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Submission on the Housing and Homelessness Strategy for South Australia: Strategic Intent

The South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS) is the peak non-government representative body for health and community services in South Australia, and has a vision of Justice, Opportunity and Shared Wealth for all South Australians. We undertake policy and advocacy work in areas that specifically affect vulnerable and disadvantaged South Australians and represent our member groups who provide vital support services in a range of areas, including housing.

SACOSS welcomes the opportunity provide input into the Housing and Homeless Strategy for South Australia – although we note that we are not resourced to provide in depth engagement on housing policy. Accordingly, on many of the detailed issues we rely on the lead of both the Community Housing Council of SA and Shelter SA, who we know have been active in responding to elements of the plan itself. Hence here we focus only on the overarching issues of the strategy.

In looking at the statement of the Strategic Intent for the Housing and Homeless Strategy SACOSS welcomes the ambition to have a cross-sector housing strategy which deals with the housing ecosystem rather than a series of isolated issues. This ecosystem approach is evident in the range of issues covered and the range of consultation stakeholders in the process. However, what has been lost in this process has been a sense of what the government intends to do for its part. Without a clear and explicit commitment of government goals and resources, the strategic intent reads like an attempt to shunt government responsibility for ensuring affordable and sustainable housing on to others. We reject such a potential outcome and reaffirm our view that is the state's government's responsibility – both as a government and as the primary provider of social housing – to ensure that appropriate housing is available for all South Australians. This goes beyond just the co-ordination type roles which appear to be the focus of the strategic intent.

This is most evident in relation to social housing. The problems faced and the decline of public and social housing are well documented in the Taskforce Report of June 2019: around

6,000 currently homeless, unmet demand for affordable housing of around 56,000 households and a decline of around 20,000 social housing tenements over the last 25 years.

As SACOSS pointed out before the election of the current government,¹ this massive decline in social housing is important both because that housing is a vital service to the most vulnerable South Australians, but also because it provides a floor for the housing market. The SA Housing Trust was once the envy of the country (and beyond) and provided housing not just for those excluded from the housing market, but for those on low incomes – thus ensuring that there was a viable alternative to unaffordable private rental. The decline in public and social housing stock means that its impact on housing supply and demand has diminished, and fewer social housing options now means that it is easier to stigmatise occupants and reinforce disadvantage. This narrow welfare approach also makes the model less viable because by definition the rental income is tied only to the incomes of people with very low real incomes (rather than broader working families with a range of incomes).

In this part of the housing ecosystem, there is no doubt that non-government community housing providers have an important role – but the role of public housing remains crucial, both in terms of scale and as a guarantee for those who may not fit the profiles of non-government providers.

Yet despite this, there is no explicit statement of intent to grow the public and social housing estate.

Indeed, both Gary Storkey's presentation at the consultation session attended by SACOSS and the public survey, begin with a proposition about better targeting and better use of existing resources. The efficient use (and maintenance) of existing resources is important, but it avoids the bigger and long term need to invest in *more* public and social housing. It is disappointing that the Strategic Intent articulates the outcome sought as matching the right supply to demand (as if the only problem is targeting, not in fact the quantum of supply) and among 7 listed objectives there is no objective to actually increase social housing stock/supply. This is crucial because unless there is the explicit goal to increase supply, then the strategy is one that will not achieve the desired outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged South Australians.

Increasing the supply of public and social housing is not the only issue to address in the housing ecosystem, but it is the one on which achieving all other objectives rest and without which they are likely to fail. And while there is room for strategies to engage private and community stakeholders, these are and should be considered activity at the margins. There can be no doubt that the social housing base can't be expanded without a significant state government investment in public housing in particular and likely additionally a major investment from the Commonwealth.

¹ SACOSS, *State Election Platform 2018: Health, Housing and Justice*, South Australian Council of Social Service.
https://www.sacoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/documents/Health%20Housing%20Justice_FINAL.pdf

There can be no doubt it's imperative that the Strategy engages directly in promoting and encouraging alignment with and co-investment from the Commonwealth, in order to drive an increase in stock/supply. In fact, to fail to do so undermines the very likelihood of any capacity to fund desperately needed investments that will have economic, community and social benefits. We commend the work of ACOSS to you for consideration in this regard².

Accordingly, SACOSS has a fundamental concern that there is no commitment in the Strategic Intent documents to such an outcome.

Further, without an absolute commitment to invest in increases in social and public housing stock, we are being asked as community stakeholders in this consultation process to cooperate in and legitimise the further erosion of our essential public housing system. This is unacceptable and SACOSS cannot support the process or the plan unless it contains an explicit intent to increase public and social housing.

SACOSS remains keenly interested in the development of a Housing and Homelessness Support Strategy in South Australia, and hopes to see an explicit statement of intent from government to increase the stock of public and community housing so that we can engage in a process which will really address fundamental issues of housing security in our state.

We thank you for your attention to this submission, and should you wish to discuss any of the issue, please contact us as above.

Yours

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ross Womersley', written in a cursive style.

Ross Womersley, CEO
29 August 2019

²How to reduce homelessness and boost incomes and jobs: Social housing as infrastructure
<https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/ACOSS-Brief-Social-Housing-Investment-as-Infrastructure.pdf>