CITY OF BALLARAT
Social Policy Position Statement

Homelessness

Context

The City of Ballarat recognises that access to safe and secure housing is a human right that has a direct impact on health and wellbeing, and plays a critical role in education, employment, and safety outcomes. In addition to being physically sound, housing must also be affordable, accessible (available to low-income households at a location that allows them to travel to work, school, and the community), and of a suitable size, warmth, and dryness.

People experience homelessness when they do not have accommodation that is safe, secure, or appropriate. The top three reasons for people seeking homelessness and housing assistance in Victoria are financial difficulties, escaping family violence, and impacts of the housing crisis.[1]

Homelessness is a complex systemic problem that requires a collective approach from all levels of government, service agencies and the wider community to support those most at risk. Ultimately, prevention is key to reducing homelessness, and this is where councils are primarily able to apply their support.

Defining Homelessness

Homelessness does not discriminate and can occur to anyone at any time throughout their lives. It is a complex issue often brought upon by a sudden change in life circumstances and can take many forms.

There is no single definition of homelessness. Mackenzie and Chamberlain's definition of homeless was adopted by the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness in 2001 and is widely used within the homelessness sector.[2]

This definition includes three categories in recognition of the diversity of homelessness:

- **Primary homelessness:** People without conventional accommodation, who may be sleeping rough, squatting, sleeping in cars and in improvised dwellings.
- **Secondary homelessness**: People with no secure accommodation, moving between various forms of temporary shelter (including staying with friends, relatives and in emergency accommodation).

- **Tertiary homelessness:** People living temporarily in hotels, motels and in private rooming houses with shared facilities, no security of tenure, and no alternative accommodation options.

More recently, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) developed a definition of homelessness to complement the Census of Population and Housing, and focuses on the lack of one or more elements that represent a 'home'.[3]

According to the ABS statistical definition, a person may be considered homeless if their current living arrangement:

- is in a dwelling that is inadequate;
- has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- does not allow them to have control of, and access to, space for social relations.

Impacts of homelessness

Some of the individual impacts of homelessness may include:[4,8]

- exposure to violence and victimisation
- development of chronic health conditions
- increased likelihood of mental illness
- poor physical health (dental, nutritional, substance use)
- higher rates of premature mortality, disability and chronic illness
- additional barriers when accessing essential services
- exposure to stigma and discrimination

The City of Ballarat's current role in relation to homelessness

After consideration of the accountability, capacity and relationships, it has been determined that the City of Ballarat has a **shared** role in relation to homelessness in Ballarat.

	Shared: The City of Ballarat is one many responsible stakeholders.	- Accountable for some aspects - Some capacity to act - Moderate City of Ballarat role required to improve community wellbeing outcomes.

Planner/ regulator
- The City of Ballarat undertakes strategic planning to support the sustainable growth of our city including affordable and diverse housing options.
- The Housing Strategy 2023-2041 provides the City of Ballarat with a framework for managing population and housing growth. As a planning authority, The City of Ballarat has a responsibility to plan to accommodate housing growth for at least a 15-year period across the municipality. This Housing Strategy will take into consideration our current housing capacity and proposes a longer-term approach to planning for housing.

- Implementation of the City of Ballarat [Homelessness Protocol 2022](#).
- The City of Ballarat will work closely with agencies and support services who assist people experiencing homelessness to access housing pathways, health services and other essential services.
- Within the guidelines of [Community Local Law 2017](#), City of Ballarat will work to ensure that our public spaces are safe and will call upon Victoria Police to intervene if a safety risk is perceived.

Advocate

- Engages with state government and other key stakeholders (including developers and affordable housing providers) to provide leadership in addressing the provision of social and affordable housing options in Ballarat.
- Continues to engage with and actively encourage the private sector and state government regarding opportunities for pilot projects in relation to social and affordable housing.
- Advocates for more effective planning mechanisms to better facilitate housing affordability and foster innovative models to deliver affordable housing.
- Advocate for a Housing First approach and support the work of local homelessness services through the Central Highlands Homelessness Alliance.

Educator

- Ensures Council Officers are equipped with appropriate knowledge and resources to respond effectively and consistently to reports of homelessness and/or rough sleeping in the municipality.
- Monitors the extent of homelessness in the City of Ballarat.
- Provides information to people experiencing homelessness (or at risk of homelessness) about services available to assist with housing and other welfare support, such as Uniting Ballarat.
- Enhances community understanding about the causes of homelessness and local support services.

Facilitator

- Refers reports of homelessness from community members to Uniting Ballarat's *Street 2 Home* outreach team to ensure appropriate support is offered to individuals experiencing homelessness within the municipality.
- Supports local organisations when requested in their outreach responses to rough sleepers or assisting with service collaboration.
- Supports community members experiencing homelessness to connect to local service providers.
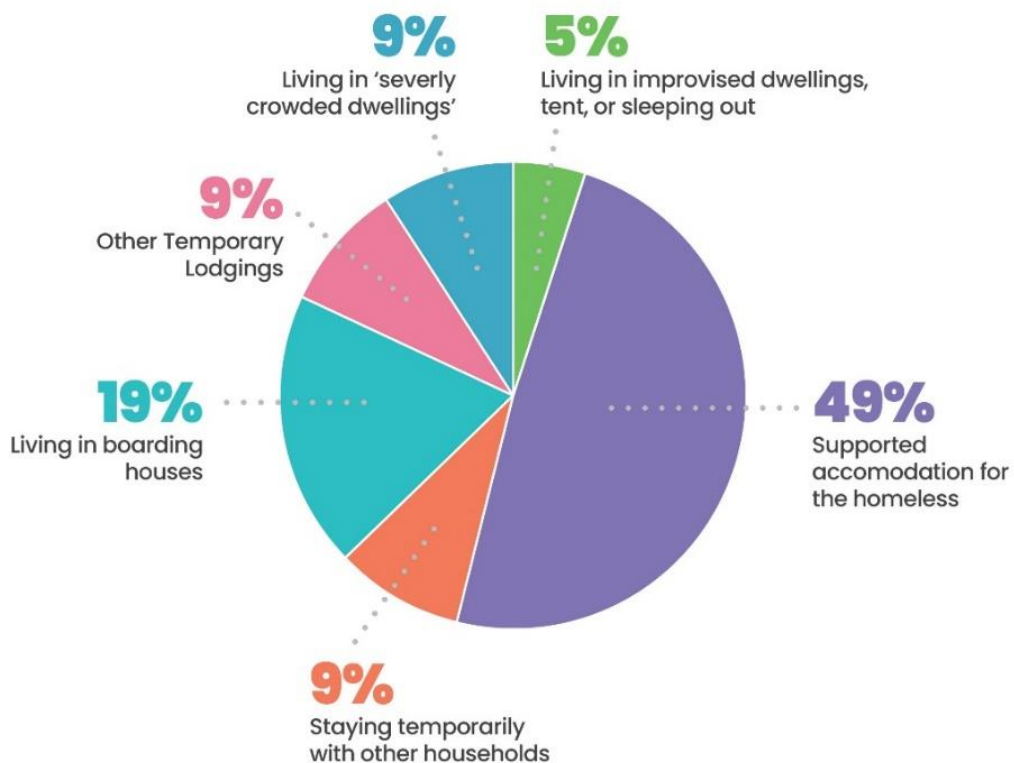
Key Messages- Homelessness

- The City of Ballarat recognises that access to adequate housing directly impacts health and wellbeing, and plays a critical role in health, education, employment, and safety outcomes.
- Council has an internal *Homelessness Referral Procedure* to guide responses across the organisation when notified of a person who is experiencing homelessness, or when staff encounter an individual who is experiencing homelessness.
- Council has also developed a [Homelessness Protocol](#), outlining Council's approach to homelessness.
- People may experience homelessness due to a range of contributing factors including family and domestic violence, job loss, relationship breakdown, mental ill-health, financial hardship, and alcohol and other drug misuse.[4]
- Rent increases, record low vacancy rates and lack of affordable housing options are contributing to a surge in demand for homelessness support services in recent years.[9]
- Some of the impacts of homelessness may include exposure to violence, development or exacerbation of chronic health conditions, poor mental health, poor physical health (dental, nutritional, substance use), higher rates of disability, higher rates of death, exposure or introduction to the criminal justice system, exposure to stigma, and long-term unemployment.[4,8]
- Homelessness is a complex issue that requires a collective approach from all levels of government, service agencies, and the community at large to support those most at risk.
- From a local government perspective, there is no enforcement with respect to homelessness or rough sleeping. Enforcement will only apply where a law has been broken (for example, where there is associated illegal or criminal activity), or a threat to safety exists, at which point the issue will be referred to Victoria Police.
- City of Ballarat undertakes strategic planning to support the sustainable growth of our city including affordable and diverse housing.

Key data and trends

City of Ballarat context- Census data

On Census night in 2021, a total of 638 people were recorded as homeless or living in overcrowded housing, up from 413 in 2016.[6] It is important to note that Census data is only one way of estimating the prevalence of homelessness, and the actual number of people experiencing homelessness at any given time is difficult to capture, and likely much higher. The ABS uses six 'operational groups' for presenting estimates of people experiencing homelessness on Census night, as represented in the below figure.

Breakdown of individuals Experiencing Homelessness in Ballarat – Census 2021

9% Living in 'severly crowded dwellings'

5% Living in improvised dwellings, tent, or sleeping out

9% Other Temporary Lodgings

19% Living in boarding houses

49% Supported accomodation for the homeless

9% Staying temporarily with other households

Victorian Housing Register

The Victorian Housing Register (VHR) is where Victorians can register for social housing in Victoria. As of 30th September 2023, the Central Highlands district had a total of 3,092 applications waiting for social housing.[6] Due to a shortage in housing stock, many Victorians in need of social housing are required to wait longer than the national average, particularly those experiencing additional hardships such as family violence. The average wait time for public rental housing for clients who have been allocated priority access housing or priority transfer due to family violence was 23.6 months in 2022-23.[7] This is up from an average wait time of 11.1 months in the 2020-21 financial year, and far exceeds the current target of 10.5 months.

Specialist Homelessness Services (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare)

Specialist homelessness agencies provide a range of services to those experiencing or at risk of homelessness.[19] According to data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 1,172 individuals were classified as 'homeless' when initiating first contact with a specialist homelessness service, whilst an additional 1,228 were 'at risk' of homelessness at first contact in the 2022-23 financial year.[19] Data from Homes Victoria shows that 2,585 people received support from Specialist Homelessness Services over the 2022-23 financial year in Ballarat.[7]

Local Needs

Ballarat has a single-entry point for housing and crisis support operated by Uniting, called Opening Doors. Opening Doors aims to deliver better coordination among homelessness services at the local level, ensuring that people in crisis can quickly and simply access homelessness services and get the help they need. Uniting is backed by a network of local services that share support, housing, and brokerage resources.

- Uniting Ballarat's *Street 2 Home* program provides assertive outreach to individuals experiencing rough sleeping in Ballarat. As of February 2024, the service was supporting between 80 to 100 people experiencing rough sleeping across the Central Highlands area, including 18 children.
- *Street 2 Home* supports approximately 226 people experiencing rough sleeping every year.

- In the month of January 2024, over 450 support periods were open for people accessing Uniting Ballarat's housing and homelessness services. 862 total support periods were opened between July 2023 and January 2024 alone, with 43.5% being people who had never accessed the service before, with many having been forced out of the rental market.

- There are a total of 72 youth households currently experiencing homelessness in Ballarat.

- In the 2023-24 financial year, the Homelessness Entry Point has had contact with 1600 households. The Entry Point has also assisted with 2335 nights of crisis accommodation; 35% of these were for victim survivors.

- There is also significant unmet need for services; due to constraints in resources and lack of funding, 201 people had to be turned away from Uniting's housing services in January alone. The Homelessness Entry Point is projected to have turned away approximately 1000 people in the 2023-24 financial year as of March 2024.

City of Ballarat's Homelessness Protocol

Council officers often receive reports from the public in relation to individuals who are sleeping rough. To aid our response to this, Council has developed a Homelessness Protocol, which is applicable to public spaces such as parks, open spaces and community facilities, which are accessible to the public and are owned, controlled or under the management of the City of Ballarat. It does not apply to private property.

There is no enforcement with respect to homelessness. Enforcement will only apply where a law (local or state) has been or is being breached (for example, where there is associated illegal or criminal activity), at which point it becomes a policing issue and will be referred to Victoria Police.

If a breach of local law or threat to safety occurs, Council will work closely with the individual, Uniting Ballarat, and Victoria Police (if necessary) to reach an outcome that is agreeable to all parties, whilst prioritising the wellbeing of the individual experiencing homelessness. Council will manage the respect and support of vulnerable individuals, alongside community safety and asset protection.

Related City of Ballarat policy documents:

- City of Ballarat Homelessness Protocol 2022
- Community Local Law 2017
- Affordable Housing Position Statement 2022
- Draft Ballarat Housing Strategy 2023-2041
- Draft Social and Affordable Housing Action Plan

Research, data and publications:

- Victoria's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan
- National Housing and Homelessness Plan
- Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia: Final report Inquiry into homelessness in Australia, July 2021
- Council to Homeless Persons- Homelessness facts, stats and insights
- Australian Bureau of Statistics- Estimating Homelessness: Census, 2021
- Mission Australia- Homelessness research
- Launch Housing- Research Hub
- Australian Homelessness Monitor
- Homelessness Australia- Our advocacy

Services and support

Homelessness and housing services

Under the Opening Doors Framework, *Uniting Ballarat* is the entry point for housing in Ballarat, backed by a network of local services that share support, housing and brokerage resources.

- **Uniting Ballarat Homelessness and Housing Support.** Phone: (03) 5332 1286, or drop-in without an appointment (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm) at 105 Dana Street Ballarat.

- **State-wide Homeless Crisis Response.** Phone 1800 825 955, Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm - this number will direct you to your nearest homelessness service. After business hours, your call will be directed to the St. Kilda Crisis Centre.

Food and Essentials- Emergency Relief

- An up-to-date list of food and emergency relief providers in Ballarat is compiled by Ballarat Community Health and can be found via this link.

Housing

- Uniting Ballarat- Housing and crisis support.
  Uniting is the entry point for homelessness services in Ballarat.
  Ph: 5332 1286
  If you or someone you know is homeless or in need of housing support, contact Uniting on (03) 5332 1286, Monday to Friday (9am to 5pm) or drop-in without an appointment at 105 Dana Street Ballarat to arrange a meeting with a housing worker.

- Child & Family Service (CAFS)
  Housing and Homelessness Services
  115 Lydiard St North, Ballarat
  Ph:1800 692 237 or 5337 3333

- CatholicCare
  Housing application and emergency support.
  4-6 Peel Street Nth, Ballarat
  Ph: 5337 8999

- Ballarat Sleep Bus
  Coming Soon

- Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
  Provides information about crisis and emergency accommodation.

- Berry Street
  Berry Street's foster, kinship and residential care programs provide children and young people who have experienced trauma with a safe and secure place to live.

Contact

City of Ballarat

Health and Social Planning Team

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