Homelessness Policy – Where to now?

Homelessness continues to be a significant social problem. In 2015-16, 279,000 men, women and children sought help from homelessness services at a cost of $763.6m; a decade or so earlier, it was 187,000 individuals at a cost of $383m. The affordability of housing continues to be a major public issue. From time to time, the visibility of homelessness becomes a dramatic public spectacle such as in Melbourne when police cleared encampments from outside Flinders Street Station or the more recent case of the Martin Place clearance of the rough sleepers.

All social policy, including homelessness policy, is shaped by values and principles. These may be explicit or not so explicit. Also, there are principles underpinning policy at the highest level and then there are principles of implementation and practice that shape how policy is turned into actions and activities on the ground. Good high level policy can be poorly implemented and not achieve outcomes to the extent possible. On the other hand, good practice and hard dedicated work by support workers and agencies can be hampered by poor policy and/or insufficient resources.

Finally, external factors in the economy or in other policy areas may have significant adverse impacts on homelessness and overcome modest positive outcomes achieved by sound policy settings and effective implementation and good practice.

A sleeper issue is how social policy is formed and reformed. Policy processes are usually complex, always political and often idiosyncratic. However, a core principle for good policy is a commitment to basing policy on the best evidence available and ongoing social research and development so that policy can advance to meet emerging needs or changing circumstances. In the real world, talking the talk of evidence-based policy comes easily, but too often politicians find walking the walk much more difficult.

Post-World War II developments have been shaped hugely by the formation of the United nations in 1945 and its human rights framework as well as the cooperative policy and development work done under aegis of the United Nations.

Human Rights and Social Policy

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948, declared in article 25(1) that:

> *'... everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services...'*

In 1975 and 1980, Australia signed and ratified the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In doing so, Australia assumed responsibility for

upholding the provisions of the two covenants. The two Treaties articulate standards by which signatories could measure how well they are addressing 'homelessness' and other forms of social exclusion.

In 1991, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR), responsible for monitoring the ICESCR, issued a 'General Comment No. 4' to clarify the terms of the treaty on the right to adequate housing. These comments include: legal security of tenure, the availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure'; 'affordability'; 'accessibility'. 'location', and 'cultural adequacy'.

Of that short list, housing affordability has become a mainstream continuing issue for Australians. The under-investment in social housing over a long period of time has produced a huge backlog of need and population growth and immigration fuels increasing demand.

Australia may be a signatory to an international covenant/treaty, but unless domestic legislation is enacted to incorporate its provisions directly into Australian law, international covenants/treaties are not legally enforceable under Australian law. Neither the ICESCR nor the ICCPR have been incorporated into Australian legislation. Currently, only two states have a legislative version of a Bill of Rights – the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006 and the Human Rights Act 2004 in the Australian Capital Territory. There is a campaign underway in Tasmania for a Tasmanian Human Rights Act. Elsewhere, there have been reports proposing human rights legislation but no legislation has been yet been enacted.

The debate about rights is important but the idea of charters or bills of human rights in Australian legislation remains politically controversial and without a bipartisan consensus. One tension is between 'negative' rights, which emphasise individual freedom and responsibility, and imply constraint on government regulation and intervention, and 'positive' rights which require governments to act to improve the quality of its citizen's lives. Nevertheless, a commitment to human rights, even without state and territory bills of rights, provides a framework and an international benchmark for improvement in policy-making and social administration.

Apart from legislation, legal rights and the potential for litigation as a way of redressing the circumstances of homeless people, in practical policy/political terms it really comes down to social, economic and political reforms. Walshe and Klease (2004) have raised useful arguments about citizenship theory and 'social inclusion' for arguing about rights, responsibilities and entitlements. They suggest at least three advantages: One is that the nomenclature of citizenship may be more acceptable as a bipartisan concept; two, social citizenship operationalises the idea of being part of the community and participation; and three, citizenship arguments strengthen the civil and political rights of marginalised people, such as the homeless, because social citizenship seems to address adequate housing, social security entitlements, acceptable standards of health care and access to education and employment. These arguments derive from the work of T.H. Marshall and focus on

minimum standards and social entitlements, equity and ensuring the full participation of all citizens.

The power of the concept of social exclusion is that it is about more than just material deprivation. Poverty remains an important dimension but social exclusion extends to a range of forms of discrimination and exclusions that may exist.

Beginning in 2008, the Australian Government created a Social Inclusion Board to identify long-term strategies for ending poverty and addressing disadvantage in Australia. In the government statement on social inclusion, *A Stronger, Fairer Australia*, 'reducing the incidence of homelessness' was one of the six priority social inclusion areas.

Australia's program of homeless services has been the envy of other countries on many grounds. However, in retrospect, and from a critical perspective, it must be said that the former Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) was not designed around the concept of social inclusion. The development of our homelessness service system concentrated on helping people who had become homeless. There was little or no early intervention and beyond the exit into some form of secure housing little thought about post-homelessness support. The implicit premise was that once somebody had been assisted into housing, then they were expected to function more or less independently. For many people, this is a perfectly reasonable expectation, but for some people it is not. In terms of social inclusion, the final death blow came in September 2013, when the Prime Minister Tony Abbott scrapped the Social Inclusion Board.

So how can a broad human rights framework and a commitment to social citizenship and social inclusion be translated into principles for policy? By no means an exhaustive list, the following propositions come to mind:

- A reformed social housing sector - major long-term government investment in the development of a social housing sector that should not be thought of as just housing for the most disadvantaged. Perhaps we need to rethink social housing and government investment in social housing as a more open access affordable housing for young people, families and individuals for those periods in their lives when they need more support but not necessarily a long-term or lifetime destination.

- Supportive housing for people recovering from homelessness. In some cases, this is housing linked with support packages for people with high and complex needs; in the case of young people, the support is what young people need as they make the transitions to adulthood, independence and a sustainable livelihood.

- Support and accommodation linked to education, training and supported pathways to employment. Youth Foyers embody this idea, but from a needs and life course perspective, all work with homeless young people needs to be linked to keeping young people engaged in education and training. Other adults experiencing have similar needs.

- A whole of government, integrated place-based approach to prevention, early intervention, service provision and post-homelessness support and reintegration into community life.

Principles of practice and standards of service provision

In the White Paper, *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness* (2008), it was stated that 'the Australian Government will enact new legislation to ensure that people who are homeless receive quality services and adequate support' and that the 'best features of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994 and the Disability Services Act 1986 would be incorporated into the new legislation on homelessness'. A parliamentary committee reaffirmed the need to frame legislation on homelessness after a consultation with key stakeholders. However, there is no legislative successor to the Supported Accommodation & Assistance Act. There was concern in the homelessness sector that without legislation, government commitment was weaker and the rights of homeless clients less secure. However, the new funding arrangement for homeless services as a part of a National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) did not require special program legislation as before. Nor did the development of the homeless service sector in various jurisdictions require Commonwealth legislation. A discussion paper, *A National Quality Framework to support quality services for people experiencing homeless*, was distributed during discussions around Australia in 2011. This effort, terminated following the 2013 election, was based on considerable prior development in the various jurisdictions.

A lot of effort was put in during the 1990s to improve SAAP service standards. The NSW *SAAP Standards* (1998) are a good example. More recently, in 2005, Victoria rolled out Homelessness Assistance Service Standards (HASS) and services were required to accredit against these standards. In 2012, these standards were replaced by a more generic Department of Human Services Standards.

In 2006, the Victorian Government had produced a new *Consumer Charter and Guidelines: Your rights and responsibilities explained*. The Charter set out the rights and responsibilities for clients of homelessness and social housing services funded by the Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS) - rights to crisis assistance, consideration for accommodation and housing based on fair policies, help finding and staying in long-term suitable housing, freedom from discrimination, to be respected, participation in decision-making, the right to make a complaint and help applying for 'income support, employment and health services, educational opportunities and other support services, but a responsibility in turn to be respectful of others.

In 2008, the ACT Government launched an *ACT Homelessness Charter*. In the preamble, the status of the Charter was explained as 'a statement of rights is intended to improve the circumstances of homeless people by raising community awareness and promoting a rights-based approach to homelessness service delivery. The charter is not a law, and the rights it sets out cannot be directly enforced in a court of law. It is a statement of values subject to the laws of the ACT'. The charter covers similar ground as the Victorian charter, perhaps somewhat more strongly stated.

As part of the Tasmanian Homelessness Plan (2010-13: *Coming in from the cold*, Tasmania also developed a Homelessness Charter. The Tasmanian Charter advanced seven key themes

that cross-referenced to practice principles for quality 'user-focused' and 'needs-based' service provision. These were: Dignity and Respect; Health, Safety and Well-being; Privacy and Confidentially; Equity and Fairness; Non-discrimination; Choice and Self-determination.

Many homelessness agencies undertake quality assurance cycles. Three states developed charters, two have human rights legislation. There are various jurisdictional service standards which share much in common. Despite a lack of a National Quality Framework and consistency in the various jurisdictions, there is no endemic problem in the practical work with homeless clients in Specialist Homelessness Services on the ground. But, what would move practice to a new level of effectiveness is a 'deliverology' approach where homelessness-related data is used in real-time to improve outcomes. In the UK, Michael Barber headed up the Delivery Unit under the Blair Government, which in 2001 was tasked with ensuring that reforms were achieved and outcomes delivered. Deliverology was originally a perjorative term but it has since been embraced to describe the outcomes improvement methodology - clear objectives, targeted resources, close data-driven attention to practice and a focus on improving outcomes in situ. By contrast, the homelessness client data that is collected is primarily about accountability and system management. The NSW Government's commitment to 12 key Premier's Priorities – which include 'making housing more affordable', 'reducing youth homelessness' and 'reducing domestic violence' – is an Australian exemplar of 'deliverology' in action for other jurisdictions to follow.

The strategic goal of ending homelessness

A major issue of a policy area such as homelessness is setting appropriate long-term goals and then having the means and the political bipartisan commitment to see the long-term through. At one level, homelessness is not a hotly contested issue but many of the best initiatives get shelved when governments change.

When Australia began responding to the increasing incidence of homeless that had become evident in the early 1980s, the various state and territory reports were arguing for homelessness services to meet the burgeoning need for supported accommodation. This was a landmark achievement and it produced one of the best homelessness service systems in the world. The preamble to the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act (1994) spoke to 'the need to redress social inequalities', about the aim of 'reduction of poverty' and 'the amelioration of the consequences of poverty for individuals' (aka homeless persons). The policy approach at this time was about 'amelioration of the consequences of poverty' or the homelessness of clients of SAAP, not ending homelessness.

In the United States, where homelessness is more prevalent and street sleeping more evident, the National Alliance to End Homelessness, a new non-government advocacy platform put out a call to end homelessness in the US in ten years. The clock started ticking from about 2002. This was a bold aspirational goal. Hundreds of cities and towns adopted this objective and started to craft plans to achieve the end of homelessness. Looking back on the US experience what lessons can we draw? Clearly, the end of homelessness has not been achieved

although small decreases in the point in time counts of homeless persons possibly suggest a positive impact. On the other hand, it must be remembered that in the US context residency in rooming houses or trailer parks is not counted as homelessness but is accepted as an affordable housing option. Maybe some people have moved across into this kind of accommodation. Not rough sleeping but in terms of an Australian definition of homelessness still a situation of homelessness. Does that mean the goal of ending homelessness in 10 years was over-reach? Yes, but with the caveat that the homelessness response was terribly under-resourced, and in the United States, it was not possible to roll out a national strategic plan.

In 2010, before the results of the effort could be publicly assessed, the US federal government did a 'tactical reboot' on the plan to end homelessness by redefining the objective as the goal of putting an 'end to chronic and veteran homelessness'. What has been achieved is a substantial growth in the provision of supportive housing. But, virtually nothing has been done to implement prevention and early intervention strategies. In terms of major national policy change, significant structural reform is very difficult in a country where a culture of possessive individualism is so pervasive; where the very idea of universal health care is a controversial issue and where real wages corrected for inflation have been falling or flat-lined for more than 40 years.

In 2008, the National Youth Commission Inquiry on Youth Homelessness called for 'ending youth homelessness by 2030', and a National Framework and National Homelessness Action Plan with 'specific targets over the short, medium and long-term' and 'strategies that set out realistically how targets will be achieved'. Over the past decade, many of Australia's leading charities and organisations in the homelessness sector have added their voice to the call to end homelessness.

While, the 2008 White Paper did not explicitly talk of ending homelessness, it did for the first time set a target of halving homelessness by 2020 with the implication that over the long term the implicit gaol was eliminating homelessness. The White Paper framework of 'turning off the tap', 'improving and expanding services' and 'breaking the cycle' if implemented systematically and systemically would conceivably progress towards to that stated strategic goal. The election of the Abbott Government ended the relatively higher policy priority homelessness had under the Labor Government. However, even before that, after a good start, no national strategy plan was developed and no new investment went into 'turning off the tap'. Both sides of politics must bear some of the responsibility for the failure to make a measurable difference in reducing homelessness. Our collective national response to homelessness needs to be rebooted and rebuilt.

In Summary

So, what needs to be done?

- Serious new investment in early intervention and prevention. Without this, reducing homelessness cannot be achieved. For different sub-cohorts within the homelessness

population such as youth or families and women escaping domestic violence, this will involve some quite different approaches and models.

- A 'whole of government' strategic approach to homelessness that brings mainstream agencies, whether administrated by the Commonwealth or the states and territories, into the national effort - new models that go beyond just what SHS agencies are funded to do – and a shift to place-based collective impact models.

- A COAG supported nationally cooperative effort drawing on some of the best work being done in various jurisdictions thus more effectively expending the public funds available for responding to homelessness.

- Adoption of the Michael Barber's 'deliverology' approach to improving outcomes across a range of service delivery areas relevant to homelessness, including, housing, community services, education, health and justice.

- The development of a youth-specific and youth-appropriate social housing sector as both a preventative measure, but also as a way of delivering rapid rehousing for young people who have become homeless. All youth housing and homelessness hubs should be foyer-like and supportive of education, training and employment pathways.

- A rethink social housing and a move away from social housing as 'welfare' housing – and major social housing investment and policies such as taxation reform and mandated social housing as part of all private housing developments.

- A *National Strategy Plan for Ending Homelessness*, supported by both sides of politics and designed as a long-term effort to end homelessness.

To paraphrase what a number of historical personalities have said: "The measure of a civilization or society is how well it treats its most vulnerable citizens". We all might usefully reflect on how that profound thought could be operationalised to end homelessness in Australia?

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