DRAFT HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

Director Community Lisa Dempster

Community Wellbeing

Officer Recommendation

That Council:

Endorses the Draft Homelessness Strategy (Attachment 1) for further community engagement from October 2023 until February 2024.

Refers additional funding recommendations contained in the draft strategy for consideration as part of the 2024/25 budgeting process.

REPORT

Executive Summary

The strategy aims to address the multi-faceted issue of homelessness in Merri-bek, encompassing identifying needs and gaps, direct Council responses, and early intervention and prevention measures. It aligns with critical Council plans and policies, including the Council Plan 2021-2025, and draws upon lived experiences and community organisations for a well-rounded approach. The draft strategy also recommends a budget allocation to support its implementation in an ongoing way. In October, further engagement will be pursued on the draft. A detailed action plan will be developed to effectively implement this comprehensive strategy, pending Council's approval of the initial draft and associated budget allocation.

The homelessness landscape in Merri-bek is rapidly evolving due to financial instability, family violence, and housing crises. Official data likely underrepresents the scope of the issue, and the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change have further complicated the situation. Given these complexities, the strategy underscores the need for a multi-faceted approach that includes response, long-term intervention, and prevention efforts. It emphasises community engagement, partnerships, and advocacy to make homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring.

Previous Council Decisions

Notice of Motion Merri-bek Council Homelessness Strategy – 10 May 2023

That Council:

1. *Develop a homelessness strategy that encompasses the following:*
   - *identification of needs and gaps in support and service for those experiencing or at risk of homelessness in Merri-bek*
   - *identifies and develops direct Council responses to homeless community members*
   - *identifies early intervention and prevention strategy responses to people at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Merri-bek.*
2. *Draws on the lived experience of people who have experienced homelessness and community support organisations connected to Merri-bek.*
3. *Refers this item for consideration as an action under Theme 3: A healthy and caring Merri-bek in the 2023-2024 draft Council Action Plan*
4. *Requests a draft Homelessness Strategy be presented to Council for consideration in October 2023.*

1. Policy Context

Merri-bek City Council's Plan 2021-2025 has been integrated with the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan (MPHWP). This document outlines the Council's and the community's vision for the future.

The Draft Homelessness Strategy (**Attachment 1**) supports the delivery of the Council Plan through the following themes, strategies and actions:

Theme 3: Healthy and Caring Merri-bek

Strategy 3.11: To support service coordination, information provision and community advocacy for people experiencing insecure housing

Action 63: Enable leisure centres to use facilities to support homeless people

Action 64: Develop and implement the Council rough sleeping protocol

Action 65: Support service coordination, information provision and community advocacy for people experiencing insecure housing

Action 76: Continue to support Merri-bek Affordable Housing Ltd Partnership

Action 84: Continue to carry out research, technical studies, strategic planning, partnership building, engagement planning and affordable housing to guide the future of central Coburg

Action 152: Continue to implement the affordable housing action plan

Action 178: Establish homelessness assertive outreach program and service coordination with local homelessness and community service providers

Merri-bek City Affordable Housing Action Plan (AHAP) 2022-2026

The Action plan identifies the housing continuum, stating that the most urgent need is clearly among those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Homelessness policy responses are essential, but Council is also committed to supporting housing supply through the AHAP.

2. Background

According to the ABS census (2021) for Merri-bek, there were 704 people experiencing homelessness in Merri-bek. However, this is likely to be an undercount. Data from the Hume-Merri-bek homeless access and intake points do not account for those who sought services but were deemed ineligible. The data collection also coincided with COVID-19 lockdown measures in Melbourne, which may have influenced the results.

Name	Sleeping rough	Supported accommodation and boarding Houses and temp Lodgings,	Stay temporary + Crowding	Total
Merri-bek 2021	**91**	**378**	**235**	**704**

Merri-bek City Council is working to end homelessness through a 'Functional Zero' approach. This aims to respond to rough sleepers to make homelessness rare, brief, and non-reoccurring by keeping the number of homeless people lower than the housing placement rate. An assertive outreach worker to assist rough sleepers into housing is included in the draft budget for 2023-2025.

Ensuring we have a coordinated and holistic approach is critical to effectively addressing the complexities and diversity of homelessness. This strategy provides a way to unify Council's efforts across the organisation and to consider further initiatives to prevent, intervene and respond to homelessness in our community.

3. Issues

Risk Factors and causes of homelessness

Maintaining housing is crucial in addressing homelessness. Preventing homelessness requires strategies including managing tenancy, planning for emergencies, and promoting economic and social participation through vocational support and community engagement. There is not one cause of homelessness. According to the Council for Homeless Persons, Victoria's most recent data on homelessness was collected at the 2021 Census and published in 2023. The main reasons for people experiencing homelessness in Victoria were:

Financial difficulties (46%)
Escaping family violence (44%)
Housing crisis (34%)

Emergency accommodation

This is a temporary solution that government, non-profit, and private agencies provide for those facing immediate homelessness. Council supports advocacy efforts like the "A Crisis in Crisis" campaign by North and Western Homelessness Networks, which recommends a shift toward safer, publicly funded crisis accommodation. Council works with local laws and various stakeholders, such as local services, to improve the quality and safety of existing crisis accommodations and explores partnerships for developing new options. It may also offer facilities or land for such developments.

Health Lens

Access to appropriate, long-term housing in good condition is essential for a person's health and well-being. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners recognise housing and homelessness as major social determinants of health and how health can impact housing stress. Evidence shows life expectancy disparities between those with stable housing and those without.

Lived experience

Including the lived experience of homelessness in council planning is a vital component that fosters a more empathetic and practical approach to policy development and service delivery. By incorporating the insights and perspectives of those who have directly experienced homelessness, council planning can align more closely with this community's actual needs and challenges. It ensures that strategies and initiatives are not only theoretically sound but are also practically relevant and responsive to the unique circumstances of homelessness.

Climate Emergency

Climate change exacerbates the challenges faced by homeless individuals and introduces additional environmental stresses and hazards. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and increased natural disasters pose significant threats to those without stable housing, who often cannot adapt or find shelter. These conditions can lead to health crises or fatalities, and climate change can indirectly contribute to homelessness through economic instability and resource access, particularly in vulnerable communities. The destruction of housing through storms or flooding can also displace people. Climate change complicates the homelessness issue, necessitating comprehensive, adaptive solutions.

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted homelessness in Merri-Bek City Council, underscoring the need for Emergency Housing, housing supply gaps and wraparound support. The economic fallout, including job losses and financial instability, placed many at risk of homelessness. The pandemic also strained shelter capacities and disrupted support networks, as social distancing reduced available spaces and many essential services were limited or closed. Increased mental health issues due to isolation and fear further contributed to homelessness.

Human Rights Consideration

The implications of this report have been considered in accordance with the requirements of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.

Certain groups are particularly structurally disadvantaged, making them more susceptible to experiencing homelessness, which can seriously affect a person's mental and physical health, security, and safety. These groups include students and young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, migrants and refugees, people with physical disabilities and mental illness, single parents, older people, LGBTIQ+ people, people leaving prison, and women fleeing domestic violence.

Gender Impact Assessment

Homelessness has varying degrees of impact on different segments of the population, with certain groups being more susceptible to a range of factors. Data from the Victorian Housing Register and the 2016 censuses show that the demographic experiencing the most rapid increase in housing crisis and in need of assistance comprises single women aged 55 and above. Notable among these priority groups are women and children who are victims of family violence. To address our requirements under the Gender Equality Act we will conduct gender impact assessments and apply a gender and equity lens to inform the development of this strategy's actions.

4. Community consultation and engagement

Several targeted conversations were initiated to help guide the first draft of this strategy. The Northern Local Area Services Networker – Housing Sector was consulted to provide support in terms of mapping of prevention and early intervention activity within the homelessness sector and activities which relate to the drivers of homelessness. The Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) provided early advice Council engaged with the Council to Homeless Persons (the peak body for the homeless sector) to ensure our documents reflected the lived experience of people who had previously been homeless

Future Community Engagement – post-October Council meeting

Following endorsement of the Draft Homelessness Strategy (**Attachment 1**), targeted engagement will be undertaken from October 2023 until February 2024.

This will involve, and not limited to, ensuring those with lived experience provide their stories of experiencing homelessness and/or rough sleeping. The Northern Local Area Service Network (NLASN) housing services will be consulted alongside the Merri-bek City council Affordable Housing Reference Group and other Councils Advisory and Reference Groups.

5. Officer Declaration of Conflict of Interest

Council officers involved in the preparation of this report have no conflict of interest in this matter.

6. Financial and Resources Implications

The preparation for the draft report, targeted conversations and engagement are being met within current resourcing. The subsequent final endorsement of the strategy, including actions, will have financial and resourcing implications.

7. Implementation

A detailed action plan will be developed alongside the final Strategy that will guide the implementation of the final strategy. This will include a monitoring and evaluation framework.

Attachment/s

1 Draft Homelessness strategy D23/423944