



Shelter SA Open Letter to Minister Christian Porter

National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness

Shelter SA is the peak body for housing in South Australia. Our vision is for every South Australian to have an affordable, safe place to call home. We advocate for improved policies and systems for all citizens, but particularly those that affect people living on low incomes.

It is now quite clear from statistical reports and our numerous metropolitan and regional consultations that the number of people accessing specialist homelessness services in South Australia is greater than the current system is funded to deal with. There are also high levels of unmet need. The information technology we use in South Australia to record the use of specialist homelessness services does not capture the true extent of homelessness in this State. We know that many non-housing services are dealing with homelessness and there is an acute lack of crisis accommodation in every town and city across the State. Too often the default response for at risk families and young children is accommodation in a motel. Motels are not appropriate accommodation for families or unaccompanied children.

Homelessness is directly related to the lack of affordable housing. Growing numbers of people living with housing stress (paying more than 30% of household income on their housing) place high demand and pressure on all parts of our funded and unfunded welfare and health systems. A healthy housing system makes economic sense – it enables families to attain good health, send their children to school and undertake employment. Affordable housing is a basic human right but it is rare for governments to make a commitment to that right by investing in social and affordable housing. Some housing policy settings work well but the quality of life gap between those with affordable housing and those without is getting wider and without clear and urgent attention to Federal and State policies that address the housing system as a whole, and structural issues around the supply of affordable housing, there is a situation of policy failure.

The National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) brings critical Federal funding into South Australia for homelessness services with the South Australian Government matching the funds dollar for dollar. In both 2014 and 2015 there was great uncertainty about the future of the NPAH and decisions were made too late to allow any forward planning for workers, services, the sector and most importantly, our most vulnerable citizens. Fortunately, the announcement about the continuation of the NPAH in March last year (2015) made by the then Social Services Minister, Scott Morrison, was for a period of two years (until June 2017).

June 2017 may seem like a long way off, however the Federal Election will occur in the next few months, potentially causing disruption to government and taking with it all the valuable planning time needed to improve the outcomes of the NPAH beyond 2017. Shelter SA is calling upon Federal Government to confirm its promise for the NPAH funding to continue until June 2017, regardless of the election process or its outcomes. The funding must be safeguarded to avoid the chaos that has surrounded the end of previous funding periods and disrupted so many lives.

Under previous Labor leadership, there was a long-term commitment to reducing homelessness by 2020. Shelter SA agrees that a long-term, bi-partisan approach is critical in order to reduce the need and demand for homelessness services. Any abrupt, unexpected reduction or removal of funding will be extremely damaging to the safety net that aims to catch those falling into homelessness through no fault of their own. If governments wish to reduce their spending on homelessness, the only viable approach is to immediately start setting up an evidence-based and well-planned strategy to increase the supply of social and affordable housing and create a gradual decline in demand for homelessness services. Making an investment in the supply of social and affordable housing will save spending in other areas and ensure our children's lives and homes are stable and safe.

To ensure the high quality reporting of outcomes, the Commonwealth can incorporate a financial reporting template for the States and Territories as part of the agreement to account for the funding and their contributions as well as tracking improvements in housing affordability and homelessness outcome measures.

Current opportunities to review the taxation system should be taken up to ensure all levers available to Government are utilised in a strategic approach to improving housing affordability and to give the housing portfolio much higher importance within the ministry. The socio-economic dimensions of Australia's housing problems are complex and considerable. Shelter SA understands that all Australians expect more action from Government on the issue of affordable housing and homelessness. Now is the time for the appointment of a dedicated Housing Minister.

Shelter SA's member organisations are at the coal-face of homelessness in its multiple forms. There will always be a need for services to help people during a crisis, but it is housing affordability that affects the majority of people who experience homelessness. For example, each day, many workers witness the impact of domestic violence and the plight of women and children fleeing from their homes. Domestic violence is one cause of disruption to a household and an experience of homelessness, but it is the lack of affordable housing that keeps women and children without a safe place to call home.

Shelter SA is currently gathering signatories to this letter in South Australia. We look forward to your response and would be pleased to provide you with any further information you require either in writing or at the table.

Yours faithfully

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