're heading in the wrong direction.

Ms CLAYDON: That's right. You make the point in your submission that without access to stable, secure, long-term housing options—and you made the point that it also needs to be a culturally appropriate and trauma-informed housing first approach—for young people you're going to see a perpetuation of young people cycling through the system, which is exactly, as you said, the wrong direction we want to be going in. I'm just wondering if you would like to put to us your key recommendations to break that cycle in the NT, given the very worrying trajectory that this is now on.

Mr McMillan: I'm happy to call upon our vice-chair to add some comments because he's based in Alice Springs, which is a community with significant challenges with youth homelessness. Some of the other submitters to this inquiry—for example, the WoSSCA women's safety centre in Alice Springs—refer to the need for crisis accommodation for young people and women suffering homelessness. What we're seeing in communities is increasing numbers of young people that are entering into homelessness. Unlike the other state jurisdictions, we don't have any use for our infrastructure. We don't have facilities such as Common Ground. We don't have any housing first solutions of note. So, in our view, that's something certainly worth pursuing, whether that be on a small-scale pilot basis. We need some investment in our young people. We need to provide alternative

accommodation pathways for children who can't safely live in their home. We know that there are families sadly affected by FASD or suffering overcrowded housing, as we've heard many other people already refer to, and that has impacts on family life with fighting, domestic violence, alcohol and other drug issues and so forth leading to kids not being able to safely return home, entering into homelessness. So we need to find pathways for young people to a safe place, as well as investing in those people by giving them opportunities for education and to get their lives on track. I'm happy to hand over to John. Do you have any other thoughts around the needs of young people and what we can do to help with youth homelessness, John?

Mr McBryde: I'm speaking contextually from working here in Alice Springs. I think Peter's covered off most of the points. As Peter said, we don't currently have very much capacity at all to address youth homelessness. As he stated, close to 50 per cent of those people who are homeless do fall in that range of under 25. In a small jurisdiction like the NT, we simply don't have anything like the Common Ground or Youth Foyer model, and we certainly don't have anything quite like that here in Alice Springs, where we do see a cycle of youth who don't have a safe home to go to often because of overcrowding in the existing public housing system or social housing system, pushing kids onto the street who then become homeless. My general suggestion across the board here is really that what is needed purely is investment in social and affordable housing across the Territory. Often, when youth are displaced and become homeless, that is because of the overcrowded conditions in public housing and social housing.

Ms CLAYDON: I take your point. I also want to flag that another at-risk cohort is women and kids fleeing family violence. I know the last time I visited your women's shelter in Alice Springs, the level of unmet need was astonishingly high. I note that, on page 27 of your submission, you're using in case study 6 the fact that the Commonwealth had announced a \$60 million Safe Places Emergency Accommodation capital grants. Are you aware of whether or not organisations—your member groups, perhaps—made application for those grant moneys and whether you have had any response? There have been some calls to try and bring forward this money and get it out into communities a bit quicker. Do you know if any of your members actually applied for some of that Safe Places Emergency Accommodation funding?

Mr McMillan: That's a question I'd be happy to take on notice.

Ms CLAYDON: Thank you.

Mr McMillan: I do believe there was interest in that program. Whether or not that proceeded to applications, I could not advise. Perhaps John McBryde has some additional comments to make.

Mr McBryde: I know, managing a housing provider here in Alice Springs, that we were looking at a \$60 million investment with Safe Places, looking at partnering with the women's shelter. We didn't pursue the application because it was primarily around crisis accommodation. It wasn't really directed at longer-term or transitional-term housing which is what is really needed here in the Territory at this point in time and in a jurisdiction like Alice with such a high unmet need when it comes to the shelter. There's actually nowhere for women to specifically go to after their short-term stay at the shelter, so it often sees women having to return to their communities or to their homes where the incidents originally occurred.

Ms CLAYDON: I do appreciate that your use of that case study was actually to make the point originally about the inaccuracies of data being attributed to a lack of funded services in the NT. I'm happy for you to speak to us or take anything on notice in that regard, but we are interested in the adequacy of data and where the gaps are. You make the interesting point that you think the data is skewed. So, with programs like the \$60 million accommodation program, you don't really get a look in because, on paper, it looks like there isn't the level of unmet need in the NT that there is in, say, Cairns, in Queensland. You make that point. You say this is not about unmet need but, rather, the way in which data is collected—or not collected, as the case may be. Do you want to talk to us about that or provide anything further for the committee's consideration?

Mr McMillan: Perhaps I could take that on notice. At this stage, we don't have anything to add to what we've said in our submission.

Ms CLAYDON: Thank you.

Mr RAMSEY: Peter, you mention in your report that you are only achieving an extra 136 houses over the last three years. Clearly, that is not going to meet the backlog. But you didn't mention how many houses are actually getting built. So, over and above those 136 houses, how many houses are for replacement?

Mr McMillan: That's a question I am not able to answer at the moment. What I can say is that the Northern Territory government has recently been releasing media releases in regard to the thousands of houses that have had renovations, extensions, modifications or new builds done. Unfortunately, a number of houses in the Northern Territory have been beyond economic repair and have had to be replaced. I am not suggesting that the Northern

Territory government has not been active or busy in the remote regions. Clearly, it needs to get access to leases and have land related infrastructure in place to be able to do new builds. These things take time and they have to be negotiated properly with local Aboriginal communities as to the type of housing the local communities need. So these things do take time. But my point is that 136 houses is a long way short of the 8,000 to 12,000 houses that the government estimates are needed in the next five years. The figure they make in their submission is that approximately 5,000 houses are needed in the remote regions alone. I'm happy to take that question on notice and ask the government to perhaps clarify the number of total builds they've done over that same period of time. They have confirmed to us—and it's really just straight from their annual report—the number of 136 net new builds in remote regions. In the case of the urban communities, it is 23 additional houses.

Mr RAMSEY: Your point is well made but, in the interests of fairness, I think we should know what that total build effort is. So if you could get those figures for us that would be helpful to me at least. How would you describe culturally appropriate housing? Sometimes I think this means different things to different people, depending on where we are in Australia.

Mr McMillan: I know that John is keen to make a comment on the cultural aspect. John, as you work for an Aboriginal community housing organisation, perhaps that's a question you are better able to comment on.

Mr McBryde: Thanks, Peter. The organisation I work for is a provider managing housing in the town camps. I have been working in this sector in the NT for about 5½ years. From my experience, culturally appropriate housing is housing that is designed for the relevant community. There was a large investment in housing through the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program, following the intervention. But it was a European style of housing, which doesn't necessarily meet the needs or cultural practices of Aboriginal people in remote communities and town camps.

I know that there is the National Indigenous Housing Design Guide, which I think was completed in 2008. It hasn't been updated, so we would encourage any future infrastructure packages or remote housing builds to follow that *National Indigenous Housing Design Guide*. I'm not an Aboriginal person myself, but, as I said, my experience has been that, typically, housing will be built in a very standard, suburbanised-type way that might not actually meet the needs of community. In the current Northern Territory government's \$1.1 billion program there are obvious efforts to engage community around the design of those houses and also around design as part of their Room to Breathe Program.

You also asked a question about the actual number of new homes under construction. I can see what's referenced from the NT government's department of housing webpage: there are currently 201 homes under construction under that program. I think Peter's report referenced 163—that was as of 31 May 2020—

Mr RAMSEY: Would that be a 12-month construction plan, or six months—

Mr McBryde: No, that's 201 homes from the beginning of this program—that's my understanding.

Mr RAMSEY: Okay.

Mr McBryde: Peter's point, obviously, is that it goes nowhere near meeting the need for an additional 5,000 remote homes.

Mr RAMSEY: No, and it's not a lot more than the 136 replacements. If there are firm figures on that they would be good to see.

Just on the culturally appropriate housing: from my own experience in the remote areas of South Australia, I would say it's not so different from urban housing except that it's probably more robust. They use a heavier ply in the walls and things like that. They have heavier wear and tear, I suppose. But, basically, you see a three-bedroom house with kitchen, dining area, lounge area, bathroom and wet areas and a veranda. I just wondered what that was in the Northern Territory, but it doesn't appear that one size fits all.

Mr McBryde: I think that's correct, yes.

Mr RAMSEY: Thank you very much.

Dr FREELANDER: Thank you for your evidence. I'm interested in how you feel that homelessness in the Northern Territory is influencing some of the terrible statistics we have affecting young people, such as children in out-of-home care, children involved with the criminal justice system and educational failure. I wonder if you can talk about that for me?

Mr McMillan: Thank you for the question. The way I can best answer that is simply to refer back to the evidence to this inquiry that was given by the Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development in their submission, on page 16, where they refer to the number of NT clients in each of those categories that you talked about per 10,000 people, and the NT rates compared to the national average rates. In

every case, really, whether we're talking about young people presenting to services, clients leaving care, children with care-and-protection orders or exiting custodial settings, the NT rates are an order of magnitude higher—multiples higher—than the national average. So it's really a very depressing set of figures, quite frankly. These are people who are presenting to specialist homelessness services.

I take issue, actually, with one aspect of the department of housing's evidence that was given prior to us coming on the line, and that was their suggestion that there wasn't a case for more funding for frontline homelessness services. If I understand what they were saying correctly, that was on the basis that there were no exit points into housing. We take issue with that. We know that, in nine cases out of 10, when services are provided to people at risk of homelessness, they are able to keep people housed, and we know that the frontline services are overstretched. We heard before in the evidence I gave that clients are six times more unassisted here in the Territory than elsewhere.

In terms of helping connect young people to services, it might not be long-term, stable housing, but it could be simply financial counselling or relationship assistance or getting issues with neighbours or house members sorted out. These services are significantly overstretched up here and really do help get people's, especially young people's, lives on track. We do disagree with the notion that there's sufficient funding for frontline services and the money should go into housing alone. Both are important, but, in terms of the statistics the department itself has referred to, in terms of the NT rate of clients, these are very shocking statistics indeed.

Dr FREELANDER: Yes. To be fair, I think the point they were making was that, without stable housing, it's very difficult for frontline services to make a huge difference. I think that was probably the point they were making.

We do have national Closing the Gap targets in a number of these areas. Would you say that it's no good having national Closing the Gap targets if you're not providing adequate housing? Would that be a reasonable assumption?

Mr McMillan: The way I would answer that is with what a former Prime Minister said in response to the role of housing in closing the gap. He said, in his *Close the gap* report, that housing was really instrumental in meeting the other social determinants of health, or that housing was really a key part of closing the gap. We hear regularly, all the time, from frontline services in the Northern Territory—these might be providers of mental health services; they might be child protection services; they could be teachers—and they're all talking about the impacts that overcrowded housing has on their kids going to school or on how they perform at school, and on people presenting in hospitals for preventable disease and illness. Housing pops up in just about every conversation that I have with a range of agencies up here. Indeed, organisations that are much more at the coalface than we are, such as the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, will be the first to talk about the central importance of housing and the central part it plays in closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage. I know we're an advocate for housing and homelessness and you'd expect us to say that housing is important, but I'm certainly able to assert that that view is widely held across the broader sector.

Dr FREELANDER: You seem a little negative about the progress that is being made so far—and I'm not judging you on that; I think that the statistics are pretty dire. But what would be the answers to this? Is it a national housing program? Is it just a matter of funding? Is it politicians becoming more aware? Where do you see the primary answers being?

Mr McMillan: There are a number of factors that we, at NT Shelter, feel are important. The first thing is that we do need to see a national strategy—we need a plan—because there are levers that the Commonwealth government can exercise to address affordability, to help with demand-side measures, with Commonwealth rent assistance and other levers at its disposal. It can leverage bond issues through NHFIC to help finance the supply of more social and affordable housing with community housing providers. In the Northern Territory, for example, our share of the community housing sector's share of social housing is 6.9 per cent, compared to 20.7 per cent nationally. So we are actually starting to begin discussions in earnest with the Northern Territory government around how we can grow the capacity and scale of the community housing sector to build more social and affordable housing, and I'm sure that national advocates have been presenting evidence to the inquiry.

In terms of the Northern Territory, if there is one point that I'd like to leave the inquiry with today it would be that, I think by any objective assessment, the Northern Territory isn't receiving anywhere near the level of funding commensurate with need. On page 19 of our submission we refer to the level of funding that we get—in the order of \$19.7 million. It's 1.3 per cent of the total NHHA funding. Despite us having 13,700 people estimated to be homeless on census night, Western Australia, with around 70 per cent of our total number of homeless people, is receiving \$163 million. We just don't see any sense—I appreciate that that's the outcome of agreements negotiated at COAG and based on population, and the department of housing breaks that down in its submission between the

homelessness component, which is a relatively small part of the overall funding component, and the general component. They say they believe there's a shortfall in the order of \$8 million. But we say that, really, that's not going to go anywhere near addressing the enormous shortfall in public housing and social housing right across the continuum.

At every stage of the housing continuum in the Northern Territory, from the crisis end through to home ownership and everything in between, there is a lack of infrastructure—there's a lack of lack of housing—and \$8 million a year is not going to go anywhere near meeting that shortfall. So, really, I appreciate the Northern Territory government is probably reluctant to say, 'We need another \$50 million from the Commonwealth,' because under the current arrangements it might think it has to co-contribute \$50 million, and that's not going to be possible in the current fiscal environment up here in the Territory. But we have to work through those conversations and we have to find a way to get the required level of investment to get the housing up to where it needs to be. We're literally miles from where we need to be on social and affordable housing up here. There are reasons for that. There are historic reasons. I'm not looking to apportion blame, but we have to look at it warts and all and see what we can do between the Commonwealth, the Territory and local governments to make real progress from here.

Dr FREELANDER: Thank you very much, and thanks very much for your evidence today.

Ms CLAYDON: I wondered if you might like to comment on this. During the global financial crisis Australia had a social housing initiative in place. It only went for between three and four years, but during that time just under 20,000 homes got built from that initiative. Is it that kind of very targeted, very focused national effort that you think is required now, some version of that?

Mr McMillan: Absolutely; we do. I'm happy for John to comment if he wishes to as well. A number of organisations have talked about the role that social and affordable housing construction can play as part of our economic recovery as we emerge from COVID. We've looked at the impacts in the Northern Territory in terms of what the benefits of building 1,050 additional dwellings for the Northern Territory over four years might look like. For us alone, at just 3½ per cent participation in a national program, it would generate around \$340 million of gross state product, create around 280 full-time jobs over four years, and help develop the scale and capacity for not-for-profit community housing providers through the benefits they can bring to the table.

We know in the Northern Territory that the government has land that it could bring to the table. It doesn't have a lot of cash at the present time. A program like that, with national support and an issuance of bonds under NHFIC through an institutional issue in the order of \$7.2 billion, has been proposed by organisations such as CHIA and National Shelter. That really does help get the construction sector moving and it helps get houses built that are badly needed, particularly up here. We are talking to the Territory Economic Reconstruction Commission around that opportunity. We're very passionate about it and we think there's really no better time, just like we did after the Second World War, to start building social housing. We know we need it, and now is the perfect time to get on with it.

Ms CLAYDON: KPMG did a review of that social housing initiative, and it was a very positive review. It ticked all those boxes you're mentioning in terms of creating jobs, keeping the construction industry going, adding to the local economy and having a lasting legacy of actually housing citizens at the end of the day, which is the intention. Thank you so much for your evidence today; I've found it very helpful.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your evidence today, Mr McMillan and Mr McBryde. You have been asked to provide additional information. Could you please forward it to the secretariat by Thursday 13 August. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence and will have an opportunity to request corrections to transcription errors. You are now free to go. Thank you very much.

Thank you to all witnesses for their participation in today's hearing. I now declare this public hearing closed.

Committee adjourned at 15:55