



Moreland City Council

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Lilian Topic  
Secretary  
Legal and Social Issues Committee  
Parliament of Victoria  
Spring St  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Ms Topic

## **INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS IN VICTORIA**

Moreland City Council welcomes the initiative of the Legal and Social Issues Committee in undertaking this Inquiry. Council notes the broad scope of the Inquiry and its intent to hear the views of people from across Victoria's communities. This submission provides a concise response to each of the three areas of the Inquiry's consideration including weblinks to relevant Moreland supporting documents. It is endorsed by the Moreland Housing Advisory Committee, which is the principal consultative body advising Council on its housing policy agenda.

### *1. The changing scale and nature of homelessness across Victoria*

#### *1.1 Statistics*

Homelessness in Moreland remains higher than the metropolitan average with around 94 persons homeless per 10,000 population in 2016 (homeless and in marginal housing). While these concerning figures from census data represent a good attempt by the ABS to enumerate the experience of homelessness, the numbers of community members seeking help through Specialist Homelessness Services is likely to paint a more accurate picture. Approximately 7,000 households per year present at Vincent Care Northern Community Hub in Glenroy (the homelessness access point for the cities of Moreland and Hume) for assistance with their housing.

In 2016 – 2017, of the people presenting to the centre:

- 24% had slept rough in the previous month
- 39% were staying with friends or family or in short term/ crisis/emergency accommodation due to a lack of other options
- 36% were at risk of experiencing homelessness, this means their housing was at risk – in arrears, facing a notice to vacate or eviction

Reflecting the national figures, the leading reason households are seeking help from homelessness services in Moreland is a lack of affordable housing. The second leading cause of homelessness is family violence.

#### **Moreland Language Link**

廣東話	9280 1910	हिंदी	9280 1918
Italiano	9280 1911	普通话	9280 0750
Ελληνικά	9280 1912	ਪੰਜਾਬੀ	9280 0751
عربي	9280 1913		
Türkçe	9280 1914	All other languages	
Tiếng Việt	9280 1915	9280 1919	

## 1.2 Council-supported local research

### 1.2.1 Community Conversation about homelessness

In October 2017 Council held a Community Conversation about homelessness at Brunswick Town Hall. Over forty people attended, including people with a lived experience of homelessness, councillors, staff from community service providers and interested community members. Participants' understanding of the issue was summarised thus:

people discussed the rising of homelessness and the visibility of people sleeping rough due to the reality that these things were indeed increasing. People spoke about the impact of gentrification in Moreland on homelessness and insecure housing, but also in the possible drift of people experiencing homelessness to the area due to the access of specific support services. Participants spoke about intersecting issues including, family violence (FV), alcohol and other drugs (AOD) and people experiencing mental health issues. They spoke about systemic issues such as neo-liberal policies, lack of affordable housing, and lack of security in private rentals. The specific issues of vulnerable communities was discussed, including the rise of women over the age of 50 and young people experiencing rising rates of homelessness. Discriminatory stereotypes and negative community perceptions of people experiencing homelessness was also discussed in depth

Through a facilitated process a number of recommendations were supported, framed within an agreement that: "There is a crisis in lack of resources, lack of compassion and lack of addressing the human rights aspect of people experiencing homelessness". Recommendations included furthering Council's role in facilitating information and communication between services and maintaining a strong advocacy position for an increase in affordable housing provision.

The full report can be accessed here:

<https://www.moreland.vic.gov.au/globalassets/areas/social-policy/report---community-conversation-about-homelessness---final-january-2018.pdf>

### 1.2.2 Preventing Homelessness among Arabic Speaking Women in Moreland

In 2016/17 Council provided funding and in-kind support for the Preventing Homelessness among Arabic Speaking Women in Moreland (PHASWM). This was led by Vincent Care Victoria in partnership with Salvation Army Crossroads and Kildonan Uniting Care. The PHASWM Project aimed to prevent homelessness amongst Arabic-speaking women who were leaving or who had left a violent relationship. Project participants were supported to access housing through the private rental and community housing markets, as well as receiving support to access flexible brokerage resources. Participants were also supported to access family violence and case management support services to ensure that safety outcomes and recovery from family violence were concurrently addressed. 28 women and 53 accompanying children were assisted by the program. Key learnings included:

- The benefit of having a support worker to assist with the applications process and address stigma when dealing with real estate agents;
- The challenge of the lack of short-term housing options for women leaving violent relationships, and
- Strong benefits of having culturally-appropriate support.

The full report can be accessed here:

<https://www.moreland.vic.gov.au/globalassets/areas/social-policy/preventing->

### 1.3 *Impact on public space*

#### 1.3.1 Coburg Library Benches- a case study

The Coburg library is situated on Victoria St Mall which is regarded as the “town square” of the suburb. The library has a row of public seating under cover on the Mall and in recent years the number of community members who use this area for shelter has grown. Council responded to community members and traders’ community safety concerns, including for the wellbeing of the people sleeping rough, by leading an integrated response including support for intensive outreach which led to a number of people moving to safer ongoing housing and initiatives to improve the physical environment in the Mall. However, the improvement works included the installation of grab rails on the library benches to comply with disability access requirements. A number of community members immediately raised a concern that the grab rails were, in effect, an example of Hostile Architecture which had the impact of moving on rough sleepers from the area.

At its meeting on 11 September 2019, after hearing a number of questions about the bench alterations from community members and engaging in an extended debate on the matter, Council unanimously supported the following resolutions under the motion “Designing and providing public spaces which support homeless people”:

That Council:

1. Recognises all people, including homeless people, have a right to use public spaces and facilities, including bench seating where it is possible for people to stretch out.
2. Acknowledges the deplorable state of homelessness in Moreland (771 on Census night) and Australia (116,427 on Census night).
3. Recognises public space and infrastructure can cause discrimination against homeless people, such as spikes installed on the ground in doorways and arm rests installed along bench seats.
4. Removes 3 of the 5 the arm rests installed on the bench seats outside the Coburg Library as soon as possible.
5. Receives a report which reviews Council’s technical specifications for urban design improvements and catalogue of standard street furniture to gain an understanding of council’s obligations and to ensure our public spaces are welcoming and inclusive of all users, and that no community members are excluded from accessing our public spaces due to any element of the design or infrastructure.
6. Opens the Exeloo public toilet in Victoria Mall 24 hours a day for a trial lasting six months.

2. *The many social, economic and policy factors that impact on homelessness.*

2.1 Employment changes

The landscape for employment across Australia has been changing rapidly and many social indicators show that it is leading factor to increasing social exclusion. Moreland has shared a common experience with many established urban areas in losing much of its manufacturing base, with the closure of Ford car plant in Campbellfield in 2017 bookending a generational change. Many newly created jobs are offered on a casual basis where 60% of workers do not get minimum hours per week, limiting opportunities for household creation and career development

2.2 Poverty and limited housing options

Council is particularly concerned that for those in periods of unemployment, the low level of Newstart Allowance is creating conditions where they are trapped in a cycle of long term poverty. In the year up to December 2018, 4,396 people in Moreland received Newstart. The gap between total weekly income that can be received from Centrelink (including Commonwealth Rent Assistance) and a minimum liveable income (Henderson Poverty Line) is \$174. Council is further concerned that the low Newstart Allowance is driving an increase in homelessness. Victorian Department of Health and Human Services figures show that only 1.1% of private rentals in Moreland are affordable to a couple with two children on Newstart. Back in 2006, 25% of properties had been affordable. For most, access to community or public housing is not a viable option with 3,489 households in the Hume Moreland area on the Victorian Housing Register as of September 2019.

3. *Policies and practices from all levels of government that have a bearing on delivering services to the homeless.*

3.1 Underinvestment in all types of housing provision

Council trusts that the Committee will have received many detailed, evidenced submissions detailing the overwhelming factor sustaining high numbers of our community being without a safe and secure home- the lack of adequate supply across the continuum of emergency; transitional; affordable social and private rental housing. We acknowledge the Victorian Government is making new investments which provide local benefit through, for example, the redevelopment of the public housing estate at Gronn Place in Brunswick West and supporting community housing providers to purchase apartments in new developments through the Social Housing Growth Fund. We further acknowledge that the Commonwealth Government has become a more active player under the various programs run by the National Housing and Investment Corporation. However, it is clear that the current commitments from both levels of governments will fall far short of the existing and future needs.

3.2 Emergency accommodation in Moreland

Council acknowledges the report – A Crisis in Crisis – published by the Northern and Western Homelessness Networks which provides evidence of the appalling living conditions in rooming houses, hostels and motels used for emergency accommodation. Since the report was completed, two motels in Coburg North have closed. These closures are, in one sense, welcome because of the unsafe environments they presented for those living there. However, an unwelcome consequence is that there are no alternative accommodation for homelessness services coming on line. A further policy decision by services to cease providing funds to house people in many of the private rooming houses in the Moreland area means that more and more people needing housing of last resort are turned away. This is a policy issue that concerns both state and federal levels of government as emergency housing provision and the Housing Establishment Fund monies used to pay for short

term accommodation are operated by the states through funding from the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement with the Commonwealth.

### 3.3 The role for local government

Council has been building capacity and referral paths between key staff such as libraries and customer service to improve responses to community members who may be in housing crisis.

During 2017 and 2018 Council was an active partner with the Department of Health and Human Services, Vincent Care Victoria and a range of homelessness and housing service providers in the 'Responding to Rough Sleepers in Extreme Weather' scheme. Up to the end of the hot weather period in 2018, over 36 people in the Moreland area were identified and provided with support and dedicated funding for crisis accommodation and or material aid. Most of these people went on to receive ongoing housing and case management support. The scheme was discontinued by the DHHS even though there was strong support from participating stakeholders.

Local governments are required to review their local laws every ten years and in 2018 Moreland took the opportunity, after consultation with people with lived experience of homelessness and service providers, to introduce exemptions from key clauses that may otherwise have the effect of making rough sleeping an offence. These changes mirrored what the City of Port Phillip has had in place for a number of years and took on board the implications of both the Moreland Human Rights Policy and the Victorian Charter of Human Rights

The relevant clauses in the Moreland Local Law 2018 are:

- Exemption under Camping in Public places (2.8)

A person cannot be issued an infringement for an offence where that person is homeless, in need of secure accommodation, has complex needs or is in need of additional assistance because of a mental or physical disability or illness.

- Furniture in a public place (7.4) A person must not, without a permit, place or cause to be placed any item of furniture in or on a public place.

However, a person cannot be prosecuted 7.4 if the person is homeless or in need of secure accommodation

### 3.4 Local government policy response

In September 2019 Council adopted an Affordable Housing Action Plan (AHAP) as the successor to the Moreland Affordable Housing Strategy 2014-2018. Responding to our research that identifies a current need for more than 4500 affordable homes, the AHAP aims to increase the provision of affordable housing in Moreland through policy, advocacy, applied skills and investment. The AHAP identifies 4 key areas where Council can be effective in increasing the supply of affordable housing:

*Focus Area 1 Facilitate the supply of affordable housing in new developments*

In the context of affordable housing being defined in and made an objective of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*, Council is committed to actions that support the use of its planning functions to increase the provision of affordable housing.

*Focus Area 2 Develop affordable housing on Council land*

Council through the strategic use of the Moreland Housing Reserve supports its arm's length entity Moreland Affordable Housing Ltd to develop affordable housing projects on its land.

*Focus Area 3 Advocate for effective policy and increased investment*

Actions are targeted at all levels of government to change policy, increase investment and enable community, not-for-profit and commercial stakeholders to respond to the housing crisis and increase the provision of affordable housing.

*Focus Area 4 Build community capacity to support people in housing crisis.*

With 800 community members homeless and many more in high housing stress, Council is committed to play its part to support those without safe, affordable homes. Actions seek to provide information, maintain networks, and promote suitable applications to the Community Grants Program.

Should you have any queries regarding this letter please do not hesitate to contact Bernadette Hetherington, Manager Community Wellbeing via email [bhetherington@moreland.vic.gov.au](mailto:bhetherington@moreland.vic.gov.au) or on 03 9240 2463.

Yours sincerely



Bernadette Hetherington  
**MANAGER COMMUNITY WELLBEING**

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