

Implementation of the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness in Western Australia

Report 13 – October 2012

Background

In early 2009 Western Australia (WA) and the Commonwealth signed the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (the Agreement). Through the Agreement, governments jointly committed \$135 million over four years to address homelessness.

The causes of homelessness are complex and linked to people's personal, social and financial circumstances. In WA, domestic and family violence is the most common cause. Broader economic factors also contribute to homelessness. In particular the growth of the resources sector and the associated population growth have had a significant impact on the availability of affordable housing. WA developed an Implementation Plan comprising 20 programs delivered by 71 not-for-profit organisations to carry out the Agreement.

This audit asked if WA met its obligations under the Agreement and if it made a difference for homeless people. We answered three questions:

- Is WA meeting its funding and reporting commitments as agreed in the Agreement?
- Are programs being delivered as agreed in WA's Implementation Plan?
- Are programs making a positive difference for homeless people in WA?

Audit Conclusion

The State has met its funding commitments. At 30 June 2012, which is three years into the four year plan, WA has met its co-contribution commitment under the Agreement and the total \$135.1 million of joint funds is on track to be spent by the end of the Agreement.

The State has also met its reporting commitments to the Commonwealth. However, reporting to the WA Parliament on the result of WA's investment in the Agreement has been limited.

All programs have been delivered as agreed in the Implementation Plan. In 2010-11, most programs met or exceeded client targets and the programs have made a positive difference to the people using them. However, it is not possible to demonstrate that the programs will achieve WA's overall objective of reducing the number of

homeless people by seven per cent. This is because the impact of the programs cannot be isolated from other initiatives and broader economic circumstances.

The planning for provision of housing could have been better. Seven programs are designed to get clients into stable housing and sustain this for at least 12 months. These programs rely on access to suitable and affordable housing. However, a shortfall in available housing has put achieving long term accommodation outcomes at risk.

The Agreement's six month timeframe to get programs started was overly ambitious and could not be met. It was expected that the Implementation Plan would be developed and programs started by July 2009. But it took another six to 12 months before most programs started. Recruiting and training 100 plus staff state-wide, and setting up new systems were particularly challenging in the short timeframe. The lack of availability of housing for workers presented an additional barrier for programs in the Kimberley and the Pilbara.

Cooperation has been effective between government and non-government organisations delivering homelessness programs under the Agreement. However, the Government's guiding principle for service delivery is a linked up homelessness support system. This has not yet been achieved.

Key Findings

- The Department for Child Protection (DCP) effectively engaged not-for-profit organisations and other government agencies to develop and deliver WA's Plan for the implementation of the Agreement. DCP developed an Implementation Plan comprising 20 programs delivered state-wide by 71 not-for-profit organisations.
- The State has met its funding obligation under the Agreement. It has committed \$68.4 million or 51 per cent of the \$135.1 million Commonwealth/State joint funding. At 30 June 2012, the State had spent \$96.4 million (71 per cent of the total funds). Of this expenditure, \$50.2 million was for support programs and \$46.2 million for capital projects. The State is on track to spend all funds by the end of the Agreement at 30 June 2013.



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- The State has met its reporting commitments under the Agreement to provide annual reports to the Commonwealth on the performance of programs and achievements against targets and on program expenditure. However, no such information has been provided to the WA Parliament. This means there is limited visibility at state level on results of the WA's investment in the Agreement.
- Achievement of the Agreement's main objective of reducing homelessness by seven per cent cannot be demonstrated as it is not possible to isolate its specific impact from other initiatives and broader economic circumstances (such as the lack of affordable housing and population growth). Another complication is the Agreement's reliance on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data to measure reductions in homelessness. Recent changes to the way the ABS measures homelessness has reduced the 2006 homelessness figure for WA from 13 391 to 8 277 (38 per cent).
- It is also not possible to say if the 20 programs reduced homelessness for clients assisted by them. This is because it would be necessary to know how many individuals became and remain housed over the four year life of the Plan and even beyond. At present DCP does not have reliable information on the length of clients' tenancies so their level of homelessness cannot yet be determined.
- Of the 20 programs, 16 have targets for the number of clients assisted of which 12 met or exceeded their targets in 2010-11. Four programs did not meet their targets due to delays in program starts. DCP estimates that if primary clients' family members and dependents are included, around 6 000 people benefited from the 16 programs in 2010-11. In 2010-11, 28 per cent of all clients assisted were Aboriginal people (681). This was well above the overall 11 per cent target for this client group.
- Progress reports and case studies from not-for-profit organisations and third party interviews with clients show that programs make a positive difference for the majority of people who use them. Clients said that getting a house or not losing it, being reconnected to family, access to mainstream services and getting one-on-one support is what made the difference.
- The State had six months to set up \$135.1 million worth of programs and capital projects. This was an unrealistic timeframe and was not met. The delays resulted in some programs not meeting targets for 2009-10 and 2010-11.
- Having access to suitable housing for clients is critical to program success, but the provision of housing was not thoroughly planned. Although the Housing Authority allocated 1 940 dwellings for programs over the four years of the Plan, it could not guarantee these would be available where and when clients needed them. Private rental and other options such as return to family, house sharing and boarding houses were expected to provide half of the housing. The lack of suitable housing means that clients cannot be housed. The lack of affordable private rentals is a particular problem in the North West.
- The Agreement has improved relationships between government agencies and non-government organisations delivering programs for homeless people. The State's guiding principle for service delivery is a system that links services for homeless people and makes access to these easy. However, this has not yet been achieved and there is no certainty that improved relationships will continue after June 2013 when the Agreement and programs finish. The uncertainty over the continuation of the Agreement also affects staff and clients as there are no plans in place for phasing out programs.