Fact sheet: The role of local government in ending homelessness

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Local governments have an important role to play in helping to end homelessness. As the level of government closest to the community and ofen most directly impacted by homelessness, they are in a unique position to advance a shared community vision to end homelessness.

Communities preventing and solving homelessness

The Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH) recognises that the scale of homelessness in Australia is both preventable and solvable, despite the common misconception that homelessness cannot be ended. Through Advance to Zero (AtoZ), the Alliance works with almost 30 communities to end homelessness across Australia.

AtoZ is demonstrating that it is possible to make homelessness rare, brief and once-off, starting with rough sleeping, one community at a time. Partners of AtoZ are working towards this by adopting the AtoZ Framework, which comprises a range of proven solutions including real-time by-name list data, the Housing First approach, coordinated systems, prevention, improvement, advocacy and other activities. When combined, these activities ensure local housing and homelessness systems are able to support more people into permanent housing than are coming into the system – not just at a point in time, but over time.

Several communities across Australia applying the AtoZ Framework have reached significant milestones, including achieving and maintaining downward shifts in rough sleeping homelessness.

The leading role of local government in Advance to Zero collaborations

Local governments have an important role to play in supporting efforts to end homelessness. They are in a unique position to commit to the ambition of ending homelessness and to lead and support person-centred, place-based, whole-of-community efforts. Local governments can advocate for local solutions and strengthen the collective impact of communities working with people experiencing homelessness. Without local governments playing an active role, we have found that communities struggle to make progress towards ending homelessness.

The role of local government and homelessness varies greatly and can often be contentious if the problem of homelessness is left unaddressed. Across Australia, some are taking a leadership role and proactively supporting AtoZ efforts in their community. This includes contributing to and supporting homelessness services to create by-name data, assisting with collaborative coordination of local services, improving the integration of local service systems and providing community education about what it would take to end homelessness in their local government area.

Others are taking a position that homelessness is not their problem and that they don't have a role or want to be involved. Sometimes local governments hinder ending homelessness efforts by moving people experiencing homelessness on to other locations, obstructing local community efforts or supporting initiatives within the community that are misaligned with best practice or sometimes cruel and counterproductive.

Guidelines for local government

The *Guidelines for local government[1]*, developed by Leanne Mitchell from her 2019 Churchill Fellowship research, offer a framework for how local governments can play an important role in ending homelessness in their community. The guidelines encourage local government to:

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[1] Leanne Mitchell, 2019, Everybody's Business – What local government can do to end homelessness (2019 Jack Brockhoff Foundation Churchill Fellowship to investigate how councils can respond to rough sleeping while balancing responsibilities to the wider community). Available at: https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellow/leanne-mitchell-vic-2019/

Know their local homelessness situation

➜ Collect local data

➜ Listen to the community

➜ Establish a shared definition of homelessness

Lead the narrative and drive collaboration

➜ Nurture community alliances

➜ Embrace lived experience

➜ Involve all parts of government

➜ Collaborate to address welfare, safety and amenity

➜ Communicate and educate for better outcomes

Organise their approach and their workforce

➜ Build a collaborative strategy

➜ Lead good giving initiatives

➜ Structure teams for success

➜ Involve the mayor and senior management

➜ Rethink and realign budgets

Act to prevent and end homelessness

➜ Know what they can do to influence housing supply

➜ Refocus prevention

➜ Bring in libraries and other customer service staff

➜ Know what can be offered in crisis responses.

Recommendations from the AAEH for local government

The AAEH recognises that local government can be among the most effective stakeholders in holding the vision of not just managing homelessness, but ending it. While state governments and homelessness services face various pressures to manage homelessness across broader regions, local governments have the ability – and responsibility – to focus on their local community and its specific needs. This is unique.

However, we have observed that when local governments step up, state-funded systems often pull back, particularly in capital cities. This is an understandable consequence of under-resourced and failing systems, but does not advance efforts to actually solve homelessness.

To support the implementation of strategies to prevent, reduce and end homelessness, the local government sector should:

→ **Declare the ambition to end homelessness:** Sometimes the hardest part about being a leader is being willing to go first. The Adelaide City Council in South Australia and Port Phillip Council in Victoria were almost the first to do this in Australia, and local governments were central to this in the communities that have successfully ended homelessness in other jurisdictions. One of the most successful factors in shifting the focus to ending homelessness, as opposed to managing it, is when local councils have led the debate and declared their ambition to support efforts.

→ **Focus efforts on ending homelessness:** Local government involvement in crisis responses is needed from time to time, but is largely the responsibility of state governments. Local government should take the longer view and focus on bringing communities together to create local Zero Projects, and financially support the backbone efforts of these initiatives. Wherever possible, local government should avoid being a direct provider of homelessness services, and instead focus on the things that it is uniquely suited to, namely as a:
  ◆ Convenor (bringing communities together)
  ◆ Coordinator (service coordination, multi-agency case conferencing)
  ◆ Improver (supporting improvement in systems integration, prevention, etc.)
  ◆ Advocate (transparency in data and outcomes)
  ◆ Funder of the above, including backbone work.

This approach focuses local accountability, builds whole-of-society buy-in and doesn't pull local government into direct service delivery (often with the crisis or emergency response focus). It also reduces the possibility of cost-shifting from state governments.

→ **Develop resources to make it easier:** Agencies like the state-based Local Government Associations, the Australian Local Government Association and the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors (CCCLM) should support the development of tools and resources to make it easier for local governments to engage in and support the work to end homelessness.

→ **Establish a capital cities dashboard:** The CCCLM should work with the AAEH to establish a centralised real-time/monthly homelessness public dashboard for capital cities. This dashboard would outline the status of efforts to end homelessness across these cities to support advocacy initiatives.

Get involved

The AAEH provides a range of support for local governments to be clear and strategic regarding their role in efforts to end homelessness.

The national AtoZ Improvement Community of Practice supports communities across Australia to build their practice and learn from each other. This includes support to local governments to help build their understanding and involvement in AtoZ, and provide links with others. We invite you to contact info@aaeh.org.au if you're interested in getting involved with AtoZ.