



Merri-bek
City Council

Homelessness Strategy

2023 - 2027



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1. Vision

“Improve the outcomes for people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness in Merri-bek”

2. Introduction

Homelessness is a phenomenon that could affect anyone at any phase of life. Merri-bek City Council (Council) supports the dignity and human rights of people experiencing homelessness, recognising that homelessness and rough sleeping result from systemic failures. Having a home is a fundamental human right and need. It enables individuals to participate positively in society and maintain their health and well-being. Homelessness is not an inevitable social issue. Research shows that insecure and unsuitable housing can lead to or exacerbate personal health challenges, including mental ill-health, substance use or other health issues.

3. Council Role

Council takes a multifaceted approach to addressing homelessness, focusing on human rights, well-being, and public health. 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. Instead of directly providing services, Council refers to specialised support for homeless individuals, advocates for their rights, disseminates information to the community, and supports prevention and intervention programs. Crucially, the Council collaborates and engages in partnerships and networks to optimise these efforts.

Functional Zero to address rough sleeping

Rough sleeping is the most visible form of homelessness. It can take many forms, including people sleeping in cars, tents, abandoned buildings and other locations, often on council-managed land. Council is implementing a service coordination approach called Functional Zero to address rough sleeping. Functional Zero is a target, methodology and movement towards ending homelessness. A ‘functional zero’ approach to homelessness is achieved when the number of people entering homelessness and currently homeless is less than the average six-month housing placement rate. This means homelessness is rare, brief, and non-reoccurring. The methodology involves coordinating services in the Merri-bek area who work in homelessness and refer to the homeless service system. The services collectively work together to implement a by-name list. This is a constantly updated list of people not yet in long-term safe and affordable housing.

4. Context

Defining homelessness

While there is no single definition of homelessness, someone experiencing homelessness could be a person who:

- Is in an improvised dwelling, tent or sleeping rough; or
- Has no security of tenure, e.g. temporary lodgings, supported accommodation or couch surfing
- Does not have control of and space for social relations, e.g., severely crowded dwellings and does not have access to suitable alternatives.

According to the ABS census (2021) for Merri-bek, there were 704 people experiencing homelessness in Merri-bek. However, this is likely an undercount. Data from the Hume- Merri-bek 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

Source: Census, 2021

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, the main reasons for people experiencing homelessness in Victoria were:

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

Who is homeless?

Certain groups experience particular structural disadvantages, making them more susceptible to experiencing homelessness. This 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, newly arrived communities, migrants and refugees, people with disabilities and mental illness,

single parents, older people, LGBTIQ+ people, people leaving prison, and women experiencing family violence

Tailoring support and prevention requires a significant understanding of these demographics and risk factors. Understanding the demographics and risk factors associated with homelessness is crucial to tailor appropriate responses, support, and prevention efforts. Homeless individuals may often fall into multiple priority categories, making their situations even more challenging. Homelessness has a cumulative detrimental impact on an individual's health and wellbeing. The longer an individual experiences homelessness, the greater the likelihood that they will have ongoing complex needs.

4.1. Strategic Direction

Each strategic direction aims to enhance outcomes for individuals experiencing homelessness and fits into three categories: response, early intervention, and homelessness prevention.

Strategic Direction 1: Facilitate a coordinated and compassionate response that respects the human rights of people sleeping rough

Council aims to guide staff on how to respond to rough sleepers in a way that is effective and consistent with our obligations under the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.

We support rough sleepers by:

- Funding assertive outreach to support pathways into stable and secure housing for rough sleepers
- Coordinating homeless and other affiliated services with a collective impact approach, such as Functional Zero to support people from homelessness and into long-term, stable housing
- Educating staff and the community on homelessness and how best to respond to people sleeping rough
- Ensuring a human rights and health equity approach to rough sleepers in public space
- Listening to and advocating for people who have a lived experience of homelessness
- Advocating to improve the quality and availability of short-term crisis accommodation

Strategic Direction 2: Support early intervention for people who are vulnerable or at risk to avoid homelessness

Council is committed to supporting early intervention activities people at risk for homelessness. Through referral to programs and services, Council aims to stabilise the housing situation of at-risk people and provide them with the tools to sustain it.

We support people at risk with early intervention by:

- Streamlining information and referral processes at key touchpoints within the organisation, such as Child Care Services, Youth service, Aged and Community support, Maternal and Child Health centres, Customer service and community centres

- Undertaking advocacy activities to support tenants' rights and increased support for people at risk of homelessness

Strategic Direction 3: Investigate partnerships with prevention programs to prevent risk factors that lead to homelessness.

Prevention strategies aim to proactively reduce the likelihood of homelessness by addressing its root causes. Merri-bek City Council is key in promoting community programs and initiatives that could support homelessness prevention.

We will support the prevention of homelessness by:

- Promoting Maternal Child Health and youth programs that aim to support stable foundations for families, thereby reducing long-term risk factors associated with homelessness
- Promoting preventative initiatives including employment opportunities through rental information, financial assistance
- Providing libraries and neighbourhood houses as community hubs that provide safe and welcoming spaces offering referrals, administration assistance and crucial resources and information that can empower individuals to improve their life circumstances
- Providing grants to community organisations that focus on homelessness prevention and early intervention
- Providing that accurate and timely information is readily available at these touchpoints is particularly important for individuals exiting publicly funded systems like child welfare, Centrelink, corrections, and mental health facilities, as they are at higher risk of homelessness

5. Principles

Housing First and wrap-around services

Council recognises the complex roots of homelessness; the Housing First model emphasises securing stable housing before addressing other needs through 'wraparound' services.

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.

Health Lens

Access to appropriate, long-term housing in good condition is essential for a person's health and well-being. Housing and homelessness is a major social determinant of health and how health can impact housing stress. Evidence shows life expectancy disparities between those with stable housing and those without.

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.

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.

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6. Strategic context and alignment

Merri-bek City Council Community Vision

The Council Plan includes the Merri-bek Community Vision, an Imagine Merri-bek Community Panel developed through deliberative engagement. We work together proactively and transparently to continue to create a vibrant, safe, healthy, resilient, innovative and regenerative community.

Merri-bek City Council Plan 2021-2025 (integrated Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan)

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 Homelessness Strategy 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

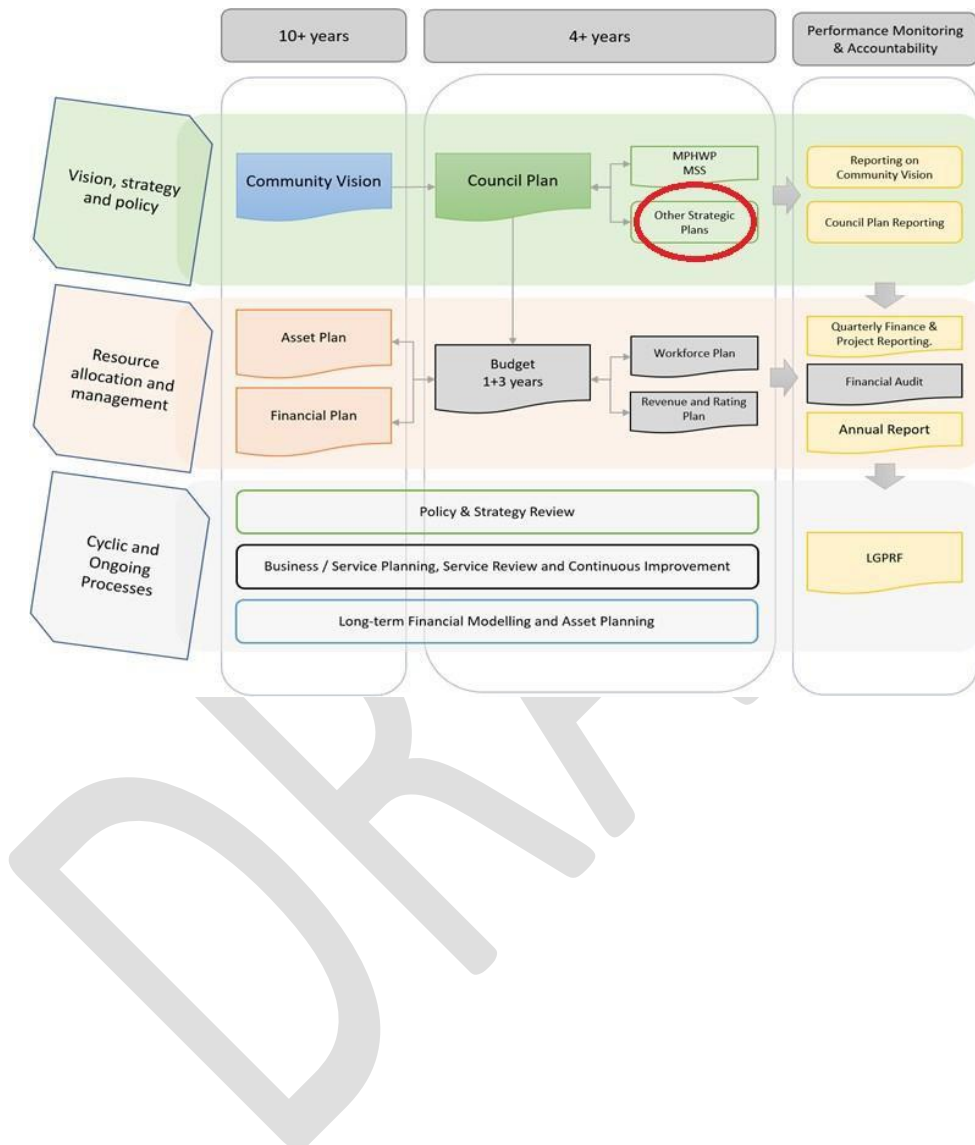
Merri-bek City Affordable Housing Action Plan (AHAP) 2022-2026

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 important, but Council is also committed to supporting housing supply through the AHAP.

Integrated planning framework

The Homelessness strategy is part of Council's Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework. Figure 2 shows where the Plan sits within the Framework. It is placed within 4-year strategic plans that support the delivery of the Merri-bek Community Vision and Council Plan.

Figure 2 Merri-bek Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework



7. Shared responsibility

The primary role of addressing homelessness sits at a Federal and State level, given their legislated roles in relation to housing provision and homelessness support programs.

Federal Government

The Commonwealth Government has historically had the lead role in responding to homelessness through funding for housing supply and homelessness support services, initially through the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA) and the Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) program, and more recently through the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness and the National Affordable Housing Agreement. The first National Homelessness Strategy was developed in 2001 and followed by the 'Road Home' Homelessness Strategy of 2008, representing the most significant investment ever in response to homelessness. From 1 July 2018, the current funding arrangements enable homelessness services to be delivered through the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA), which includes \$4.6 billion in Commonwealth Rent Assistance (a supplementary payment to people on low incomes in the rental market paid via Centrelink) and \$1.5 billion in payments via State and Territory governments.

- National Housing and Homelessness Plan: A 10-year Australian government strategy in development for safe and affordable housing and homelessness response, outlining short, medium, and long-term reforms. The plan aims to understand better Australia's housing and homelessness issues and the factors contributing to housing insecurity.
- Productivity Commission inquiry into the economic impacts of mental health: The inquiry's focus on understanding the economic effects of mental health can indirectly relate to homelessness by shedding light on the factors that contribute to mental health issues and their consequences. Though not a direct solution to homelessness, understanding these economic impacts can contribute to a more holistic approach by recognising mental health's role in housing stability and well-being. Housing affordability, social support, and healthcare access also influence the complexity of homelessness.

State Government

- 2018 Victorian Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan: The state's long-term plan to reduce rough sleeping, including early intervention and coordinated services, with many initiatives ceasing in July 2022.
- 2023 Victorian State Budget for Homelessness: Allocates \$35.9 million in 2023-24 and \$134 million over four years for housing and support, plus \$3.75 million for specific initiatives. Includes \$20 million for a 3.3% increase in community sector funding, with concerns expressed by organisations about the need for more funding.
- From Homelessness to Home Program: A program designed to support the transition from homelessness to stable housing, providing tailored assistance.

- State Care in Victoria for Homelessness Prevention: Focuses on preventing youth homelessness, offering 'safe at home' programs, and collaborating with services to address root causes like family violence and state care experiences.
- Support for Young People in Out-of-Home Care: Previously, individuals aged out of the system at 18, leading to homelessness for over a third of them within a year. The policy has been updated to assist those up to 21, with a \$500 allowance in Victoria. Advocates call for more federal aid, including changes to the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA), and emphasise additional support to prevent homelessness among these individuals.
- Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System: An investigation into mental health in Victoria, including the connection between mental health issues and homelessness.
- Homes for Victorians: A policy to ensure all have access to affordable, safe, and sustainable housing.
- Victoria's Big Housing Build: An initiative to boost housing construction across Victoria, focusing on affordability and accessibility for all residents.

Local Government

The primary responsibility of responding to and addressing homelessness resides with state and federal governments. In addition, the State and Commonwealth governments are responsible for increasing the supply of Social and Affordable Housing and funding homelessness services. Increasingly, local government are taking a more active role in addressing homelessness due to the urgent need for action.

Legislatively, local governments operate within a framework defined by acts such as the Local Government Act 2020 and The Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 in Victoria. This legislation provides a mandate for Councils to improve community health and wellbeing, guiding Council's approach to homelessness.

Specialist Homelessness Services

Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) refers to agencies that support individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness, funded under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement by state and federal governments. Various not-for-profit organisations administer these services through a centralised access point called 'Opening Doors' in Victoria. Beyond housing assistance, SHS offers an extensive array of general support services. These include case management, material aid, meals, laundry and shower facilities, and referrals to specialised services as needed, such as health, mental health, drug and alcohol, and legal services.

Some of the most significant gaps in service provision come from the length of the support period to get more people through a support program. Very few long-term support programs are available where case management support is ongoing for a significant time. This means, particularly for people with high and complex needs, that housing they may have been able to secure can be at risk if their support needs are not being met, contributing to the cycle of homelessness.

Other Related service systems

Various service systems support homelessness prevention and intervention. The Family Violence Service system offers referral and accommodation options to mitigate homelessness, particularly for women, and collaborates with homelessness services for coordinated support. The mental health system provides treatment and support for mental health issues, another significant contributor to homelessness. In the realm of education, early intervention programs help disadvantaged young people re-engage with educational pathways, offering skills courses, specialist centres, and mentoring programs. These educational services are accessible to those who are homeless or at risk. For young people transitioning out of out-of-home care, programs are available to support their independent living to prevent homelessness during this critical period.

8. Monitoring, evaluating and review

Monitoring and evaluation

This strategy will undergo periodic review and updates as required. Monitoring and evaluation are crucial to understanding the strategy's impact and intended outcomes. This will be conducted with working groups, critical services in the homelessness space, and feedback from rough sleepers' experiences.

Council will receive reports detailing the progress and status of the strategy, as well as any significant changes in the policy environment. In the event of substantial alterations to the Council's policy positions or the broader policy landscape, a new strategy will be formulated to address the evolving circumstances effectively.

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