

Homelessness Strategy

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Homelessness Strategy

INTRODUCTION

The Wellington City Council is committed to promoting the well-being of its citizens. That commitment is concerned with ensuring that the needs of vulnerable people are met and the quality of life for all Wellington residents is not compromised. In the case of homeless people, the Council's role is to:

- Contribute to the provision of housing for people in need
- Advocate for and facilitate the provision of services to vulnerable people
- Ensure the safety of both homeless people and other members of the public
- Protect the environment.

Both the community and individuals benefit by addressing the needs of homeless people. Research associated with Wellington – Our Sense of Place identified a strong sense of community, tolerance and caring as being key values of Wellingtonians. In addition, Wellington has a reputation for safety, accessibility and cleanliness. To address the needs of vulnerable people contributes to preserving the characteristics that give Wellington its Sense of Place. To maintain its reputation and develop as a creative and innovative city, the city needs to address or reduce the number of people who are vulnerable and needy.

Wellington is a comparatively affluent city by New Zealand standards and the number of homeless people is probably low in comparison with other cities of a similar size.

However, the key outcome of this Strategy is the benefit that should accrue to susceptible individuals. Homeless people are highly vulnerable members of our community who often have multiple and complex needs beyond the provision of accommodation. There are no simple or generic solutions. There are some people living rough in Wellington or sometimes sleeping in public places who either have accommodation or are choosing not to be housed. For those who choose not to be housed it is important that there is access to facilities and essential services such as food, health services and safety. Some homeless people are vulnerable and need services which they may find difficult to access. The priority is to support access to services for them. Others have a lifestyle which is disruptive to others and leads to public nuisance and disorder. The priority for that group is a balance between access to services and responding to disorder. It is also important that the environment is not harmed and that other members of the public can go about their business free from intimidation and disorder.

Responding effectively to homeless people requires a coordinated approach. Central government, local government and community agencies are all involved in responding to people in need and to ensuring access to services. There is an interdependent relationship between the community, local and central government. The Council is well-placed to broker a response in collaboration with partners and community agencies.

Key issues for the Wellington City Council under this strategy are:

- services for people in Council accommodation who require support and services to maintain their tenancy
- integrated services for “at-risk” people congregating in Wellington’s parks
- ensuring access to services for homeless people
- the need for an outreach service aimed at ensuring at risk tenants and other homeless people are supported.
- an ongoing advocacy relationship with Capital and Coast District health board to promote the provision of health services to meet identified gaps, for example detoxification facilities in Wellington and increased community based mental health, alcohol and drug services in Wellington
- strengthening partnerships with the community
- partnership with Police on responding to concerns for the community arising from use of public spaces.

BACKGROUND

The term homelessness broadly refers to people with inadequate access to safe, secure and affordable housing or to people without conventional accommodation. Definitions of homelessness usually include people who:

- Have no shelter (living in parks/sleeping rough) – primary homelessness
- Move between various forms of temporary shelter – secondary homelessness
- Live in accommodation unsuitable to their needs and often without security of tenure – tertiary homelessness

In Wellington there are also a number of people who have accommodation (or access to it) but choose to sometimes sleep rough. This group of people appear to be the public face of the homeless yet provision of accommodation is not a key issue.

Homelessness may be short term caused by crisis, long term where a person has adapted to a homeless lifestyle or ongoing where a person at risk of homelessness moves through different forms of insecure accommodation.

The reasons for homelessness are diverse and often combine a number of issues including but not limited to:

- Family/relationship breakdown and loss of community support
- Gambling addiction
- Poverty and a history of social exclusion
- Domestic violence or sexual abuse
- Unemployment
- Alcohol abuse

- Other drug abuse or addiction problems
- Mental health issues
- Leaving prison or trouble with the police
- Eviction or abandonment of former home

Trends within the homeless population must be monitored to ensure that services are appropriate and that if there are changes to the groups of people becoming homeless a response is implemented. For example, if there was an increasing number of young people living rough there would be a need to adjust services to meet their needs.

The Council and those agencies offering support to homeless people must, in collaboration, be alert to emerging groups within the homeless population who need specific services. Monitoring of trends and issues faced by homeless people must be done in collaboration. The Wellington City Council has agreed to prepare regular reports on issues and trends.

STRATEGY AIMS

The Homelessness Strategy articulates the Council's role and objectives in addressing the needs of homeless people and those who live rough (but are not necessarily homeless).

The aims of the Homelessness Strategy are to improve the quality of life for homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless by increasing accessibility to services and support and to take steps to ensure the safety of all Wellington residents.

The Wellington City Council will contribute to those aims by:

- Facilitating the provision of services including exploring options for an outreach worker
- Continuing its role as a key housing provider
- Strengthening partnerships and supporting community providers – enhancing coordination
- Advocacy, taking account of gaps in service provision
- Ensuring a range of responses are in place if there are instances of disorder, intimidation or inappropriate use of public places
- Co-ordinating the monitoring of trends and issues.

This document aims to articulate the overall direction and priorities of the Council in responding to homelessness. The Community Services Business Unit work programme will identify specific actions and detailed initiatives consistent with this strategy.

PRINCIPLES

- Improving the quality of life of homeless people in a *compassionate, culturally sensitive* and *sustainable* manner.
- Promoting effective *collaboration* and *partnership*. We recognise that these issues are community issues. This shared problem must be solved by shared solutions.
- Being *responsive* to the changing characteristics and circumstances of homeless people. Sometimes there will be different needs or challenges facing homeless people.
- Respecting and upholding the rights of all Wellington residents to *safety* and *wellbeing*.
- Ensuring the needs of Maori are identified and services are culturally appropriate.

ROLE OF COUNCIL

The Local Government Act 2002 establishes the role of local authorities as being to enable democratic local decision-making and action by, and on behalf of, communities and to promote the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of communities in the present and for the future. To this end the Council has several roles in responding to homelessness.

Service provider

The Council is a major provider of housing with 2,360 houses in Wellington city – ranging from bedsits and one bedroom units in housing blocks, through to stand alone houses. These are provided for people on low incomes or with special needs. Council officers are currently working in partnership with Housing New Zealand to build more social housing. Because some tenants have complex needs there are sometimes challenges in maintaining the tenancy and the support of community agencies for those tenants is beneficial to all parties. Community agencies assist the tenant's access to services and can also assist in the landlord/tenant relationship.

Walkwise officers also offer advice, assistance and support to vulnerable people in need. This is a valuable service which complements other social services. Walkwise are well positioned to make referrals to social services. Given their presence on the streets of Wellington and the relationships they develop, Walkwise officers are often the first to identify emerging issues.

Advocate and facilitator

The Council has an advocacy role in identifying gaps in services and either lobbying for increased services by central government agencies or working in partnership with other agencies to attain services. The Council is in an ideal position to support community agencies in their provision of services and does so through grants, by building relationships and assisting with coordination and communication. There is a need for the provision of activities to counter boredom for those who are rehabilitating or seeking opportunities to change their lifestyle.

Services and support for vulnerable people, particularly those that often have multiple and complex needs, are an important aspect of ensuring a strong sense of community, tolerance, diversity and safety.

Governance of Public Spaces

Public spaces are a community space available to all to be enjoyed. The Council must act to ensure their use and enjoyment. When the activities of any people, including those who are living rough, are such that it interferes with the use of public spaces by community members, the Council has a role in responding to those issues. There is a range of responses that can be made to such activity. The following table summarises the type of response considered most appropriate to various behaviours that may be evident.

Response	None required	Refer to Social Services (Walkwise/Police)	Trespass Orders (Walkwise/ WCC)	Justice System (Police)
Example of Behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People enjoying themselves • Picnics • Sitting relaxing • Playing • Dog walking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drunkenness (without disorder) • Disorientation/ signs of mental health issues • Physical symptoms of illness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drunk/drugs • Offences with no formal complaint e.g. intimidation • Repeat offending in an area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criminal offences • Indecent exposure • Disorderly behaviour • Violence
Concern	None	Concerns for individual's safety and health	Concerns for public health and safety	Illegal behaviour

ASSISTANCE PROVISION

Housing

There is a range of services that provide housing:

City Housing (Wellington City Council) – mainly provide medium to long term housing but can offer a short term fixed tenancy. This can be reviewed and extended if appropriate. Housing ranges from bedsits to larger family homes and are located from Miramar to Johnsonville. City Housing gives priority to those who are disadvantaged in the private rental market, in particular, the fit elderly, refugees and people who have low level psychiatric conditions. Rents are set at 70% of the market rate. There are significant waiting lists for accommodation.

Housing New Zealand Corporation (HNZC) – offers a similar but complementary service to City Housing generally offering larger units in suburban areas. Rents are set at 25% of income and again there are significant waiting lists.

The *Wellington Night Shelter* in Taranaki Street is a critical service in providing accommodation to homeless people. The existing Night Shelter was built in 1968 for a clientele of mainly itinerant men aged in their 50's. Accommodation is provided for 25 in a dormitory and a further 14 men are catered for in the transitional hostel accommodation. The men in the transitional hostel are longer-term and are encouraged to move into more permanent accommodation. Over time the clientele has changed and currently the average age is 29 years. There have been an increasing number of women seeking shelter but only 3 women are able to be accommodated per night. Requests are also being received from families for accommodation. These requests are mainly for refugee families and can't be met.

The shelter is scheduled to undergo refurbishment towards the end of the year and the Council has provided for a grant of \$250,000 in its Annual Plan to support that refurbishment.

A number of social service agencies have been working together on the *Easy Access Housing* project. Easy Access, in partnership with HNZA and CCDHB, are focussed on providing housing for people with complex and multiple needs.

There is a range of *community housing* providers in Wellington that offer accommodation for people on low incomes or people with specific needs such as mental health consumers or people with disabilities. Generally places are available only through referrals from other agencies such as health services. There is some limited emergency accommodation at Menenga Pai Mansfield Street in Newtown. In addition there are some private boarding houses offering low cost accommodation.

Crisis and emergency accommodation provides a certain safety net for some groups of homeless people especially those who find themselves suddenly homeless, have no plans and do not know where to go. This strategy promotes the Council's ongoing role in the provision of housing and support for services to promote independent living.

Services to support independent living

The provision of crisis accommodation appears to be less successful for the long term homeless, in particular for those who experience homelessness as a way of life and regularly sleep in public places. There are additional barriers to providing accommodation to this particular group, for example:

- Personalities not suited to living in close proximity of other tenants such as in high density housing.
- Inability to raise sufficient money to pay a bond or rent in advance.
- Behaviour problems that intimidate or frighten neighbours and consequently lead to eviction.
- Friends who cause problems and disrupt neighbours, which can lead to eviction.
- Inability to maintain tenancy for all or some of the above reasons.

The Downtown Community Ministry is a key provider of support services to highly vulnerable people living in Wellington and the work it carries out mitigates against some of the barriers noted above. A significant amount of work is carried out successfully to support both homeless people and people at risk of being homeless. The early intervention and preventive nature of this work means it is often less visible.

There is however an identified gap in ensuring access to services, particularly health services and the Council is currently exploring options to provide support for the employment of a community outreach worker.

Public conveniences

For people without accommodation and sleeping rough, the provision of public conveniences is a relevant issue. The Council has a Public Conveniences Policy which guides the Council's role in the provision of public conveniences. The business unit of Council responsible for its implementation is currently developing initiatives through the asset management plan process. The Council is not the sole provider of conveniences with the commercial sector also providing some public conveniences, for example at the Railway Station.

Food Assistance and Meals

The Council does not have a role in provision of food and meals but does support agencies that offer that service. Meals are available from a wide range of agencies and there is a high service uptake. For example, the Compassion Centre has on average 20 to 50 for breakfast and 50 to 90 for dinner.

Health issues for homeless people

The role of the Council in provision of health services is concerned with the Council's leadership role. It is well placed to advocate and lobby for increased health services. There are two areas of concern around health. First, access to primary health care (such as basic medical facilities) and second, dealing with complex health issues associated with mental health problems and advanced addiction.

Difficulties in providing outpatient and community services to homeless people include;

- accessing an address to which outpatient appointments can be sent
- being able to find a client who may need wound care or other assistance
- locating an hygienic environment in which to treat/interview clients
- trying to promote healing when the day to day environment mitigates against this
- delivering rehabilitation services and equipment to people who live in a range of different environments.

Collaboration with community agencies is critical to the provision of services and there are a range of community agencies facilitating access of homeless people to services by addressing some of those barriers noted above. For example the Downtown Community Ministry provides a contact point or address for people in need.

Social service agencies act as brokers of services and identify support workers or advocates for people with multiple and complex needs. In recognition of the contribution these agencies make to accessibility of services the Council has a role in supporting and advocating for them.