



PERFORMANCE AUDIT

4 JUNE 2021

Responses to homelessness

NEW SOUTH WALES AUDITOR-GENERAL'S REPORT

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In accordance with section 38E of the *Public Finance and Audit Act 1983*, I present a report titled '**Responses to homelessness**'.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Margaret Crawford'.

Margaret Crawford
Auditor-General
4 June 2021

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Section one

Responses to
homelessness

Executive summary

Homelessness exists when a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives. A person is considered to be experiencing homelessness if their current living arrangement:

- is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or
- 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.¹

The number of people experiencing homelessness in New South Wales increased by 37 per cent between the last two censuses, from 27,479 in 2011, to 37,715 in 2016. New South Wales recorded the largest increase of all the states and territories in both the number of people experiencing homelessness and in the homeless rate (from 40.8 to 50.4 persons per 10,000).

The NSW Government's primary service response to homelessness is crisis, temporary and transitional accommodation, and support services, funded at more than \$1.0 billion over four years from 2018–19. These are 'commissioned services' delivered by non-government organisations under contracts with the Department of Communities and Justice (the Department) and out of scope for this audit. We assessed how the Department manages contracts for specialist homelessness services in our 2019 audit 'Contracting non-government organisations'.

The policy framework for the NSW Government's response to homelessness is the NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018–23 (the Strategy), which is examined in this audit. The Department is responsible for the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy. The Strategy comprises 21 actions, ten of which directly target people at risk of, or already experiencing, homelessness through measures such as:

- screening high school students for the risk of homelessness and providing supports
- assisting vulnerable people to maintain their tenancies in social housing or the private rental market
- providing purpose-built social housing.

These ten actions comprise \$160 million of the Strategy's \$169 million funding.

In December 2019, the first evidence of the COVID-19 virus emerged. People sleeping without shelter or in public places (sleeping rough) typically live in communal arrangements, with some having limited access to basic hygiene supplies or showering facilities. These factors may increase the risk of transmission of COVID-19 amongst this population.

In response to the pandemic, the NSW Government provided additional funding for the Department to institute a range of actions aimed at preventing vulnerable people from becoming homeless, and people sleeping rough from contracting or transmitting the virus. These were informed by, but separate to, actions under the Homelessness Strategy.

This audit focused on the temporary accommodation provided to individuals experiencing street homelessness during the pandemic, and the new 'Together Home' program established in 2020 to transition people with experience or history sleeping rough from temporary accommodation into more sustainable longer-term housing.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4922.0 - Information Paper - A Statistical Definition of Homelessness, 2012, September 2012.

This audit assessed how effectively the Department is implementing the Homelessness Strategy and addressing street homelessness in its COVID-19 response. In making this assessment, the audit examined whether the Department:

- has effectively developed an evidence-based Strategy and established supporting arrangements to implement it
- is ensuring the Strategy is achieving its objectives and outcomes
- is effectively supporting people sleeping rough into temporary accommodation during COVID-19 and to transition into more sustainable longer-term housing.

Conclusion

The \$169 million Homelessness Strategy will have a limited short-term impact on homelessness across New South Wales.

The Department designed the Strategy to build evidence to inform future state-wide action rather than to end homelessness. The Department also received significantly less funding than it sought, and as a result, the Strategy's actions have a narrow reach in terms of the locations and the number of people targeted for assistance.

The Department has clearly communicated its aims to intervene early to prevent people from experiencing homelessness; to provide effective supports to people experiencing homelessness; and to create an integrated person-centred system. While these objectives are clear, they are not being pursued state-wide.

The Department recognised in its advice to government on Strategy resourcing that growing demand could not be met within current funding and housing supply, and that there was limited proof on effective preventative and early interventions in the available evidence base. Given the evidence threshold for new funding, the Department designed the Strategy to pilot approaches which help to identify the best prevention and early intervention measures for state-wide roll out after the Strategy's five-year term, subject to budget approval.

The Department received significantly less funding than it sought for the Strategy. It repurposed existing resources, dropped some proposed actions and scaled others down to fit within the final funding envelope. While seeking to demonstrate what works to prevent homelessness or intervene earlier, the Department directed 95 per cent of the final Strategy funding to concrete actions supporting people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness.

The Department has put in place governance and operational arrangements which are supporting the implementation and evaluation of the Strategy, and it is broadly on track with reaching the target number of clients expected. The Department's data shows that more than 4,100 people have received direct supports under Strategy actions. However, the reach of the Strategy remains constrained. Once fully implemented, most Strategy actions will be available in only a quarter of the state's local government areas, supporting around 8,200 people - what equates to around 22 per cent of the number of people experiencing homelessness in New South Wales at the last census in 2016.

There is a risk that future funding will not be secured – and Strategy actions not continued or scaled up – if the evidence on effectiveness is incomplete, mixed or unclear when the Strategy concludes. This sits against a backdrop of increasing need for housing and homelessness supports in the state that may become more acute once the full economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are felt.

The Department effectively planned and implemented a crisis response to assist people sleeping on the streets during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department will need to do more to ensure a sustainable longer-term response which prevents people returning to street homelessness.

The Department's crisis response focused on people sleeping rough due to the public health risk of COVID-19 transmission amongst this group. Of the approximately 32,500 people provided with temporary accommodation between 1 April 2020 and 31 January 2021, 4,355 were sleeping rough. As at 13 May 2021, only one case of COVID-19 had been detected to date among the individuals who received assistance. The Department advises that around one-quarter of all those placed in temporary accommodation were assisted into social housing or private rental accommodation.

Within metropolitan Sydney, the Department established a dedicated team and contracted provider to connect people sleeping rough placed in hotels with support services, and to assist and monitor their transition to longer-term housing. The Department's data suggests that almost 38 per cent of the approximately 1,800 people who received this support were able to move to social housing or private rental accommodation. However, the Department did not track the housing outcomes for clients who were not provided with this support, or who were not engaged with housing or funded support services.

The Department offers supports to people in temporary accommodation to assist them in finding longer term housing, and it has a policy to not knowingly exit someone from temporary accommodation into homelessness. However, it does not track housing outcomes for every client if they do not engage with the Department's housing or funded support services.

The Department cannot precisely identify how many people sleeping rough assisted during COVID-19 have returned to rough sleeping or other forms of homelessness. The Department's data suggests that 72 per cent of the approximately 4,000 people sleeping rough assisted with temporary accommodation between April 2020 and April 2021 who exited left with an unknown housing outcome. The Department intends to conduct research in the future to better understand what happens to people who leave temporary accommodation without seeking further assistance.

The Department also has limited data to understand whether the enhanced temporary accommodation program was more effective in helping to connect participants with services and support them into stable accommodation, than previous approaches.

The Department extended an existing initiative for community housing providers to head lease properties in the private rental market and ensure support services for people who were sleeping rough before being assisted into enhanced temporary accommodation. As at April 2021, the Together Home program has assisted 400 people to obtain accommodation and supports for two years. However, the number of Together Home places is significantly less than what is required to provide housing for the more than 4,350 individuals who were sleeping rough prior to entering enhanced temporary accommodation.

The Department advises it is using a combination of 'business-as-usual' options to assist other people sleeping rough into stable accommodation where Together Home places are not available, including social and affordable housing and supported transitional accommodation. It also intends to secure longer-term housing options for Together Home clients after the two-year support ends. But it is not clear how it will overcome longstanding housing challenges to do so, given the complexity of needs amongst this client group, the limited availability of affordable rental properties and the existing scale of unmet need for social housing in New South Wales.

1. Key findings: the Homelessness Strategy

The Strategy's geographical and client reach is limited because it is building the evidence base on what works

The Department's objectives to intervene early, provide effective supports and create an integrated person-centred system to address homelessness are clear, but are not being pursued state-wide.

There were existing gaps in the available evidence which made it difficult for the Department to develop a holistic, state-wide, long-term solution to homelessness. Some of the actions under the Strategy have a degree of supporting evidence. Other actions are intended to generate evidence through pilots and by evaluating existing programs more robustly.

At least one Strategy action is available in each of the Department's 16 districts, and there are examples of the Department rolling out practice changes from Strategy pilots across the state. However, progress towards the Strategy aims is confined to pockets where actions are being trialled.

Once fully implemented, Strategy actions will be available in only a quarter of the state's 128 local government areas and will support approximately 8,200 people - which equates to around 22 per cent of the number of people who were experiencing homelessness at the time of the last census in New South Wales in 2016 more than 37,000 people. This does not include the number of people at risk of homelessness.

A key gap in Strategy actions is addressing Aboriginal homelessness.

The Department received significantly less funding than sought and designed the Strategy to build the evidence base rather than eliminate homelessness

The Department could not meet the evidence threshold for a cost benefit analysis required by a Treasury business case, given the limited evidence available locally and internationally on what works to prevent homelessness or intervene earlier. The Department sought new, targeted investment to extend a small number of initiatives with proven effect, and to build the evidence base about other measures that work, rather than the quantum of funding required to end homelessness in New South Wales.

Even so, approved funding was significantly less than that sought by the Department. It repurposed existing resources, dropped some proposed actions and scaled others down to fit within the final funding envelope. It directed 95 per cent of the total Strategy funding to supports and accommodation for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

The Department intends to use the gathered data from implementation of the Strategy to expand effective prevention and early intervention measures after it concludes, subject to budget approval. It expects that, over time, these initiatives will reduce the demand for crisis services.

Actions may not be scaled up at the end of the Strategy's term, perpetuating the Strategy's limited reach and narrow impact on homelessness

The Department's approach of testing interventions and building the evidence base through the Strategy was well described and provided a clear rationale in its original advice to government. An evaluation framework has been designed to generate sufficient evidence on the overall Strategy and its individual actions for a cost benefit analysis to support a future budget bid.

The Department intends to use the findings from interim evaluation reports, due by September 2021, to determine the programs and pilots with promising evidence that should continue to the end of the Strategy term. It expects this to enable more qualitative and quantitative data to be available to the evaluations, as well as to support service continuity.

However, delays in delivery of some actions under the Strategy, and the time taken for outcomes to be achieved and show up in the data, will impact on the strength of the evidence available at the mid-term and final Strategy evaluation points. This raises a risk that future funding for a comprehensive Strategy will not be secured - and prevention and early intervention activities not continued or scaled up beyond pilot sites - if the evidence on effectiveness is incomplete, mixed or unclear when the Strategy concludes.

Given its limited reach, even if the existing Strategy actions were retained, and no expansion occurred, it would continue to have a narrow impact on homelessness in New South Wales. This sits against a backdrop of increasing need for housing and homelessness supports in the state that may become more acute once the full economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are felt.

2. Key findings: the COVID-19 response to homelessness

The Department effectively planned and implemented its homelessness response to the pandemic and reduced the risk of transmission of COVID-19 for people sleeping rough

The Department's crisis response focused on people sleeping rough due to the public health risk of COVID-19 transmission amongst this group.

The Department engaged with the specialist homelessness services sector from mid-March 2020 to modify service delivery, advise on infection control and plan extra supports. It explored options with temporary accommodation providers to support self-isolation for clients, and scaled up its assertive outreach patrols by staff, specialist caseworkers and health professionals to support people sleeping rough into crisis or temporary accommodation for safety.

The Minister directed the Department to address street homelessness in the COVID-19 response using the Government's second stage of stimulus funding. The Department procured hotel, motel or serviced apartment accommodation for 400 people who were sleeping rough, or unable to physically distance in large crisis accommodation centres, within a week of the ministerial direction, building on existing programs. The Department provided advice to the Minister on the need to adjust existing policy settings to meet the forecast demand for temporary accommodation services.

The Department secured additional temporary accommodation when and where it was required, to accommodate the number of people sleeping rough who wanted support. Between 1 April 2020 and 31 January 2021, the Department provided temporary accommodation to 32,158 individuals, of which 4,355 people were sleeping rough, totalling more than 70,000 nights of temporary accommodation and services.

The Department met regularly with NSW homelessness peak organisations and established a Taskforce involving other government agencies, peak organisations, and service providers, to assist in quickly executing the measure and resolving issues arising. The Taskforce built on existing collaborative arrangements in place to support cross-sectoral coordination, enabling it to respond quickly to COVID-19.

The Department worked with NSW Health and health providers to ensure its COVID-19 response to homelessness was in line with health guidelines. As of May 2021, just one participant in the Department's enhanced temporary accommodation program had contracted COVID-19.

The Department does not know how many people sleeping rough who were assisted with enhanced temporary accommodation have returned to homelessness

Within metropolitan Sydney, the Department established a specialist housing team, and contracted a non-government provider, to connect people placed in hotels with support services, provide tailored support, and to assist and monitor their transition to longer-term housing.

The Department's data indicates that between May 2020 and 31 January 2021, over 1,800 people who had previously been sleeping rough had been engaged in this program, more than four times the expected client numbers. Almost half moved into further accommodation when they left the program, including people supported with longer-term housing such as social housing, community leasing under the Together Home program, and private rental arrangements.

However, the Department did not track the housing outcomes for clients who were not provided with this support, or who disengaged from services. The Department advises that this would have required additional resourcing to do so.

The Department offers assistance to people in temporary accommodation to find longer term options, and has a policy to not knowingly exit someone from temporary accommodation into homelessness. However, it does not track housing outcomes for every client if they do not engage with the Department's housing or funded support services. It intends to conduct research in the future to better understand what happens to people who leave temporary accommodation without seeking further assistance from the Department.

The Department cannot identify precisely how many people sleeping rough who were assisted during COVID-19 have returned to rough sleeping or other forms of homelessness. The Department's data suggests that 72 per cent of the approximately 4,000 people formerly sleeping rough who left temporary accommodation between April 2020 and April 2021 left with an unknown housing outcome. This includes people who were not eligible for social housing, were stranded due to border closures, or who disengaged from the Department or funded support services.

The Department also has limited data to understand whether the enhanced temporary accommodation program was more effective in helping to connect participants with services and support them into stable accommodation, than previous approaches.

The Together Home program was established quickly to assist people into more permanent accommodation but will not meet demand as a standalone response

The Department established the Together Home program in September 2020 to provide longer-term accommodation to people who were sleeping rough during the pandemic. Community housing providers head-lease properties in the private rental market for two years and sub-lease these to clients, while ensuring they receive additional support, such as health services, to help them maintain the lease.

Under the initial tranche of funding, the Together Home program aimed to support 400 people sleeping rough. This target was met by April 2021. Due to increased rental demand in many areas of the state, there were some delays in securing properties in certain areas. In addition, people on temporary visas, or with existing public housing debt, are ineligible for this program.

A further \$29.0 million was provided to this program through the 2020–21 NSW Budget, creating 400 additional program places. However, the total number of 800 Together Home places will not be sufficient to provide housing for the more than 4,000 individuals who were sleeping rough prior to entering enhanced temporary accommodation.

The Department advises it is using a range of 'business-as-usual' options to assist other people sleeping rough into stable accommodation outside of the Together Home program. These options include social housing, supported transitional accommodation, subsidised private rental, boarding houses, and referral to mental health and substance addiction rehabilitation facilities.

The Department's latest annual state-wide street count suggested that the number of people sleeping rough across New South Wales decreased by 13 per cent between February 2020 and February 2021. The Department has acknowledged that it could do more to monitor and support the housing outcomes for people in temporary accommodation after they exit.

The Department has plans to secure longer-term housing options for Together Home clients after the two-year program, through commissioned community housing and private rental assistance. However, it is not clear how this will overcome existing housing challenges given the complexity of needs amongst this client group, the limited availability of affordable rental properties and the existing scale of unmet need for social housing.

3. Recommendations

By July 2022, the Department of Communities and Justice should:

1. use data and analysis identified through the Homelessness Strategy 2018–2023 and provide advice to the NSW Government on sustainably addressing demand and unmet need for homelessness supports
2. use the evidence obtained through the Homelessness Strategy 2018–2023 to commence development of a comprehensive strategy to address homelessness, linked to the government's ten-year plan for social housing and 20-year housing strategy
3. establish and sustain governance arrangements that enable input to key decisions on homelessness policy from partner agencies, the specialist homelessness services sector, the community housing sector, Aboriginal people and people with lived experience of homelessness
4. in partnership with Aboriginal stakeholders and communities, design and implement a strategy for early identification and responses to the needs of Aboriginal people vulnerable to homelessness; and build the capacity and resourcing of the Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector to deliver homelessness services
5. evaluate the homelessness response to COVID-19 and integrate the lessons learned into future practice; and develop protocols to inform actions in future emergencies/disasters
6. establish and sustain a means to regularly collect client outcomes data and feedback; and use this to drive improvements to responses to homelessness.

1. Introduction

1.1 Homelessness in New South Wales

The number of people experiencing homelessness in New South Wales grew by almost 70 per cent over the decade before the last census, from 22,219 in 2006, to 37,715 in 2016 (latest census data available). Between the 2011 and 2016 censuses, New South Wales recorded the largest increases of all the states and territories in both the number of people experiencing homelessness, and in the homeless rate (from 40.8 to 50.4 persons per 10,000).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) definition of homelessness is: 'when a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives, they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement:

- is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or
- 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'.

Across New South Wales, most people experiencing homelessness at the time of the last census were living in severely crowded dwellings (45 per cent), or boarding houses (18 per cent). Seven per cent of people experiencing homelessness were sleeping 'rough' with little or no shelter at all.

Exhibit 1: Homelessness by type in New South Wales, 2001–2016

Homelessness by type in New South Wales	2001	2006	2011	2016
Persons living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out	1,698	1,596	1,924	2,588
Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless	3,339	3,867	4,924	5,861
Persons staying temporarily with other households	5,194	4,761	4,937	5,350
Persons living in boarding houses	7,574	5,941	5,793	6,869
Persons in other temporary lodgings	116	152	244	222
Persons living in 'severely' crowded dwellings	5,120	5,902	9,655	16,821
Total	23,041	22,219	27,479	37,715

Note: The ABS must ensure that any statistical information about individuals cannot be derived from published data. To minimise the risk of identifying individuals in aggregate statistics, the ABS uses a technique (known as perturbation) to randomly adjust cell values. As a result of this, adding up cell values to derive a total will not necessarily give the same result as published totals.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018.

People experiencing homelessness

Since 2006, the number of people experiencing homelessness in New South Wales has increased by 70 per cent.

Within this population, there has been a significant rise in the number of people aged between 19–24 years old (increased by 117 per cent), and 25–34 years old (increased by 114 per cent). Family violence and mental health issues are often reported by young people experiencing homelessness. Young people leaving out-of-home care also have disproportionate rates of housing instability, often resulting in homelessness.

There is a growing trend for people to become homeless in later life for the first time. Between 2006 and 2016, the number of people experiencing homelessness over 55 increased by over 70 per cent, representing 17 per cent of the total homelessness population in New South Wales. Factors such as low incomes, retirement without sufficient superannuation, and health conditions contribute towards their vulnerability of experiencing homelessness.

The number of women experiencing homelessness has increased by 75 per cent since 2006. Domestic and family violence is a leading cause of homelessness among women and children, with one-third of people accessing specialist homelessness services reporting experiencing domestic and family violence. Research has shown that women experiencing homelessness often experience different challenges to men. This includes caring for dependent children, rates of assault and victimisation, levels of anxiety, depression and other mental health problems, and higher risks of premature death.

Aboriginal people make up almost eight per cent of the New South Wales homeless population and almost 30 per cent of specialist homelessness services users, despite comprising less than three per cent of the general population in the state. Research suggests that factors which contribute to this greater need for homelessness supports include racism, systemic socio-economic disadvantage, and increased difficulty navigating the social housing system. Within the Aboriginal community, overcrowded housing is a significant issue. In some cases, overcrowding causes existing housing to become insecure, putting occupants at further risk of transitioning to street homelessness.

People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds – particularly people on temporary visas including refugees – may experience increased vulnerability to homelessness due to additional barriers such as limited English language skills, and difficulty finding accommodation that enables them to remain connected to family and community.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer or questioning (LGBTQI+) people are at higher risk of homelessness compared to the general population, and are more likely to experience chronic homelessness due to family rejection and discrimination.

People living in regional and rural areas may be vulnerable to homelessness due to limited housing options, education, employment opportunities and access to disability and health services. Between 2013–2017 there was a 75 per cent growth in regional clients accessing specialist homelessness services.

People living with a disability are at a greater risk of experiencing homelessness. Research has shown that people living with disability can have difficulty in attaining employment, and accessing housing options that are suitable to their needs. Nationally, people living with disability make up 18 per cent of the population, yet represent approximately 25 per cent of the clients of specialist homelessness services.

The NSW Government funds a range of non-government agencies to support those who are experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness. These specialist homelessness services provide services ranging from general support and assistance, counselling and legal advice to immediate crisis accommodation.

In 2019–20, specialist homelessness services assisted approximately 70,400 clients across New South Wales. A greater proportion of clients in New South Wales (66 per cent) than nationally (59 per cent) needed accommodation. The top three reasons for seeking assistance were financial difficulties (40 per cent of clients), a housing crisis (36 per cent of clients) and family and domestic violence (35 per cent).

1.2 NSW Government responses to homelessness

NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018–23

The key policy framework for the NSW Government's response to homelessness is the NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018–23 (Strategy). This followed on from the NSW Homelessness Action Plan 2009–2014 and from 2012 reforms to the specialist homelessness services sector known as Going Home, Staying Home.

To inform the Strategy's development, the Department issued a discussion paper on the proposed strategic directions for public feedback in 2016. The Department undertook consultations with key stakeholders, including people with lived experience of homelessness. It received 120 written submissions and facilitated consultations with more than 430 participants across 15 districts. These included dedicated workshops with Aboriginal people, young people and people with lived experience of homelessness. The Department released a public report summarising the feedback and themes from these consultations. It released the Strategy in June 2018.

The NSW Homelessness Strategy sets out the NSW Government's intent to respond to homelessness through three focus areas:

- build a mainstream service system that is able to intervene early to prevent homelessness and break disadvantage
- increase access to supports, including housing, that prevent homelessness and re-entry into homelessness
- create an integrated, person-centred service system.

The Strategy comprises 21 actions, ten of which directly target people at risk of, or already experiencing, homelessness (see Exhibit 2 in Chapter 2) through measures such as:

- screening high school students for the risk of homelessness and providing supports
- assisting vulnerable people to maintain their tenancies in social housing or the private rental market
- providing purpose-built social housing.

Actions were resourced with new funding of \$61.4 million and repurposed funding of \$107 million for a total of \$169 million over four years from 2018–19. Further recurrent funding of \$22.0 million was provided in the 2020–21 state budget, for initiatives for 2022–23 and beyond until the next strategy is in place.

Appendix two details each of the Strategy actions and their individual funding, and Appendix three sets out the progress the Department advises it has made in implementing each one.

Specialist homelessness services

The NSW Government's primary service response to homelessness is crisis, temporary and transitional accommodation, and support services, funded at more than \$1.0 billion over four years from 2018–19. The Department funds non-government organisations to deliver services to support people who are at experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness.

These services include a range of programs for young people, families, single men, and women, with or without children, escaping domestic and family violence.

The 'commissioned services' delivered by these non-government organisations under contracts with the Department are out of scope for this audit.

Premier's Priorities focusing on homelessness

Since 2016, responding to homelessness has been a Premier's Priority. Youth homelessness was an original Premier's Priority, which aimed to 'increase the proportion of young people who successfully move from Specialist Homelessness Services to long-term accommodation to more than 34 per cent by 2019'. The Department of Premier and Cabinet reported that this target was exceeded by June 2019.

In July 2019, a new series of Premier's Priorities were announced, including to 'reduce street homelessness across New South Wales by 50 per cent by 2025'. As part of its efforts to achieve this goal the Department advised that it had planned to expand localised versions of assertive outreach state-wide. Assertive outreach involves a specialised team that proactively engages with people sleeping rough to assist them in accessing the housing and homelessness service system.

In 2019, the NSW Premier signed an agreement to halve street homelessness across the state, from a 2016 baseline of 2,588 people, by 2025. The agreement formalised a joint commitment between the Institute of Global Homelessness, City of Sydney, NSW Government and the sector's leading NGOs to collaborate towards ending street sleeping in New South Wales (the Vanguard Cities Initiative).

The Strategy has more measures specific to people sleeping rough than those focused on other groups and more people rough sleeping are targeted for assistance than the number of people experiencing other forms of homelessness. This is in line with the Vanguard Cities Initiative and the current Premier's Priority to reduce street homelessness.

Both the Premier's Priorities and the agreement working towards ending street sleeping bolster - but sit outside of - the Homelessness Strategy. They are outside the scope of this audit.

COVID-19 response to prevent and respond to homelessness

COVID-19 is a respiratory disease caused by a new form of coronavirus. The first evidence of the COVID-19 virus emerged in December 2019. Throughout January 2020, the World Health Organisation issued alerts about a novel coronavirus and encouraged health entities to take precautions. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the coronavirus to be a global health emergency of international concern. On 11 March 2020, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. It had spread to 114 countries including Australia.

The NSW Government announced initiatives to prevent and respond to homelessness in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. These included emergency temporary accommodation, private rental subsidies, domestic and family violence services, stable accommodation for people sleeping rough, additional supports for unaccompanied children and young people under the age of 16 in homelessness services, and deep cleaning of crisis refuges and congregate care properties. Further detail on these initiatives is provided in Appendix six.

The bulk of the COVID-19 homelessness funding was directed to two key measures:

- emergency temporary accommodation for people sleeping rough or in large crisis accommodation in which physical/social distancing was difficult to achieve, funded at \$39.0 million
- longer term housing for people sleeping rough assisted into temporary accommodation during COVID-19 (the Together Home program), funded at \$69.9 million.

These two initiatives are the focus of this audit. Other parts of the Department's COVID-19 response to homelessness are outside the scope of this audit.

1.3 About this audit

This audit objective was to determine how effectively the Department is implementing the NSW Homelessness Strategy and addressing street homelessness in its COVID-19 response. We addressed the audit objective by answering three questions:

- Has the Department effectively developed an evidence-based Strategy and established supporting governance and operational arrangements to implement it?
- Is the Department ensuring that the Strategy is achieving its objectives and outcomes to prevent and improve responses to homelessness?
- Is the Department effectively supporting people sleeping rough into temporary accommodation during COVID-19, and supporting them to transition into more sustainable longer-term housing?

The audit's assessment of the COVID-19 response to homelessness focused on events between 1 January 2020 to 30 April 2021. It focused on the enhanced temporary accommodation provided to individuals sleeping rough during the pandemic, and the Together Home program which aims to transition them into more sustainable longer-term housing. The pandemic was ongoing at the time this report was published.

The Department also undertook a range of other measures and administered related funding in its COVID-19 response to homelessness, such as deep cleaning of crisis refuges and congregate care facilities, and additional rental subsidies to those made vulnerable as a result of COVID. These actions are summarised in Appendix six and are outside the audit scope.

This audit has not assessed the Department's commissioning of specialist homelessness services, which comprises over \$1.0 billion in funding over four years from 2018–19. Our 2019 'Contracting of non-government organisations' performance audit assessed how effectively and efficiently the Department contracts NGOs to deliver community services, including homelessness services.

The Premier's Priority to reduce the number of people experiencing street homelessness is also outside the audit scope.

More information on the audit approach is in Appendix seven.

2. NSW Homelessness Strategy

This chapter considers how effectively the NSW Homelessness Strategy was developed and is currently being implemented by the Department of Communities and Justice.

2.1 Developing the Strategy

The Department developed the Strategy largely based on stakeholder input and available evidence of what works

The Department developed the Homelessness Strategy based on the international and local evidence available on what works to prevent, reduce and address homelessness. This included taking account of lessons learned from evaluations of the previous strategy, the Homelessness Action Plan 2009–2014, and of feedback from broad stakeholder consultations.

There were existing gaps in the available evidence base which made it difficult for the Department to develop a holistic, long-term state-wide solution to homelessness. The Strategy aims to fill some of the evidence gaps, to identify the best interventions for broader roll out across the state after the end of the Strategy's five-year term (July 2023).

Some of the actions under the Strategy have supporting evidence (see Appendix two). Other actions are intended to generate evidence through assessing new linked datasets, testing a range of initiatives in a small number of sites or pilots, and evaluating existing programs more robustly.

The Department also undertook broad consultations with key stakeholders to develop the Strategy. It received 120 written submissions and facilitated consultations with around 430 participants across 15 districts across the state. These included dedicated workshops with Aboriginal people, young people and people with lived experience of homelessness.

The Strategy broadly reflects the themes that emerged from the submissions and consultations, while noting that this feedback was framed by the strategic directions and questions posed by the discussion paper.

The Department focused Strategy actions on most of the groups identified as being more vulnerable to homelessness in the evidence. However, only some of these groups receive a tailored response involving service design, eligibility criteria or program delivery specific to the group. Aboriginal people, members of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and LGBTQI+ people do not receive targeted responses under the Strategy actions. Although some research suggests that persons with disability are also vulnerable to, and within, homelessness, this population is not given specific focus either in the Strategy or through its actions.

The Department received significantly less funding than sought for the Strategy

Approved funding was significantly less than that sought by the Department. The Department repurposed existing resources, dropped some proposed actions and scaled others down to fit within the final funding envelope. This limited the reach of the Strategy actions in terms of geographic locations and individuals targeted for assistance.

The Homelessness Strategy was approved by the government in February 2018. Funding for actions that could not be delivered within existing resources was to be approved as part of a business case during the 2018–19 Budget process.

The Department prepared a business case seeking significant new funding for the Homelessness Strategy. The Strategy was developed as a five-year framework for action to drive a systemic response to homelessness with a focus on prevention and early intervention. The business case was in line with Treasury procedural requirements and included a cost benefit analysis of options.

The Department recognised that limited available evidence on effective measures to prevent and reduce homelessness would not meet the threshold for a cost benefit analysis required by NSW Treasury. It sought significant new investment to extend initiatives with proven effect, and to build the evidence base about other interventions.

However, the Department did not receive the quantum of funding it requested. New funding comprised \$61.4 million and the Department reprioritised a further \$107.6 million in existing resources to the Strategy. Even so, the Department did not progress some proposed actions, and scaled others back to fit within the Strategy's final funding envelope of \$169 million.

The Department directed the bulk of Strategy funding to supports for people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness

While seeking to build the evidence base on what works to prevent homelessness or intervene earlier, the Department directed 95 per cent of Strategy resourcing to support people at risk of, or already experiencing, homelessness.

Ten of the Strategy's 21 actions directly target people at risk of, or already experiencing, homelessness. These actions, set out in Exhibit 2 below, make up the bulk of the Strategy resourcing, comprising almost \$160 million of the Strategy's final funding envelope of \$169 million. The remaining funding is from existing resources for data analysis, workforce training and interagency action. Further detail on the funding for each of the Strategy actions is provided at Appendix two.

Exhibit 2: Key initiatives targeting people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness under the NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018–23

Action	Detail
Universal screening	Screen high school students for risk of homelessness and provide early intervention supports to them and/or their families.
Sustaining tenancies	Increase early intervention action for at-risk tenancies in the private market through localised real estate engagement, and in social housing through case management for vulnerable tenants.
Home and Healthy	Engage with people at risk of homelessness while in a hospital, mental health facility, alcohol and other drug treatment centre or other medical setting; and provide case management to support them into housing, to engage with work and to connect to the local community.
Supported Transition and Engagement Program (STEP)	Continue to implement STEP to provide housing and wrap around supports for people sleeping rough.
Core and cluster accommodation	Provide additional, purpose-built accommodation for women and children escaping domestic and family violence.
Social and Affordable Housing Fund, Phase 2	Provide 1,200 new social and affordable dwellings, with 30 per cent to be in regional New South Wales.
Specialist housing for older people	Deliver targeted social housing options for older women.
Youth Foyer	Provide access to safe and affordable accommodation for young people leaving out-of-home care to engage with education, training and employment through delivering one purpose-built 'Youth Foyer' dwelling.

Action	Detail
Staying Home, Leaving Violence expansion	Extend the 'Staying Home, Leaving Violence' program to an additional five sites, to increase options for women and children experiencing domestic and family violence to stay safe at home.
Assertive outreach expansion (including co-located health services)	Expand assertive outreach to people experiencing street homelessness in areas of high need (Newcastle and Tweed Heads) to assist them to access accommodation and other supports; and embed health care workers in outreach teams.

Source: Department of Communities and Justice.

The Strategy's geographical and client reach is limited

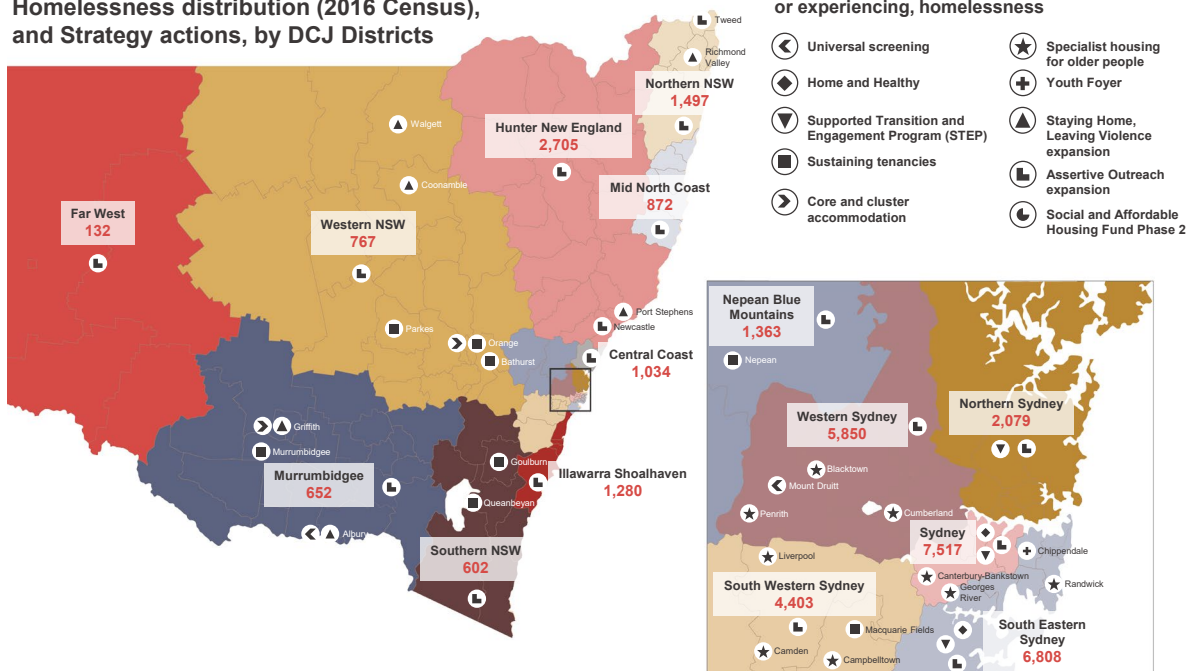
The reach of the Strategy is limited in terms of the number of locations where actions are delivered, and the number of people targeted for support.

The Department has clearly communicated the Strategy aims to intervene earlier to prevent people from experiencing homelessness; to provide effective supports to people experiencing homelessness; and to create an integrated person-centred service system. Although these objectives are clear, they are not being pursued state-wide.

At least one Strategy action is available in each of the Department's 16 districts across the state (Exhibit 3). However, with the exception of assertive outreach targeting people sleeping rough, the Strategy actions providing direct supports to individuals are delivered in just 34 of the 128 local government areas across New South Wales.

Exhibit 3: Number of people experiencing homelessness, and locations of Strategy actions, across the state

Homelessness distribution (2016 Census), and Strategy actions, by DCJ Districts



Source: Department of Communities and Justice and Audit Office NSW analysis 2021.

The Department estimates that Strategy actions should reach around 57,000 people at risk of or experiencing homelessness altogether (although this does not adjust for potential double-counting where an individual may be targeted by more than one program).

This includes screening 20,000 secondary school students for the risk of homelessness, and encouraging financial institutions, energy and telecommunications companies to provide information on financial hardship support measures to 30,000 customers.

The Department aims to target approximately 8,200 vulnerable people through Strategy actions that provide direct supports to prevent or address homelessness - such as through purpose-built housing or case management. However, a variety of indicators suggest the number of people needing such support is much greater than the number targeted through the Strategy, including:

- census data which estimates more than 37,700 people were experiencing homelessness in New South Wales in 2016
- specialist homelessness services data which shows more than 70,000 clients were supported with accommodation, counselling, legal or other supports in New South Wales in 2019–20, while over 20,000 clients who sought accommodation services were not provided with that service
- University of NSW research that suggests more than 130,000 households in the bottom 20 per cent of income earners in New South Wales in 2018–19 were either experiencing housing stress or were homeless.

The number of people expected to be assisted to avoid or leave homelessness under Strategy actions - around 8,000 individuals - represents approximately 22 per cent of the number of people experiencing homelessness in New South Wales at the time of the last census (37,715 people). This does not include the number of people at risk of homelessness.

The Department has started to include some practice changes tested through Strategy pilots in business as usual state-wide practice, including:

- assertive outreach to identify and engage with people experiencing street homelessness
- frontline staff training in trauma-informed practices
- practice guidelines for sustaining tenancies
- active referrals to housing for people exiting custody.

However, progress towards the Strategy aims is generally confined to pockets where actions are being trialled.

2.2 Implementing the Strategy

Governance and operational arrangements supporting implementation of the Strategy need to be more representative

The Department put in place governance and operational arrangements that supported the development of the Strategy and are facilitating effective delivery of Strategy actions. However, there is an opportunity to strengthen the ongoing involvement of key stakeholders in overseeing the Strategy and driving the plan that succeeds it.

The key strategic governance body for the Strategy is the Housing and Homelessness Steering Committee (SteerCo), originally formed to oversee social housing reforms known as Future Directions. SteerCo has CEO or Deputy Secretary and district executive membership from the NSW Government agencies with portfolio responsibilities for housing and homelessness: the Department, the NSW Land and Housing Corporation (LAHC) and the Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO).

The Department's housing and homelessness project management office (HHPMO) coordinates reporting on the range of Strategy actions, and on housing and homelessness efforts outside of the Strategy. The HHPMO collates detailed reporting on the status and key risks of Strategy implementation for the attention of senior decision makers on the SteerCo. But it does not monitor progress on individual Strategy actions, nor challenge or verify the information provided by program managers. The SteerCo brings together senior decision makers from the government's housing and homelessness policy and operational arms.

Following an internal governance review managed by the HHPMO, the SteerCo has recently expanded its membership to include representatives from partner agencies outside of the housing portfolio, and from the peak organisations representing mainstream and Aboriginal community housing providers. The review considered that the SteerCo's remit should be broadened beyond the Homelessness Strategy and Future Directions social housing reforms, to oversight homelessness and social housing more broadly.

However, the SteerCo still does not include representation from people with lived experience of homelessness, the specialist homelessness services sector or local councils (which have responsibilities to manage public places, and often participate in assertive outreach initiatives targeting people experiencing street homelessness). There is an opportunity to involve these critical stakeholders in key decisions about the delivery of the current Strategy, and the design of the plan that succeeds it, as well as in refining SteerCo to oversee social housing and homelessness policy, strategy and system performance more broadly.

The Department does not address the risks and realities of Aboriginal homelessness

The Department has not included any dedicated actions or investment in initiatives targeting Aboriginal people vulnerable to homelessness, and failed to reflect key aspects of Aboriginal stakeholder feedback, in the Strategy. Relevant governance and operational arrangements do not overcome this key gap.

The Strategy includes a commitment to link with the AHO's strategy, and to provide cultural competency training to Departmental and NGO service provider staff. However, although senior decision makers from the AHO and the Department participate in respective governance arrangements for the Homelessness Strategy and the AHO strategy for Aboriginal social housing (Strong Families, Strong Communities), there are few connections between the strategies in practice.

The Department supports internal governance groups Ngarra (Aboriginal staff network) and the Aboriginal Outcomes Housing, Homelessness and Disability Working Group. The Department also undertook comprehensive consultations with key stakeholders, including Aboriginal stakeholders and people with lived experience of homelessness, to develop the Homelessness Strategy.

However, the Strategy does not address the feedback of Aboriginal stakeholders who called for:

- a greater focus on seeing and addressing the specific nature and causes of homelessness for Aboriginal people
- strong involvement of Aboriginal organisations and communities in developing policy and service responses
- recognition that support to address homelessness risks is often not sought by Aboriginal people due to the fear of unwarranted child removal and/or a lack of cultural safety in mainstream practices
- investment in more Aboriginal community controlled or delivered services and a local, place-based approach.

A number of these themes were evident in feedback on previous reform directions many years ago and reiterated in recent research on Aboriginal homelessness commissioned by the Department, and by the range of Aboriginal stakeholders we consulted. These elements are not directly covered by the AHO strategy, and the AHO advised that it does not have portfolio responsibility or resourcing to address homelessness.

A quality accreditation system for Department-funded specialist homelessness services is being rolled out under the Strategy. This will condition future Department funding on services demonstrating they are meeting standards including culturally appropriate processes, and Aboriginal cultural competency. These will be applied to all NSW specialist homelessness services providers from 1 July 2024.

Although the quality standards are expected to drive improvements in the cultural competency of mainstream service providers, they will not - on their own - address the desire for more Aboriginal workers and community-controlled services. The Department acknowledges that it can do better in working with Aboriginal representatives to co-design and co-deliver responses to homelessness.

The Department is improving its identification of people vulnerable to homelessness, enabling earlier intervention

Although there are clear goals in the Strategy to intervene earlier, until very recently, the Department did not have robust enough data to inform its approach.

There is no single, regular means of identifying the extent of homelessness in all its forms in New South Wales (see Appendix four). The key data sources rely on individuals making contact with the Department, or NGOs, to be counted. It is more difficult to recognise people vulnerable to homelessness where they have not sought formal assistance or are not experiencing street homelessness (and visible to assertive outreach teams).

The Department takes steps to overcome this in partnership with NGOs such as through 'Connections Week' (formerly 'Registry Week') surveys of people in crisis accommodation, boarding houses, temporary accommodation or sleeping rough. But this does not capture 'couch surfing' or severely overcrowded households (the most common form of homelessness in New South Wales). Nor does it identify people at risk of homelessness before it happens, which is necessary for prevention and early intervention efforts to be targeted.

This is particularly problematic for identifying Aboriginal people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. All of the Aboriginal stakeholders we consulted highlighted that homelessness for Aboriginal people is rarely in the form of rough sleeping, since family and community members will look after others who are without a safe place to stay. Stakeholders advised that this manifests as couch surfing, severely overcrowded households or other precarious forms of housing.

The Department is working to enhance its data collection and analysis to identify people vulnerable to homelessness at an earlier point in time. Two key projects are described in Exhibit 4 below.

Exhibit 4: Improving the early identification of homelessness

Pathways to Homelessness

In February 2021 the Department finalised a data linkage project called 'Pathways to Homelessness' to identify how clients move through government services and into the specialist homelessness services system.

It is one of the most comprehensive datasets on homelessness assembled in Australia, and includes de-identified data relating to 600,000 people who have used specialist homelessness services, Australian Government health and welfare services or one of 16 other NSW Government services across housing, justice, health, education and child protection services.

Analysis on the dataset provides information about people at high risk of presenting to homelessness services and potential intervention points for the different groups most at risk. The Department intends to use this information to increase early identification and intervention strategies to support people before they enter the homelessness service system. Early research on the dataset suggests that strong intervention points to prevent future homelessness include:

- walk-in mental health services
- court appearances (including Youth Justice Conferences and cautions)
- Legal Aid.

The Department expects Pathways to Homelessness to also help it to better assess the relative effectiveness of different interventions in the future, if combined with evaluation evidence.

Universal screening in schools (the Geelong Model Project)

The Geelong Model Project aims to screen secondary students for risk of homelessness (for them or their families) and identify opportunities for early intervention in partnership with youth homelessness services and schools. Originally developed and delivered in Geelong, Victoria, the approach is being trialled in seven high schools across two locations in New South Wales (four in Mount Druitt and three in Albury) under the Homelessness Strategy.

The program uses a risk assessment tool in the form of a questionnaire that participating students complete, as well as school staff observations about vulnerable students. This data is analysed using an algorithm that identifies vulnerable children and young people from the risk profile, and these students are interviewed by Geelong Project team members to confirm their circumstances. Referrals to support services are then offered.

Source: Department of Communities and Justice 2021.

The Department is monitoring whether the Strategy is achieving its objectives and outcomes

The Department has identified clear outcomes, indicators and data collection for tracking the actions under the Strategy. The Department has targets for the number of clients the Strategy actions aim to assist, and collects regular data on the number of clients these actually reach.

However, the Department's regular internal reporting has limited detail on progress towards meeting intended outcomes of its Strategy actions. Departmental program managers track implementation progress towards objectives, such as construction updates, number of participants entering and exiting programs, and locations where pilots are operational.

Formal assessment of the outcomes achieved is occurring through the evaluations of the Strategy actions, and an external evaluation of the overall Strategy. An interim evaluation report on the Strategy to Year 3 is expected to be completed by September 2021, and a final evaluation report to Year 5 is due by July 2023.

More information about progress towards desired outcomes between these milestones would provide greater value to the reports produced for the governance groups overseeing the Strategy.

The Department developed and is implementing a sound evaluation framework, but clear evidence of outcomes may not be available at the end of the Strategy

The Department has developed a sound evaluation framework for assessing the outcomes from both the Strategy and each action under it. It is implementing this with commissioned evaluations. The evaluation framework has been designed to generate evidence sufficient for a cost benefit analysis to support a future budget bid. However, delays in delivery of some actions under the Strategy and the time taken for outcomes to show up in the data may impact on the strength of the evidence available at the end of the Strategy.

The evaluation framework was informed and is monitored by the Monitoring and Evaluation Advisory Group (MEAG). The MEAG is chaired by an independent member and consists of key stakeholders from Government, academia and service providers.

The Department aims to have the first evaluation report on the Strategy, covering the first three years of the Strategy (July 2018–June 2021), by September 2021. This will include the results from individual evaluations or reviews of five of 13 Strategy actions in scope. The Department, with advice from the MEAG, has ensured that these evaluations are using common procedures to allow for comparative analysis between the different Strategy actions being assessed.

However, the findings from the individual evaluations will reflect the different stages of implementation of the programs, and the ability to draw conclusions on longer-term outcomes and Strategy-level outcomes will be limited at this stage. They will not support a comprehensive assessment of the Strategy's cost effectiveness.

The final evaluation report of the overall Strategy will be prepared by an external evaluator and is due by July 2023. This evaluation will assess the extent to which the objectives of the Strategy have been achieved, and the influence of broader policy and practice on program implementation and client outcomes. It is intended to inform the development of a business case for funding the next homelessness strategy.

Four of the Strategy actions have encountered implementation delays currently ranging from between three to eight months. This may delay the clarity and strength of outcomes data for the evaluation reports at the end of the Strategy term.

This, in turn, raises risks that the evaluation may not provide the Department with the evidence required to secure funding for a comprehensive strategy to follow the existing strategy. This also creates uncertainty about service continuity during any gap in time between the two strategies.

2.3 Progress made

The Department has supported over 4,000 individuals at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness and has made progress in delivering most Strategy actions

The Department has reported it has made progress on most action items in the Strategy in line with implementation plans (see Appendix three). As the Department commences actions that have staggered start dates and resolves delays with some construction and cross-agency projects, it expects to deliver all actions, and reach the target number of clients, by the time the Strategy concludes.

As noted above, Strategy actions target approximately 8,200 individuals with direct supports to prevent or address homelessness (see Exhibit 2). The Department's data suggests that over 4,100 individuals have received support through a Strategy action to avoid or address homelessness. This represents approximately 50 per cent of the target number, at the mid-point of the Strategy's five-year term.

Construction of purpose-built accommodation for women and children escaping domestic and family violence, and for older women, is significantly behind schedule, although the Department expects they will be delivered within the term of the Strategy. Once completed, these two actions are expected to support 380 individuals in total.

COVID-19 also delayed work on 'No Exits from Government Services into Homelessness', a multi-agency framework to improve exit planning from NSW Government services to prevent homelessness (see Exhibit 5, below).

Meetings of the cross-agency governance group and publication of the policy framework were put on hold during 2020 due to the pandemic and competing priorities for the Department and partner agencies. However, the whole-of-government 2021–22 action plan has been finalised and related data collection and monitoring began in 2021.

Individual agency projects for No Exits were not delayed in the same way. Those that were operational during 2020 include:

- Community Corrections and Housing changing their state-wide referral practices and support options for people leaving custody
- the 'Home and Healthy' social impact investment under the Strategy which provides case management to help people leaving hospital and other health facilities avoid homelessness and into employment
- the Futures Planning and Support project which offers support and links to relevant government services for young people aged 17–25 years who have been in out-of-home care.

Exhibit 5: No Exits from Government Services into Homelessness

This measure focuses on improving agency planning and assistance for people leaving NSW Government care or services including out-of-home care, correctional and youth justice centres, health facilities such as hospitals and mental health institutions, and social housing following a failed tenancy.

In 2012, the Department released the Framework for Multi-Agency Client Transition Planning to Prevent Homelessness to strengthen NSW Government agencies' exit planning to prevent vulnerable people leaving government services into homelessness.

As part of the NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018–23, the NSW Government endorsed a review of this framework and of agencies' exit planning practices. The review was undertaken by an inter-agency group consisting of representatives of the Department of Communities and Justice, Department of Premier and Cabinet, NSW Treasury, NSW Health, Department of Education, Legal Aid NSW, Aboriginal Affairs NSW and the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment. It resulted in the updating of the 2012 framework to form the No Exits from Government Services into Homelessness initiative under the Strategy.

The revised framework includes 11 mutually agreed principles, including clear and detailed transition planning from the point of entry; housing solutions linked to support; appropriate services available at transition; and commitment to interagency cooperation. Development of the 2021–22 Action Plan is now complete which identifies relevant existing initiatives and data, service and support gaps, and opportunities for coordination across programs and agencies. Work is underway to develop data collection and processes to support progress reporting against annual action plans.

Source: Audit Office of NSW Analysis 2021.

Under the Strategy, the Department originally proposed to develop a public online dashboard to improve the transparency of funding and outcomes. The dashboard was expected to consolidate Australian Government data, specialist homelessness services' data and program funding, as well as output data on NSW Government homelessness programs.

The Department subsequently decided not to progress the dashboard, as the information to be included was available across multiple regular public reports. However, stakeholders have reported difficulty in finding complete and up-to-date information on the outcomes and client numbers for specific Strategy actions.

The Department is unlikely to achieve a key objective within the Strategy term: create an integrated, person-centred system

The Department had proposed specific measures to improve service navigation under its focus area of creating an integrated, person-centred system when seeking significant funding for the Strategy. These actions included:

- dedicated staff positions to play a linkage or care coordination role for people seeking assistance for complex needs
- funding to enhance sector systems to improve referrals, increase understanding of services and service capacity
- funding to enable client information/case management sharing.

These initiatives were not progressed under the Strategy once approved funding was settled as it was significantly less than that sought. Remaining actions focus on internal government processes rather than client pathways and service connections.

The Department advises that other Strategy actions under different focus areas should contribute to building an integrated and person-centred system, such as:

- initiatives which identify effective points for government agencies to intervene to prevent or reduce homelessness, such as Pathways into Homelessness (see Exhibit 4) and No Exits from Government Services into Homelessness (see Exhibit 5)
- a trial of outcomes-based commissioning of specialist homelessness services under the Strategy that will examine longer-term client and system-level outcomes.

Even though the individual actions under this objective may be delivered on time, and these data and research projects should yield relevant insights, without the measures originally proposed it is difficult to see how an integrated, person-centred system will be achieved in practice within the term of the Strategy.

Creating an integrated, person-centred system remains an important area of focus. Stakeholders with lived experience of homelessness told us that the service system continues to be fragmented and difficult to navigate to obtain the supports needed.

Actions may not be scaled up, perpetuating the Strategy's limited reach and narrow impact on homelessness

There is a risk that future funding for a comprehensive strategy will not be secured - and prevention and early intervention activities not continued or scaled up - if the evidence on effectiveness is incomplete, mixed or unclear when the Strategy concludes.

The Department's approach of testing interventions and building the evidence base through the Strategy was well-described and provided a clear rationale in its original advice to government. The Strategy focuses on demonstrating 'what works' to prevent homelessness and intervene earlier through piloting and evaluating key actions. This will guide future larger-scale investment in initiatives across the state after the Strategy concludes.

The Department intends to use the findings from interim evaluation reports, due by September 2021, to determine the programs and pilots with promising evidence that should continue to the end of June 2024. It expects this to enable more qualitative and quantitative data to be available to the evaluations, as well as to support service continuity. However, delays in delivery of some actions under the Strategy, and the time taken for outcomes to be achieved and show up in the data, will impact on the strength of the evidence available at the mid-term and final Strategy evaluations.

The Department expects that the Strategy evaluation will inform projections of its impact and benefits when a business case for future funding is developed.

In our 2020 audit of the Department's out-of-home-care reforms, 'Their Futures Matter' (TFM), we found that the Department and partner agencies could not reach key decisions on reprioritising funding for early intervention activities, or on scaling up pilots across New South Wales.

This was, in large part, because the evidence base was not robust enough at the end of the four-year TFM reform period to determine which existing or trialled interventions were most effective in supporting vulnerable children and families.

We noted that, without wider implementation, there was a risk that lessons from the TFM pilots would be lost, and – at best – the supports they delivered would remain fragmented in trial sites across the state.

A similar risk looms for the Department's plan to scale up the Strategy actions across New South Wales through a comprehensive plan if evidence is unclear or mixed at the end of the Strategy term. As discussed above, the Strategy's reach is already limited to around one-quarter of the state's local government areas, and 19 per cent of the number of specialist homelessness service clients in 2019–20. If the existing actions were retained, and no expansion occurred, the Strategy would continue to have a narrow impact on homelessness in New South Wales.

This sits against a backdrop of increasing need for housing and homelessness supports in the state that may become more acute once the full economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are felt.

3. COVID-19 and homelessness

This chapter examines how effectively the Department of Communities and Justice addressed homelessness in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how well it is applying lessons learned from the pandemic to future policy and service development.

3.1 Background

The first evidence of the COVID-19 coronavirus emerged in December 2019 when clusters of viral pneumonia cases were identified in Wuhan, China. In January 2020, the international media started to report on what appeared to be a growing health risk in mainland China, with the first case outside of China being recorded on 8 January 2020. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak to be a global health emergency of international concern, WHO's highest level of alarm.

Australia recorded its first COVID-19 case on 25 January 2020 from a returning traveller who recovered in hotel quarantine. At the beginning of March 2020, New South Wales recorded its first person-to-person transmission, prior to the WHO declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. Towards the end of March 2020, the NSW Government began introducing public health orders to impose restrictions and assist in stopping the spread of COVID-19.

The Department's key steps in its COVID-19 response to street homelessness are outlined in the COVID-19 timeline at Exhibit 6. Appendix six provides further detail on other aspects of the Department's response to the pandemic focused on other types of homelessness.

Exhibit 6: Timeline of COVID-19 and the Department's response to street homelessness in March 2020

Date	Event
December 2020	• Health clinicians in Wuhan province of China note a viral pneumonia with unknown causes
25 January 2020	• First COVID-19 case in Australia is recorded
27 February 2020	• Australian Prime Minister says the outbreak will become a pandemic and activates the Australian Government's emergency response plan
2 March 2020	• First person-to-person COVID-19 transmission occurs in New South Wales
3 March 2020	• First COVID-19 related death occurs in New South Wales
11 March 2020	• World Health Organisation declares COVID-19 a global pandemic
15 March 2020	• New South Wales bans gatherings of 500+ people
16 March 2020	• The Department commences regular communications re COVID-19 with the specialist homelessness services sector, and starts setting up processes to monitor service capacity, changes to service delivery, services' needs for support with ensuring COVID-19 safety, and to respond
17 March 2020	• NSW Government announces a \$2.3 billion health and economic stimulus package

Date	Event
20 March 2020	- Australia closes its international borders to foreign travellers - NSW Health advise of positive COVID-19 cases on the Ruby Princess cruise ship
23 March 2020	- The NSW Premier announces new restrictions following the decision by the National Cabinet in which non-essential activities and businesses would be temporarily shut down - The Department creates a dedicated webpage on what the shutdown means for homelessness services, including a focus on supporting people sleeping rough into crisis or temporary accommodation for safety.
24 March 2020	Australian Prime Minister advises Australians to only leave the house when it is necessary
27 March 2020	NSW Government announces \$1.0 billion in stimulus funding, including \$34.1 million to prevent people experiencing homelessness
30 March 2020	- The Department receives a directive from its Minister to support people sleeping rough in Sydney and people in large crisis accommodation facilities (congregate care) into temporary accommodation within a week, in order to manage the public health risk posed by COVID-19 - The Department pre-books 380 rooms to accommodate people experiencing street homelessness or needing to leave large crisis accommodation facilities to enable social distancing, for three months, in the Sydney metropolitan area - The Department establishes the Sydney Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce with sector partners, and the Taskforce holds its first meeting
29 July 2020	The NSW Government announces \$36.1 million in funding for Together Home, a program that aims to move people sleeping rough who are in temporary accommodation into more stable housing
3 November 2020	The NSW Government announces a second tranche of Together Home funding, with an investment of \$29.0 million
1 January 2021	The NSW Government announces an Aboriginal-led model and expansion of the Together Home program in the Hunter Central Coast District, at a cost of \$1.3 million

Source: Audit Office of NSW analysis 2021.

3.2 Planning the COVID-19 response to homelessness

The Department effectively planned and implemented a homelessness emergency response to the pandemic

The day after the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 12 March 2020, the sector peak body Homelessness NSW publicly called for a coordinated plan and more temporary accommodation to assist people sleeping rough and people in crisis accommodation to self-isolate.

On 16 March 2020, the Department contacted specialist homelessness service providers to share advice on responding to COVID-19 cases, announce modifications to service delivery and point to relevant information sources. The Department also explored options with temporary accommodation providers to support self-isolation for clients where homelessness services could not facilitate this. It developed processes to track changes in organisations' service delivery and issues in accessing temporary accommodation or other supports.

By 22 March 2020, the Department had contacted specialist homelessness services across New South Wales to identify the sector's needs and risks in the COVID-19 context, including service continuity and staff arrangements, self-isolation options, food supplies, cleaning schedules and personal protective equipment. It used the results to develop district risk assessments and district business continuity plans, and to provide extra supports for services.

The NSW Premier announced new restrictions, following the decision by the National Cabinet, in which non-essential activities and businesses would be temporarily shut down, on 23 March 2020. The Department created a dedicated webpage on the same day outlining the implications of the shutdown for people experiencing homelessness and services. It advised that the Department's assertive outreach teams would be focusing on supporting people sleeping rough into crisis or temporary accommodation for safety, given their vulnerability to the virus. The Department significantly increased its assertive outreach patrols by staff, specialist caseworkers and health professionals to engage people sleeping rough and offer accommodation.

From 24 March 2020, the Department commenced regular meetings with the NSW homelessness peak organisations, to understand and respond to the issues the sector was facing, and to collaborate on responses. On 26 March 2020, the Department prepared terms of reference for a cross-sectoral taskforce to drive the COVID-19 response to street homelessness. The proposed membership included the peaks, a range of homelessness and community housing service providers, local council and health network/district representatives.

The NSW Premier announced the second stage of a Health and Economic Stimulus package, in response to COVID-19, on 27 March 2020. In this package, \$34.0 million was earmarked as a boost in funding to prevent homelessness. This included \$14.3 million for emergency accommodation to enable people to self-isolate, particularly people experiencing street homelessness and those in specialist homelessness services or domestic violence refuges, 'for as long as is necessary to protect them at this time'. An additional \$25.0 million was added to the temporary accommodation allocation in June 2020.

On 30 March 2020, the Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services directed the Department to rapidly expand assertive outreach services to support people sleeping rough in the inner city into temporary accommodation to manage the public health risks. The Minister also asked the Department to move clients out of large homelessness crisis facilities (congregate care) to enable those accommodation services to adhere to social distancing requirements. This was to be done within a week. The Department managed to effectively meet this short timeline by using the stimulus funding, pre-booking 380 hotel, motel and serviced apartment rooms, and enhancing its pre-existing assertive outreach and temporary accommodation programs.

The Department moved to establish the cross-sectoral 'Sydney Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce' (the Taskforce) with NGO and agency partners on 30 March 2020 and it met the same day to confirm the terms of reference, and the critical cross-agency issues needing resolution. The Taskforce is discussed in detail, below.

The Department provided advice to the Minister at the end of March 2020 on COVID-19 and temporary accommodation for people sleeping rough. This briefing spoke to predicted levels of demand, sourcing additional providers, clients needing to stay longer than existing policy settings allowed for, logistical matters and expected financial impacts. This informed adjustments that the Department made to the standard temporary accommodation program between April and June 2020 (outlined in Appendix five).

The Department prepared expert guidelines for specialist homelessness services on infection control, managing the mental health needs of staff and clients, managing service disruptions, and considerations for vulnerable clients. It started disseminating these to the sector on 31 March 2020.

Some stakeholders told us they were concerned about a perceived lack of advice and coordination from the Department in the early weeks of the pandemic before the response was announced, and about early implementation issues. The Department worked to resolve these in partnership with the Taskforce, over the first three weeks of April 2020.

The Taskforce endorsed a plan for delivery of accommodation and health support for people sleeping rough, and those experiencing homelessness in large congregate care facilities, in the inner city of Sydney during the pandemic on 14 April 2020. This plan was monitored as a standing item at each Taskforce meeting. The Taskforce considered that elements of the plan could be applied in other locations and to other cohorts of people experiencing homelessness, where local governance arrangements were in place.

The COVID-19 response was targeted to people sleeping rough and people in large crisis accommodation sites

The Department targeted its enhanced temporary accommodation to the groups of people experiencing homelessness identified at greatest risk for COVID-19.

The Department followed NSW Health guidelines and sought the advice of homelessness peak organisations on the impact of COVID-19 on their members' services and clients. This identified that people sleeping rough and those in large crisis accommodation sites unable to physically distance from other people were at greatest risk of contracting the virus.

International evidence also indicated that risk of transmission of COVID-19 may be greater among people sleeping rough as most have limited access to basic hygiene supplies or showering facilities. As many people sleeping rough have chronic mental and physical conditions, health experts considered it likely that the severity of symptoms would be significant if a person sleeping rough contracted COVID-19.

The Department's homelessness response to COVID-19 had capacity to provide temporary accommodation for all people who self-identified as sleeping rough during the pandemic.

People experiencing other forms of homelessness - including couch surfing and severely crowded dwellings - were considered to be at relatively lower risk of catching the virus because they were in existing households.

The Department relied on existing and sound data to forecast areas of need

The Department matched the location of temporary accommodation to sound data on need, drawn from recent state-wide street counts, assertive outreach patrols and advice from peak organisations and other Taskforce members.

Under the Premier's Priority to reduce the number of people experiencing street homelessness, the Department had conducted a state-wide count of people sleeping rough across the state in partnership with local councils and non-government organisations in February 2020. According to the street count there were 1,314 people assumed to be sleeping rough across the state, with 678 people sleeping rough across the Sydney metropolitan area.

From early April 2020, the Department pre-booked 380 individual rooms for three months with 22 different accommodation providers across metropolitan Sydney including the inner city, Coogee, Mascot, Liverpool, Campbelltown, Parramatta, Blacktown, Miranda and Minchinbury.

The Department booked additional temporary accommodation, in places of need, when required. Where accommodation was required in areas outside of Sydney, the Department used its pre-existing temporary accommodation provider register to secure relevant accommodation.

The Taskforce also used local knowledge and intelligence regarding areas of need and responses required.

The Department enhanced its existing temporary accommodation program

Under normal conditions, the Department's temporary accommodation program is the final safety net where there are no other accommodation options, and assistance is generally limited to a few days in most cases.

During the pandemic, people who identified as sleeping rough were automatically granted 30 days temporary accommodation, with the potential for further extensions. This was intended to enable clients to have sufficient time to engage with housing staff from the Department, be linked to relevant support services and plan for an exit to safe and suitable alternative housing (which was considered likely to take more time in the context of COVID-19). Appendix five details how the enhanced temporary accommodation program provided during the coronavirus response differed from the features of the pre-existing program.

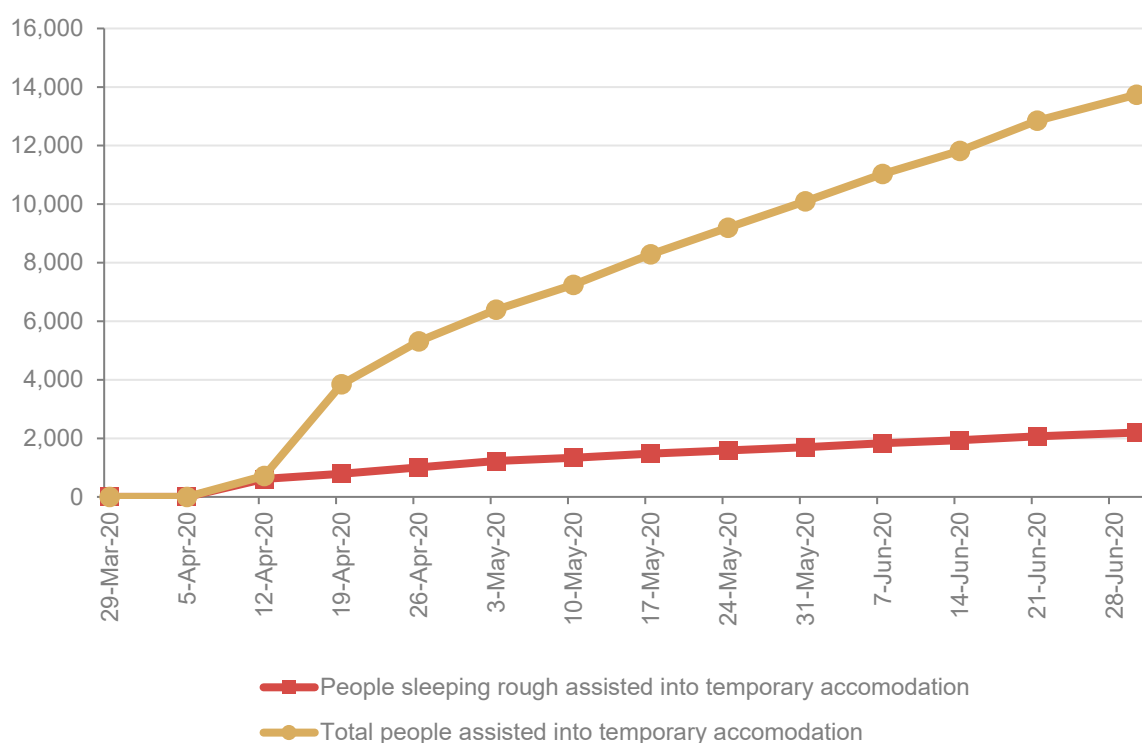
The Department spent in excess of \$29.0 million on enhanced temporary accommodation while the program was in operation between late March 2020 and the end of June 2020. From 1 April to 30 June 2020, these funds delivered over 131,000 nights of accommodation to over 13,000 people.

This was more than double the \$14.0 million in stimulus funding the NSW Government provided for temporary accommodation. The Department advised that the remainder was drawn from business as usual funds, using standard processes. The Department's procurement of additional temporary accommodation was in line with its relevant financial delegations and it reported to Treasury regularly on the stimulus funding.

The standard and enhanced temporary accommodation programs provide shelter for people facing imminent homelessness who are unable to find alternative accommodation and face risks to their personal safety or mental health. This includes, but is not limited to, people sleeping rough.

Between 1 April 2020 and 31 January 2021, the Department provided temporary accommodation to 4,355 people who self-identified as sleeping rough and 32,518 people in total. Exhibit 7, below, shows the number of people in the enhanced temporary accommodation program, which operated from 1 April 2020 to 30 June 2020.

Exhibit 7: Cumulative number of people in the enhanced temporary accommodation program (operating from April 2020–30 June 2020)



Source: Department of Communities and Justice 2020.

The Department modified its practices and policies to assist people experiencing street homelessness into temporary accommodation

The Department temporarily adapted its practices and policies in its response to COVID-19 to be more person-centric and to proactively engage with people sleeping rough, assisting them in accessing the enhanced temporary accommodation program.

The Department significantly increased assertive outreach patrols to engage people sleeping rough and offer temporary accommodation supports. Assertive outreach involves a specialised team approaching, engaging and supporting people living on the streets or public places to meet immediate needs, and to assist them in accessing the housing and homelessness service system.

Prior to the pandemic, under the Homelessness Strategy, assertive outreach was being piloted in three locations across New South Wales (Sydney metro, Newcastle and Tweed Heads). During the pandemic the Department increased the frequency of patrols in these locations and expanded assertive outreach to an additional 58 local government areas.

Within metropolitan Sydney, the Department contracted a service provider to liaise with people entering temporary accommodation, make an initial assessment of their needs, and link them with appropriate services. The Department also facilitated weekly 'pop-ups' in seven inner city hotels to bring its housing staff and from non-government service providers to clients in temporary accommodation, and undertook group outreach to engage vulnerable and isolated clients including Aboriginal people.

The Department relaxed some administrative requirements to assist more people to access temporary accommodation swiftly. It excluded temporary accommodation taken prior to 1 April 2020 when calculating people's entitlements, and extended temporary accommodation entitlements beyond 30 days if the applicant was engaging with Department services. To expedite processing, the Department waived the requirement for people to provide two formal documents to verify their identity. It also waived the requirement for a medical assessment for people with a medical need who were to be assessed for priority housing and removed the requirement for people in hotels to provide diaries documenting attempts to find alternative accommodation.

Appendix five outlines other ways in which the enhanced temporary accommodation program differed from the pre-existing program.

On 1 July 2020, the Department transitioned back to standard policy settings for temporary accommodation, although exceptions were provided for people who were sleeping rough prior to entering enhanced temporary accommodation and those awaiting a placement via the Together Home program (discussed in subsection 3.3 below).

Under standard arrangements, clients who call the Department's 24/7 intake and referral line Link2Home are usually offered two nights' temporary accommodation to enable them to contact their local housing office for a full assessment of their housing needs. Relevant guidelines provide that any clients that need extra time can have their temporary accommodation extended based on individual circumstances and their continued engagement to plan for, or be waiting on a confirmed longer-term housing solution (such as a private rental property or social housing). The average period of time that clients spent in temporary accommodation last year was 14.5 days. However, the cap of 28 days temporary accommodation in any 12-month period was reinstated for all clients from 1 July 2020.

Some stakeholders have told us that they consider the standard two nights' accommodation and 28-day cap is generally not enough time for clients to engage with other support services and the Department on their longer-term needs. Stakeholders have pointed to other jurisdictions, such as South Australia, Victoria and New Zealand, that offered people sleeping rough longer periods of time in temporary accommodation during COVID-19 (ranging from three to 12 months), in part to facilitate opportunities to move to longer-term housing after exiting temporary accommodation.

The Department facilitated support services for rough sleepers in temporary accommodation who wanted assistance

Within metropolitan Sydney, the Department contracted a non-government service provider to connect people placed in enhanced temporary accommodation with supports and assist them to transition to stable housing under a program called STEP-Link. In regional and rural areas, STEP-Link was not operating and Departmental staff referred clients in enhanced temporary accommodation to relevant support services directly.

The program guidelines make clear that STEP-Link was to provide a tailored level of service to each person in temporary accommodation depending on their needs, with a key focus on people sleeping rough. STEP-Link was not available for every client and the level and type of support varied, ranging from referrals to other services to complex case management.

The STEP-Link program aimed to target all people sleeping rough who were placed in temporary accommodation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in the metropolitan Sydney area, excluding people in supported temporary accommodation. In May 2020 this was expected to be approximately 400 people, with potential to grow. The Department considered that early triaging would be necessary to accommodate demand.

The Department's data report that, between 7 May 2020 and 21 January 2021, a total of 1,833 people who had previously been sleeping rough had been engaged in STEP-Link, more than four times the expected client numbers. Almost half – 892 people – moved into further accommodation when they exited the STEP-Link program, although these were not always longer-term housing options, as detailed in Exhibit 8 below.

Exhibit 8: Housing outcomes for STEP-Link clients, May 2020–January 2021

Housing outcome by type	Number of STEP-Link clients
Social housing	390
Together Home program	123
Private rental arrangement	169
Support accommodation	110
Living with family/friends	79
Boarding house/other accommodation	21
Total	892

Source: Department of Communities and Justice (unaudited).

Governance arrangements enabled effective cross-sectoral collaboration and delivery of the crisis management response

The Department established the cross-sectoral Sydney Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce after funding was allocated in late March 2020. The Taskforce built on existing collaborative arrangements in place to support cross-sectoral coordination, enabling it to respond quickly to COVID-19.

The Taskforce consists of district and policy staff from the Department, and representatives from NSW Health, NSW Police, the Minister's office, local government, housing and homelessness sector peak organisations, and NGO service providers. It reported to the relevant Departmental Deputy Secretary.

The Taskforce assisted the Department to implement, and optimise, its supports for people experiencing street homelessness during the pandemic. After the initial crisis response, the Taskforce broadened its focus to provide a forum to raise risks and issues requiring collaborative planning and problem solving, and to enhance consistency across the service system in relation to street homelessness.

Taskforce members have contributed to the ongoing development and implementation of the Department's COVID-19 response to street homelessness. For example, the Taskforce identified that many large crisis accommodation refuges were unable to operate at capacity, while abiding by physical distancing guidelines. The Department subsequently supported providers to deconcentrate people out of larger crisis and emergency accommodation services into temporary accommodation.

The Taskforce also formed several working groups to tackle practical issues encountered throughout the Department's COVID-19 response to street homelessness (Exhibit 9). These working groups were able to focus collective efforts to better support people accommodated in hotels, motels and serviced apartments.

Members of the Taskforce found value in collaborating with other Taskforce partners to share decision making and provide timely identification and resolution of issues. The Taskforce was expected to be in place until the NSW Government declares the COVID-19 virus to be effectively contained and services return to business as usual.

Exhibit 9: Sydney Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce working groups

Working group	Main roles
Outreach, Support and Care Coordination	- Coordinate the outreach for, and triage of, people experiencing street homelessness to assist them to transition into temporary accommodation. - Oversee hotel pop-up kiosks to provide easy access to homelessness and housing services. - Monitor the provision of support to those in accommodation including health care, mental health, drug/alcohol, daily living needs, social connection.
Aboriginal Homelessness Coordination Group	- Coordinate Aboriginal assertive outreach support, including intensive outreach hubs. - Provide advice to the Taskforce, and other coordination groups, on support for Aboriginal people, and identify the need for additional supports.
Accommodation Exits Coordination Group	- Develop opportunities to grow the supply of housing to support transition of people experiencing street homelessness into long-term permanent accommodation. - Identify barriers to successful housing exits for people sleeping rough in temporary accommodation.
Food and Food Security Coordination	- Plan for and monitor the provision of food to support people experiencing street homelessness in temporary accommodation. - Link services/supports which may be able to meet needs for food provision.

Source: Department of Communities and Justice 2020.

The Department worked with NSW Health and providers to ensure its COVID-19 response to homelessness was in line with health guidelines

The Department built on existing collaborative arrangements with NSW Health and health service providers to provide information about policy and practice changes and align the Department's COVID-19 crisis response with NSW Health guidance.

Before the pandemic, the Department had established partnerships with the NSW Health Local Health Districts and St Vincent's Health in the Sydney metropolitan area, to provide health and housing responses to rough sleepers. These parties, and the federal Primary Health Network, were represented on the Taskforce which the Department set up at the beginning of the COVID-19 response to homelessness.

The Industry Partnership and peak body Homelessness NSW ran regular presentations with the specialist homelessness services sector during the pandemic. Health experts, representatives from the Department and the Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services attended sessions, providing information about changes to temporary accommodation, updates about the COVID-19 response, and tailored guidelines on managing the risk of COVID-19 for specialist homelessness services.

During the pandemic, existing temporary accommodation facilities were required to reduce their capacity to allow for physical distancing and potential isolation of clients should they develop flu-like symptoms. NSW Government funding enabled the de-concentration of congregate care settings and procurement of vacant hotel rooms as temporary accommodation, as a public health measure to enable this.

The Department issued guidelines suggesting all visitors, hotel employees and clients be asked screening questions about any contact with people with COVID-19 prior to entering facilities under the enhanced temporary accommodation program. The Department did not require visitors, hotel employees or clients to be tested for COVID-19, unless they were identified as being at risk. This was in line with public health guidelines which did not mandate mass COVID-19 testing.

As noted above, health assessments that were usually conducted when clients entered the standard program were waived as part of expediting processes to assist more people into temporary accommodation. But a service provider was contracted to assess clients' overall support needs on entering the accommodation and health services were part of the 'pop-ups' which operated at these facilities and saw clients who self-referred. After the initial screening, clients were expected to monitor their own health and report any suspected symptoms.

The Department advised that it refers any client who has, or is suspected to have, contracted COVID-19 to NSW Health. These clients are accommodated under NSW Health's 'Health Hotel' program. According to the Department, just one client assisted by the enhanced temporary accommodation response had contracted COVID-19 between April 2020 and 13 May 2021.

In addition, the Department allocated grants to service providers for deep cleaning of their facilities to minimise risk of disease transmission, and worked with experts to develop tailored guidelines for specialist homelessness services on managing the risk of COVID-19.

3.3 Assisting people sleeping rough into more stable accommodation

The Department developed a program to transition some people sleeping rough from temporary accommodation to more permanent housing

The Department moved to establish a new program to provide longer-term housing to people sleeping rough in temporary accommodation during the pandemic.

Nationally, prior to COVID-19, around one in five people sleeping rough experience repeat homelessness, with this figure being higher for Indigenous clients and those aged between 15–24 years. People sleeping rough often cycle in and out of temporary accommodation or return to the streets. Unlike other groups of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, chronic rough sleepers are generally unable to use private rental subsidies due to their high support needs.

In June 2020, the NSW Government announced \$36.1 million in funding to establish the Together Home program. The Department stood the program up in three months, based on elements of funding and practice under its existing Supported Transition and Engagement Program (STEP). STEP reflects elements of a 'Housing First' approach. Housing First is an international model for housing and supporting people who have experienced long term and recurring homelessness and who face a range of complex challenges.

Housing First involves rapidly rehousing people in long-term accommodation without first requiring they be 'housing ready' or engaged with treatment. Once housed, clients are then offered wrap-around supports to assist them to resolve issues that contributed to them experiencing homelessness. The effectiveness of the Housing First model is well-evidenced in overseas jurisdictions. STEP and Together Home represent some elements of Housing First, but while they provide housing, it is not long-term and requires engagement with support services.

The Together Home program aims to support clients sleeping rough, who were housed in temporary accommodation during COVID-19, into stable accommodation, while ensuring they receive additional support facilitated by a case worker (e.g. from health services) to help them to maintain the lease.

The Department amended existing contracts with community housing providers under the Community Housing Leasing Program to include Together Home program responsibilities. Community housing providers head-lease a suitable property and sub-lease it to clients. Community housing providers also partner with support services to secure holistic supports customised to the tenant's needs.

Exhibit 10 below provides more details on the Together Home program.

Exhibit 10: The Together Home program

The Together Home program has places for 400 clients who were sleeping rough (before accessing temporary accommodation during the pandemic). It supplies access to a head-leased property and wrap around supports such as alcohol and other drugs counselling, mental health and disability services. The program provides clients with 24 months of housing and support, aiming to work with them towards longer-term, stable housing after this period.

Most clients receive a standard support package valued at \$19,000 per client per annum. This package is customised to procure relevant services based on the individual's needs to support them as they transition into more stable accommodation. In addition, there are 40 Higher Needs packages for clients with severe mental health conditions to receive intensive assistance, valued at \$58,000 per annum of intensive support funding for each client.

Together Home aims to provide support for Aboriginal people through delivering a culturally appropriate service. Support providers are expected to deliver suitable responses through identifying cultural needs and consulting Aboriginal stakeholders. Of the 40 Higher Needs packages, 30 per cent are reserved for Aboriginal clients.

On 28 September 2020, the Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services announced an additional \$1.3 million for Together Home to provide homes for Aboriginal people sleeping rough on the Central Coast, led by a consortium of local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations: the Yerin Aboriginal Health Service, Gudjagang Ngara li-dhi Aboriginal Corporation and Mingaletta Aboriginal Corporation. Referred to as the 'Aboriginal Together Home' program, it commenced on 1 January 2021 and will run for 18 months.

A second tranche of the Together Home program was announced on 3 November 2020 and will start on 1 July 2021. Tranche 2 funding is being allocated to community housing providers for a further 400 places across New South Wales. Eligibility has been expanded to include people who have a history of street sleeping, as well as people sleeping rough at the time of application.

Source: Department of Communities and Justice with NSW Audit Office analysis 2021.

The Together Home program has provided housing and supports to over 400 clients

Under the first tranche of the Together Home program, the Department aimed to secure more stable housing and case managed supports for 400 clients. A second tranche of funding was announced in November 2020 and will support a further 400 program places across New South Wales. As at April 2021, Together Home had assisted 400 people to secure accommodation and supports for two years.

The Department's Housing Directorate established a team to triage Together Home applications for people previously sleeping rough in temporary accommodation during the pandemic. To be eligible for Together Home, applicants must have been sleeping rough prior to entering temporary accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic, be aged 18 years or over, are approved or are eligible for social housing, do not have any unresolvable visa restrictions that will impact long term housing outcomes, have an income within the social housing income eligibility limits, or can be supported to access an income.

People who are ineligible for Together Home may be offered rental subsidies under the initial COVID-19 emergency support package, provided that they are either permanent residents or citizens. If non-residents or non-citizens are unable to find accommodation in the private rental market, their options to secure government-funded housing are limited.

Applications for Higher Needs packages, available across New South Wales, are assessed by the High Needs Panel, convened by the peak body Homelessness NSW, which regularly reports to the Department.

The Department is monitoring that appropriate supports are in place for Together Home clients

In line with Housing First principles, the Together Home program separates the landlord and support service provider roles. In Together Home, community housing providers contracted by the Department hold the landlord role and are contractually required to secure appropriate supports for clients in partnership with relevant other service providers. A small number of community housing providers are approved to provide the supports internally on condition that a clear separation is in place between tenancy management and support service functions.

The Together Home program guidelines outline the supports that providers are required to deliver. These guidelines form part of the contract participating community housing providers agreed with the Department to deliver the Together Home program. The Department checked with each community housing provider the support services they would work with at the commencement of the program. For community housing providers which intended to deliver the supports directly, the Department interviewed relevant senior staff and required a report on how housing and supports would be separated in practice.

The Department gave Together Home support providers access to the client management IT system used by specialist homelessness services. It receives quarterly reporting on a range of program participation indicators and client outcomes. These include:

- number of clients receiving wrap-around supports
- number of clients housed
- number of properties leased through the program
- de-identified qualitative information about client outcomes such as: engaging with support services, sustaining tenancies, securing employment, obtaining drivers' licences, and referral to the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

This quarterly reporting is also provided to the Together Home Steering Committee which has NGO sector representation and informs the Department's weekly reports to Treasury on the Together Home funding.

Community housing providers, support providers and the Department consider the data entered into the client management system, and the reports produced. Risks are raised with governance groups if data issues or concerns about client outcomes are identified.

Significant time was taken to house clients outside of metropolitan Sydney

The amount of time taken to secure appropriate properties under the Together Home program has increased each month, particularly outside of metropolitan Sydney. The Department advised this is due to community housing providers struggling to find suitable accommodation to meet the complex needs of this client group, increased competition in the private rental market, and low vacancy rates across New South Wales outside of the Greater Metropolitan Sydney.

Delays to securing accommodation will not impact the 24-month period of support offered to clients, which commences only once the client is housed. While clients are waiting for their property, the Department is continuing to fund temporary accommodation, which impacts on the Department's budget available for temporary accommodation in 2020–21.

Exhibit 11 below outlines the progress made to date in housing clients including wait times.

Exhibit 11: Clients housed via Together Home, including wait times

Month	Clients housed	Average wait (days)
July 2020	6	9
August 2020	77	18.7
September 2020	133	25.7
October 2020	78	33.9
November 2020	42	51.9
December 2020	23	73.6
January 2021	13	99.8
February 2021	11	111
March 2021	15	79.3
1–20 April 2021	2	80
Total	400	38.1

Source: Department of Communities and Justice 2021.

The Together Home program will not be sufficient for current demand

The number of Together Home places is significantly less than what is required to provide housing for the 4,355 individuals who were sleeping rough prior to entering enhanced temporary accommodation during the pandemic.

As people sleeping rough have no fixed address, it is hard to calculate the usual size of this population across New South Wales. The Department's 2020 state-wide street count conducted from February to April 2020 observed a total of 1,314 people who appeared to be experiencing street homelessness. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated 2,588 people were sleeping rough in New South Wales at the time of the 2016 census.

At the time that Together Home was developed (in July 2020), there had been more than 15,000 people in emergency temporary accommodation during the pandemic since April 2020, including over 1,500 people who had been street sleeping. Between 1 April 2020 and 31 January 2021, 4,355 people assisted with temporary accommodation indicated they had been sleeping rough. Even with the original number of places doubled to 800, the Together Home program only has places for 18 per cent of this population.

The Department is working to support people who were rough sleeping into stable accommodation outside of the Together Home program through business as usual options. These include social housing, subsidised private rental accommodation, expediting the turnover of short-term transitional accommodation, resuming use of properties 'offline' for maintenance or marked for redevelopment, boarding houses and referral to mental health and substance addiction rehabilitation facilities.

The Department's latest annual state-wide street count found a 13 per cent decrease in the number of people sleeping rough, compared to a similar period in 2020. Within the City of Sydney local government area, the number of people observed to be sleeping rough reduced by 19 per cent within the same period.

The Department has plans to secure longer-term housing options for Together Home clients but it is not clear how these will overcome existing housing challenges

Together Home provides accommodation and case managed supports for two years, which may provide clients with the opportunity to build their capacity to secure more permanent housing after this period.

The program guidelines – which form part of the contract for the community housing providers delivering the program – expect that providers will make at least two reasonable offers of permanent accommodation/private rental options to clients while they are in the head-lease property during the two year lease period under Together Home. The Department also commits to help find longer-term housing solutions through offers of properties and other private rental assistance products during that two-year period.

However, a number of NGO stakeholders have raised concerns that the complexity of needs amongst the Together Home client group, the limited availability of affordable rental properties and the existing scale of unmet need for social housing in New South Wales will make it difficult for them to secure longer-term housing – particularly if the program's case managed support packages are not continued.

3.4 Lessons learned from the COVID-19 response to homelessness

The Department tracked demand and uptake of the enhanced temporary accommodation program, but has limited data to assess how well it supports cohorts at higher risk of homelessness

The Department regularly monitored the number of people placed into temporary accommodation during the pandemic and reported this information to key stakeholders.

The Department's research and analysis team presented data dashboards on the COVID-19 temporary accommodation program to key decision makers. These included statistics on the number of people accommodated and their length of stay. This assisted the Department to track whether there was sufficient accommodation in areas of demand.

However, due to the speed of the Department's homelessness response to COVID-19, the data collected on the enhanced temporary accommodation program may not be complete or robust enough for the Department to understand how well different groups were supported.

This includes cohorts who are at higher risk of homelessness compared to the general population, including Aboriginal people, members of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, victims of domestic and family violence, older people, people with a disability or LGBTIQ+ people.

The Department advises that its standard temporary accommodation program provides a tailored response for these groups, but there is limited evidence that this was applied to collecting or monitoring client data in the enhanced temporary accommodation program throughout the COVID-19 response.

Interviews conducted for Homelessness NSW with a small number of rough sleepers supported through the COVID-19 response highlighted that the higher quality of temporary accommodation made them feel cared for and safe, and encouraged them to take responsibility for maintaining the condition of the accommodation. One NGO stakeholder told us that the enhanced temporary accommodation program has empowered many of their clients to develop and use their independent living skills to an extent that would not have been possible had they continued to live in shared crisis accommodation. Other NGOs observed positive benefits for clients such as increased engagement with medical services.

However, there was no formal or systematic process used by the Department to capture such client outcomes, or client characteristics, views and experiences during their stay, at exit, or afterwards.

The Department has monitored the housing outcomes for some people previously sleeping rough who were supported with enhanced temporary accommodation

The Department developed key performance indicators and targets to measure the timeliness and quality of supports provided to people sleeping rough placed in enhanced temporary accommodation under the STEP-Link program (see section 3.2). These included:

- engaging with clients within 24 hours of entering temporary accommodation (target 90 per cent of clients)
- developing a case plan for clients (target 95 per cent of clients)
- supporting clients to maintain their temporary accommodation and engagement with specialist service providers (target 90 per cent of clients)
- the proportion of program clients that remain engaged with the program for 1–3 months (target 90 per cent of clients)
- the proportion of clients transitioned into sustainable accommodation do not return to homelessness (target 90 per cent of clients).

The Department received reports on these key performance indicators, including housing outcomes, for the clients who received these supports via STEP-Link. However, it did not track housing outcomes, for clients who were not provided with this support, or who were not otherwise engaged with services.

Although the Department offers assistance and has a policy to not knowingly exit someone from temporary accommodation into homelessness, it does not track housing outcomes for every client if they do not engage with Departmental or other services.

Since March 2018, the Department has conducted a six-monthly desktop review of the tenancy status of social housing tenants who previously slept rough and identified those which are considered at high risk, and the reasons for tenancies being ended. Latest analysis, conducted in March 2021, found a total of 875 people had accepted tenancies through regular and intensive homelessness outreach and COVID-19 responses in the inner city of Sydney since March 2017.

The Department also intends to conduct research in the future to better understand what happens to people who leave temporary accommodation without seeking further assistance from the Department or funded services. The Department's data shows that almost one-quarter of the more than 26,000 households exiting temporary accommodation between 1 April 2020 and 18 April 2021 received either private rental assistance or were housed. It does not know what the housing outcomes were for the remainder.

The Department cannot identify precisely how many people sleeping rough assisted during COVID-19 have returned to rough sleeping or other forms of homelessness. Its administrative data indicates that, between 1 April 2020 and 31 January 2021, approximately 20 per cent of the 4,355 people sleeping rough placed in temporary accommodation across New South Wales were assisted with the Department's private rental products (243 people) or housed in social housing (650 people). The Department's data also suggests that 72 per cent of the approximately 4,000 people sleeping rough who exited temporary accommodation between 1 April 2020 and 18 April 2021 left with an unknown housing outcome.

This includes people who:

- were stranded due to border closures
- are not eligible for social housing
- chose not to continue with a social housing pathway or housing products offered to them
- have disengaged with the Department and relevant support services.

The Department has not evaluated its COVID-19 temporary accommodation program and has no clear plans to implement lessons learned

The Department has not yet undertaken an in-depth assessment of the enhanced temporary accommodation program and has not supplied evidence that it has a plan in place to evaluate its COVID-19 response. Without a formal evaluation, there is no firm data to support the identification of desired outcomes and changes in practice.

Through its COVID-19 response, the Department had access to a higher level of funding to engage with clients sleeping rough and triage them into more stable accommodation. However, the Department did not collect sufficient evidence to substantiate the benefits of similar approaches in the future.

Officers have reflected on lessons learnt about what worked well from the homelessness response to the pandemic. Examples of successful practices from the COVID-19 response identified by the Department include:

- becoming more client-focused in designing service solutions
- looking for new ways to bring services to clients such as through 'pop-ups' involving housing staff from the Department and a variety of non-government support service providers being available at temporary accommodation locations
- strong collaboration with peak organisations, and service providers, to improve the quality of supports for clients
- relaxing administrative requirements to expedite service delivery
- increased use of technology to hold large-scale meetings with various NSW Government agencies, peak organisations, and service providers, facilitating increased attendance.

In July 2020, the Department began to wind down the COVID-19 response and revert to its business as usual homelessness services. As of May 2021, the enhanced temporary accommodation program is still ongoing at a diminished capacity. This may have made it difficult for the Department to take the necessary time to begin formally capturing lessons learnt from its COVID-19 response and incorporating practices and efficiencies into standard operations.

However, with an interim evaluation of the Strategy due in September 2021 and work commencing on the next budget bid, the Department has an opportunity to embed learnings into standard processes and practices going forward.

The Department has agreed to evaluate the homelessness response to COVID-19, and to integrate lessons learned into future practice. It considers that these efforts will be supported by its existing monitoring work including on the relevant Premier's Priority, case study reporting on related COVID-19 supports, and the planned evaluation of the Together Home program (next subsection).

The Department has better processes to capture learnings from the Together Home program

The Department has developed a monitoring and reporting framework as part of its Together Home program guidelines. This sets out requirements for community housing providers and support service providers to report their performance and client data quarterly, against the Together Home outcomes framework.

The outcomes framework contains objectives, outcomes, outputs and outcome indicators broken down into short, medium, and long-term stages of support. Examples of these outcome indicators include the proportion of people:

- that remain housed at different intervals between three and 24 months
- are street sleeping at entry, in stable housing at exit
- that remain connected to family, cultural and community networks, or who have rebuilt a connection during support, at different intervals of time
- with an improved living skills assessment, compared to initial assessment
- with an improved total wellbeing score at exit, compared to start survey total score.

As well as quarterly reports on performance and outcomes, Together Home service providers report to the Department fortnightly on the:

- number of people referred to the program
- number of people accepted into the program
- number of properties leased through the program
- number of people with a support provider in place
- number of tenants with exits to stable housing
- number of tenants with exits to unstable housing
- roadblocks, issues, obstacles, and successes
- financial expenditure.

The governance arrangements for the Together Home program are also used to monitor implementation and outcomes. Learnings are captured at a local level through the Program Delivery Group, made up of participating community housing providers and the Department. This group focuses on program implementation issues and aims to resolve these collaboratively.

Where issues or lessons require further strategic input and consideration, these are escalated to the Program Steering Committee. The committee comprises senior executive representation from the Department, the Community Housing Industry Association, the Aboriginal Community Housing Industry Association and peak bodies. It has a mandate to adopt a continuous improvement approach to delivery of the program.

The Department has plans to undertake an evaluation of the Together Home program

The Department has prepared an evaluation framework for the Together Home program, which seeks to assess the cost effectiveness of this approach compared to typical practice.

It has also developed an outcomes measurement framework for Together Home, which was reviewed by the independently chaired Monitoring and Evaluation Advisory Group (MEAG). The framework includes objectives, with specific outputs and data sources detailed, as well as short term, intermediate and long-term indicators for each output.

The Department has contracted the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), in partnership with Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW, to deliver the Together Home evaluation.

The evaluation will have three components focusing on: implementation, outcomes and economic impact. The Department expects the evaluation to:

- develop quality evidence on program effectiveness
- identify strengths and challenges relating to program implementation and delivery processes
- generate learnings to facilitate improvements to the service delivery model
- understand the extent to which system change has been achieved
- understand the effectiveness of the commissioning approach undertaken by the Department
- support further commissioning approaches for Housing First programs in New South Wales.

The COVID-19 response to homelessness will not be sufficient to address forecast demand in 2021 and beyond

The Department moved quickly to assist people who were sleeping rough into temporary accommodation and built on the initial crisis response to provide this group with more stable housing options. The Department has demonstrated agility and flexibility in its homelessness response to COVID-19. However, the scale of these measures were exceptions to business as usual.

The number of people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness was forecasted to rise following the COVID-19 pandemic and the cessation of various temporary support initiatives such as the federal wages subsidy JobKeeper, increased JobSeeker welfare payments, and the state eviction moratorium. Although there have been stronger-than-expected economic conditions since this forecast model, frontline services report that the tight rental market across New South Wales is contributing to increased demand for homelessness supports.

The Department is unable to meet existing, let alone increased, demand without further additional funding.

Section two

Appendices

Appendix one – Response from agency



Communities
& Justice

Ms Margaret Crawford
Auditor-General for NSW
Audit Office of NSW
GPO Box 12
SYDNEY NSW 2001

1 June 2021

Ref: EAP21/7864

Dear Ms Crawford

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Performance Audit Report: Responses to Homelessness. I am pleased to advise the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) accepts all recommendations in this report.

I would also like to acknowledge the hard work and professionalism of your team, who worked collaboratively and transparently with DCJ staff throughout the audit process.

The Audit's findings and recommendations build on the results we have already achieved, including the opportunity to improve our inter-agency governance and engagement with Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness, in the next iteration of the NSW Homelessness Strategy.

We are building a comprehensive evidence base to determine what works in preventing and responding to homelessness. The evaluation of the Strategy which is due in July 2023, will monitor and report outcomes over time across the seven domains of the NSW Government Human Services Outcomes Framework. These results will give us a greater understanding of what works in prevention and early intervention, which programs should be scaled up, and which programs need to wind down.

I welcome the finding that DCJ's response to people experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic was effectively implemented. COVID-19 has been, and continues to be, one of the greatest challenges of our time. From the beginning, we have been committed to continuing our service delivery to keep vulnerable people safe.

I enclose a detailed response to the Audit's recommendations and the actions we will be taking to implement them over the next 12 months.

If you would like more information about DCJ's response to the report, please contact Anne Campbell, Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability by email at [REDACTED] or by phone on [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Coutts-Trotter'.

Michael Coutts-Trotter
Secretary

Encl.

Department of Communities and Justice
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The Department of Communities and Justice should, by July 2022:

1	Use data and analysis identified through the Homelessness Strategy 2018–2023 and provide advice to the NSW Government on sustainably addressing demand and unmet need for homelessness supports.												
Agency Response	Accepted The NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023 evaluation will monitor and report outcomes over time across the seven domains of the NSW Government Human Services Outcomes Framework. The evaluation will assess both the effectiveness of the Strategy in achieving its objectives and the effectiveness of the programs within the Strategy in improving client outcomes, with a particular focus on people sleeping rough, people experiencing repeat or chronic homelessness, people experiencing domestic and family violence, young people, older people, and Aboriginal people and communities. The evaluation will have broader benefits across DCJ and other government agencies, in providing high quality data on program performance linked to client outcomes, and cost effectiveness in terms of the resources used and the outcomes achieved. The evaluation will fill the current evidence gap on what works to prevent and respond to homelessness in NSW and will support DCJ in the development of the next Homelessness Strategy. DCJ will also utilise multiple additional sources of evidence to provide advice to government on the most effective responses to homelessness, including evidence from: • Specialist Homelessness Services evaluation • Pathways into Homelessness Final Report and evidence brief • Assertive outreach and street count data • Commissioning statements												
	<table> <tr> <th colspan="2">Agreed actions</th><th>Person responsible</th><th>Date to be actioned by</th><th>Date due</th></tr> <tr> <td>1.1</td><td>DCJ will deliver the interim Homelessness Strategy Evaluation to inform the allocation of Homelessness Strategy funding in 2022-23 and 2023-24.</td><td>Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability</td><td>July 2021</td><td>September 2021</td></tr> </table>				Agreed actions		Person responsible	Date to be actioned by	Date due	1.1	DCJ will deliver the interim Homelessness Strategy Evaluation to inform the allocation of Homelessness Strategy funding in 2022-23 and 2023-24.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	July 2021
Agreed actions		Person responsible	Date to be actioned by	Date due									
1.1	DCJ will deliver the interim Homelessness Strategy Evaluation to inform the allocation of Homelessness Strategy funding in 2022-23 and 2023-24.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	July 2021	September 2021									

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1.2	DCJ will use data identified from the NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023 evaluation (final report due July 2023) to inform the development of the next Homelessness Strategy business case.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	September 2021	July 2023 and ongoing
1.3	DCJ will analyse data from the SHS program evaluation to inform future commissioning strategies.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	Commencing June 2021	December 2023 and ongoing
1.4	DCJ will work with partners to develop annual commissioning statements that articulate priorities for the procurement of services and infrastructure to achieve state-wide social housing and homelessness client outcome objectives.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	In progress	July 2022
1.5	DCJ will use data and analysis from the Pathways into Homelessness actuarial analysis and evidence briefs to inform the business case for the next Homelessness Strategy.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	In progress	July 2021 and ongoing
1.6	DCJ will use and analyse premier's priority data and annual street counts to continue to support people to move into stable accommodation and invest in prevention and early intervention.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	In progress	July 2022 and ongoing
1.7	DCJ will work with interagency and non-government sector partners to improve data collection for temporary visa holders experiencing or at risk of homelessness.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	In progress	July 2022
1.8	DCJ will implement the Outcome Reporting Framework, developed for reporting to the Housing and Homelessness Steering Committee, which shifts the focus from individual projects and programs to alignment with Stronger Communities Cluster outcome indicators.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	In progress	July 2022 and ongoing

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2	Use the evidence obtained through the Homelessness Strategy 2018–2023 to commence development of a comprehensive strategy to address homelessness, linked to the government's 10-year plan for social housing and 20-year housing strategy.			
Agency Response	Accepted By July 2022, DCJ will release its public consultation schedule for the next NSW Homelessness Strategy. DCJ aims to gain a thorough understanding of client and community views, needs, and experiences from the consultation. This process is key to the design and implementation of services that are better tailored to needs and more likely to achieve positive outcomes. The development of the next Strategy will draw on data and evidence from implementation and evaluation to identify programs and approaches for scale-up in the next iteration of the Strategy, building on a better understanding of what works to prevent and respond to homelessness.			
Agreed actions		Person responsible	Date to be actioned by	Date due
2.1	DCJ will complete the NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023 evaluation.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	September 2021	July 2023
2.2	DCJ will finalise and release the public consultation schedule for the next NSW Homelessness Strategy, which will include mechanisms for linking this work to the government's 10-year plan for social housing, 20-year housing strategy and other relevant strategies.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	January 2022	July 2022
2.3	DCJ will develop and implement the Aboriginal Specialist Homelessness Service Sector Development Action Plan in consultation with Aboriginal homelessness service providers and peaks.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	In progress	July 2022 and ongoing

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3	Establish and sustain governance arrangements that enable input to key decisions on homelessness policy from partner agencies, the specialist homelessness services sector, the community housing sector, Aboriginal people and people with lived experience of homelessness.			
Agency Response	Accepted The Housing and Homelessness Steering Committee will continue to serve as the key governance mechanism for the NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023. Recent changes to the membership of the Steering Committee will enhance the strategic guidance and oversight for the Strategy and includes delegates from: Aboriginal Community Housing Industry Association (ACHIA), Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA), Treasury, and Ministry for Health and Corrective Services. The Aboriginal Strategy Housing Homelessness and Disability working group (AOSHHD) will continue to bring together key external peak agencies and NSW Government business units that have a focus on improving outcomes for Aboriginal people across the housing and homelessness sector. The Working Group provides a space to develop, refine and collaborate on items so the sector can improve performance against the social housing targets under the Aboriginal Outcomes Strategy (AOS).			
Agreed actions		Person responsible	Date to be actioned by	Date due
3.1	DCJ will sustain membership of the new Housing and Homelessness Steering Committee, including new delegates from: - Aboriginal Community Housing Industry Association (ACHIA) - Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA) - Treasury - Ministry for Health - Corrective Services.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	In progress	July 2022 ongoing
3.2	DCJ will utilise the AOSHHD to provide governance in the development and on-going review of the Aboriginal Homelessness Services Sector Development Action Plan.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	In progress	July 2022

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3.3	DCJ will continue to seek cross-agency input on policy and program development through the Homelessness Interagency Project Group.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	In progress	July 2022 and ongoing
3.4	Continue to convene Sydney Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce.	Deputy Secretary, Housing, Disability and District Services	From 30 March 2021	July 2022
3.5	Continue to convene DCJ and Homelessness peaks to understand and respond to issues, and to collaborate on responses.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	From 24 March 2021	July 2022

4	In partnership with Aboriginal stakeholders and communities, design and implement a strategy for early identification and responses to the needs of Aboriginal people vulnerable to homelessness; and build the capacity and resourcing of the Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector to deliver homelessness services.
Agency Response	Accepted The Aboriginal SHS Sector Development Action Plan is in development. The Action Plan aims to improve homelessness services for Aboriginal people, by supporting existing Aboriginal organisations and staff in the homelessness sector and an expanded or stronger role for Aboriginal organisations and communities in the future, including in the design and delivery of future homelessness services. The Action Plan will be developed by Aboriginal people, for Aboriginal people with strong Aboriginal involvement in governance arrangements to oversee this work during both development and ongoing monitoring and reporting. The governance arrangements are important to address the fact that not all DCJ contributors to the Action Plan will be Aboriginal.

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Agreed actions		Person responsible	Date to be actioned by	Date due
4.1	DCJ will develop and implement the Aboriginal Specialist Homelessness Services Action Plan in consultation with Aboriginal homelessness service providers and peaks.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	In progress	July 2022
4.2	DCJ will launch a dedicated Commissioning Policy and Practice Hub. The Social Housing Commissioning Framework (HHS) and the Commissioning with Aboriginal Clients and Communities will be linked to these once completed.	Executive Director, Partnerships; Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	In progress	July 2022
4.3	DCJ will increase the number of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) funded by DCJ to provide support to Aboriginal people experiencing or at risk of homelessness in NSW over the next three years.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	In progress	In progress July 2022, concluding July 2024

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5	Evaluate the homelessness response to COVID-19 and integrate the lessons learned into future practice and develop protocols to inform actions in future emergencies/disasters.			
Agency Response	Accepted This is in progress through: - An evaluation of the Together Home program - which aims to assist clients experiencing street homelessness who were housed in temporary accommodation during COVID-19 into stable accommodation linked with wrap-around supports. The process, outcome and economic evaluation will assess the implementation, client outcomes and cost effectiveness of Together Home. It will draw on DCJ lessons learned and external reviews currently being undertaken (e.g. UNSW); - Case Study reporting approach implemented under Family Outreach and Child Adolescent Services (FOCAS) Brokerage; and the Under 16s COVID-19 Stimulus will deliver evidence of good practice that will be used to inform future practice improvements. - FOCAS case study reporting is used to show how funding is linked to therapeutic Evidence Informed Practices. This is in addition to expenditure reporting done in the Client Information Management System (CIMS). Case study reporting provides additional context to expenditure data and provides a means for capturing and sharing good practice. Case Study reporting will continue into the 2021-22 financial year. - Under 16s stimulus case study reporting identifies at and organisational level how funding is being or intended to be spent and how this will benefit clients, services for clients, or staff delivering services for clients and provide some description of the outcome. The case studies will be used to showcase good practice across the sector and report to relevant stakeholders including the Minister and Under 18's Steering Committee on progress. - The NSW Government's Response to the Inquiry into the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places.			
Agreed actions		Person responsible	Date to be actioned by	Date due
5.1	DCJ will conduct an evaluation on the Together Home program and the results will inform the design and commissioning of future 'housing first' programs, which may include processes on service delivery during emergencies/disasters	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	Commenced by July 2022	December 2024

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5.2	DCJ will continue to conduct the reporting approach implemented under FOCAS Brokerage; and the Under 16s COVID-19 Stimulus as a mechanism to deliver evidence of good practice that will be used to inform future practice improvements.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	In progress	July 2022
5.3	DCJ will conduct a comprehensive review of the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places. The review will build on the findings of the NSW Inquiry into the Protocol, which found the enhanced support and improved collaboration in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been effective in keeping people sleeping rough safe and housed throughout the crisis.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	Commence July 2021	July 2022

6	Establish a means to regularly collect client outcomes data and feedback; and use this to drive improvements to responses to homelessness.			
Agency Response	Accepted This is in progress through: - Specialist Homelessness Services Outcome Framework - The purpose of the framework is to improve quality and apply more rigour to the design and delivery of the NSW Government's SHS program. An outcome-focused approach will enable the NSW Government to build better links between evidence, our programs, and our performance. - Australian Service Excellence Standards (ASES) - NSW Government funded specialist homelessness services will be required to attain accreditation under the ASES by 30 June 2024 Generally speaking, the final report does not include any information provided to AONSW on the development of the Outcomes Framework or the ASES accreditation as part of the Homelessness Strategy.			

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Agreed actions		Person responsible	Date to be actioned by	Date due
6.1	DCJ will progressively implement the new Specialist Homelessness Services Outcomes Framework across all SHS from 1 July 2021	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	1 July 2021	30 June 2024
6.2	DCJ will continue to support SHS organisations towards meeting the ASES accreditation by 2024.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	In progress	30 June 2024
6.3	DCJ will deliver customised training on the Personal Wellbeing Index within SHS organisations.	Executive Director, Housing, Homelessness and Disability	September 2021	July 2022
6.4	DCJ will continue to develop linked data assets to support housing and homelessness program evaluation and analysis of client trajectories, service use patterns and outcomes, such as the Future Directions and Pathways to Homelessness datasets.	Executive Director FACSIA; Executive Director Housing, Homelessness and Disability	Commence July 2021	July 2022 and ongoing
6.5	DCJ will continue to implement Outcomes Delivery Planning, which shifts the focus for status reporting for strategic initiatives to outcomes for people who engage with DCJ services. The plan includes strategic initiatives to provide assistance to people unable to access or sustain appropriate housing, including homelessness services.	Deputy Secretary, Strategy, Policy & Commissioning	Ongoing	July 2022 and ongoing

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Appendix two – Actions within the NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018–23

Action	Description	Funding, new (\$'m)	Funding, reprioritised from existing (\$'m)	Total (\$'m)
Prevention and early intervention				
Universal risk screening (Geelong Project Model)	Expand the use of universal screening tools for homelessness and risk of homelessness in schools, piloted in one or two districts, building on the Geelong Model.	4.7	--	4.7
Pathways to Homelessness	Commission an actuarial analysis of pathways into homelessness to inform investment in 2019–20 and onwards – aiming to develop a predictive model.	--	0.2	0.2
Home and Healthy (social impact investment)	Social impact investment - preventing people exiting hospitals, mental health facilities and AOD treatment centres from becoming homeless.	20.0	--	20.0
Sustain tenancies in the private rental market	Increase early intervention tenancy supports through localised real estate engagement projects.	--	1.5	1.5
Work with financial institutions to address financial hardship	Support and encourage financial institutions, including telecommunications and energy companies, to offer information on a full suite of Commonwealth and state supports for their customers who are experiencing financial hardship.	--	0.6	0.6
Sustaining tenancies in social housing	Take action to sustain existing tenancies in social housing through local strategies to deliver intensive person-centred support and case management.	10.7	--	10.7
No Exits into Homelessness	Use the Multi-agency Framework for Transition Planning to Prevent Homelessness to undertake a review of current exit planning policies and practices, and best practice in exit planning. Agencies to agree on a joint approach, including developing new agency action plans which are to include transition support models for clients with exit plans who require linking, coordination or cross agency collaboration to transition into long-term accommodation.	--	0.8	0.8

Action	Description	Funding, new (\$'m)	Funding, reprioritised from existing (\$'m)	Total (\$'m)
STEP	Continue to implement the Supported Transition and Engagement Program (STEP) to provide an additional 120 housing places for people who were experiencing street homelessness over the next four years. Includes wraparound support based on elements of a Housing First model. This initiative will be supported by Next STEP (see next row).	--	20.3	20.3
Next STEP	Provide over 70 packages for continuation of support and accommodation for people remaining in STEP properties who still required support at the end of the original program.	9.1	--	9.1
HOST	Build on the success of the Housing Outreach and Support Team (HOST) in inner city Sydney by implementing another HOST team in Parramatta to provide assertive outreach to people experiencing street homelessness and support them to access accommodation and support.	--	2.6	2.6
Core and cluster	Increase core and cluster accommodation for families experiencing domestic and family violence.	--	4.0	4.0
Effective supports and responses				
Social and Affordable Housing Fund (SAHF)	Implement Phase 2 of the Social and Affordable Housing Fund to target 1,200 new social and affordable dwellings. At least 70 per cent to be social housing and balance to be affordable. Target of 30 per cent to be in regional New South Wales. Proposals targeting the general social housing population with a priority for proposals with older women as a target group.	--	9.3	9.3
Specialist housing for older people	Deliver targeted social housing options for older women. Smaller units (97 units at \$190,000 per unit) will be trialled to accommodate growing demand for social and affordable housing for older women in financial hardship.	--	18.4	18.4

Action	Description	Funding, new (\$'m)	Funding, reprioritised from existing (\$'m)	Total (\$'m)
Youth Foyer	Provide access to education and accommodation for young people aged 18-22 who have exited out-of-home care (OOHC) through a Youth Foyer. Foyers are designed for young people with the capacity to engage in education and training, but who are prevented from participating due to structural, institutional and/or personal barriers. One purpose-built Youth Foyer site located in central Sydney will be delivered with a mix of self-contained units and communal areas, offering young OOHC leavers a safe and affordable place with supports to gain independent living skills while they engage in education, training and employment. This is financed through a social impact bond between investors, government and service providers.	--	42.3	42.3
Staying Home, Leaving Violence	Increase options for women and children experiencing DFV to stay safe at home. Staying Home Leaving Violence will be established in an additional five new sites.	6.2	--	6.2
Co-located homelessness health services - subsequently redesigned to consist of additional health workers embedded in assertive outreach teams	Establish three additional sites, modelled off Tierney House, where people with chronic health conditions can receive treatment or respite.	6.9	--	6.9
Assertive outreach	Expand assertive outreach to people experiencing street homelessness in areas of high need, in two new sites in New South Wales.	3.8	--	3.8
Temporary Accommodation framework	Build on the successes of Supported Temporary Accommodation models and complete a temporary accommodation framework to ensure the appropriate support options are available for people requiring crisis accommodation to enable them to transition to long-term housing.	--	0.4	0.4

Action	Description	Funding, new (\$'m)	Funding, reprioritised from existing (\$'m)	Total (\$'m)
Integrated, person-centred service system				
Human Services Outcomes Framework	Develop the Human Services Outcomes Framework application for homelessness and introduce cross-agency requirements for reporting on homelessness outcomes.	--	0.1	0.1
Homelessness dashboard*	Develop a whole-of-system homelessness dashboard to improve transparency of funding and outcomes.	--	--	--
Australian Service Excellence Standards (ASES) accreditation**	To support outcomes-based commissioning, a new quality system will be implemented over the next five years.	--	--	--
Evaluation of the Homelessness Strategy	Evaluate the Strategy, identifying where initiatives are effective, and scaling up as appropriate.	--	0.2	0.2
Alcohol and other drug (AOD) services	Increase AOD services for people experiencing homelessness by providing clear pathways and links into appropriate housing options to improve health and housing outcomes following treatment.	--	0.1	0.1
Improving frontline services (workforce training)	Deliver trauma-informed care and Aboriginal cultural capability training available to all Departmental staff and NGO services delivered in multiple locations across New South Wales. Build the capability of Departmental client service officers to deliver improved customer service outcomes through LEAP training.	--	6.8	6.8
TOTAL		61.4	107.6	169.0[^]

[^] Totals may not sum correctly due to rounding.

* The Department advises that this action will not be progressed.

** Funding for this action was not identified at the initial framing of the Homelessness Strategy budget.

Note: Does not include the additional \$22.0 million recurrent funding allocated to the Homelessness Strategy in the 2020–21 State Budget.

Source: Department of Communities and Justice (unaudited).

Appendix three – Reported progress on Homelessness Strategy actions to date (unaudited)

Actions	Aims/targets	Achievements to date
Sustaining Tenancies in Social Housing	Assist 577 individuals over five years (2018–23) to maintain their social housing tenancy.	As of January 2021, this action has assisted 496 clients (227 in Macquarie Fields and 269 in Murrumbidgee). Ninety-one per cent of program clients sustained their tenancy for 12 months with no further breaches of their tenancy agreement. The Department has plans to expand the program to three other areas (1. Parkes, Orange and Bathurst, 2. Queanbeyan and Goulburn, 3. Nepean).
Home and Healthy	Provide supports for 1,200 people exiting hospital or health facilities to avoid experiencing homelessness.	As of 31 December 2020, this action has assisted 132 clients.
Assertive Outreach	Engage with up to 1,035 individuals experiencing street homelessness to provide a multi-agency response within two local government areas (Newcastle, Tweed). Both sites have a yearly target of 115 clients actively supported (including supports on the street, temporary accommodation or housing).	Between July/August 2019 and March 2021, 1,361 client engagements have occurred in Tweed and 705 in Newcastle. One hundred and twenty-three clients have been supported into temporary accommodation in Tweed, and 399 in Newcastle. Ninety-two clients have been housed in Tweed, 177 in Newcastle. As a result of the 2019 Premier's Priority and the 2020 COVID-19 response to homelessness, assertive outreach was further expanded beyond the sites initially selected under the Homelessness Strategy. Between 1 April 2020 and 14 January 2021, the Department and partners performed 5,936 assertive outreach activities across the state. As of 21 January 2021, assertive outreach has been expanded to 58 local government areas.
Co-located Homeless Health Services	Establish three additional sites, modelled off Tierney House, where people with chronic health conditions can receive treatment or respite.	A decision was made to transfer these funds to expand the assertive outreach program to include primary health services.
Core and Cluster Accommodation	Assist 288 individuals in specialist accommodation for families experiencing domestic and family violence, across four sites.	The Griffith site, which began in June 2020, has accommodated 11 families, consisting of 27 individuals (11 adults and 16 children) as at 31 March 2021. The Orange site opened on 11 February 2021. As at 31 March 2021 it has accommodated eight women and 22 children with a total of 121 bed nights. While some initial feasibility studies have occurred, there is no definite timeline for the construction of the additional two proposed sites.

Actions	Aims/targets	Achievements to date
Specialist Housing for Older People	Provide 106 targeted social housing dwellings for older women.	As of December 2020, one development (eight dwellings) had been completed with a further three developments (25 dwellings) expected to be completed over the course of 2021–22. All developments are expected to be completed by 2023–24.
Staying Home Leaving Violence expansion - additional sites	Assist 2,210 women, and their children, to prevent homelessness by removing the perpetrator of violence from the family home so that women and children can remain at home.	As of 31 December 2020, the expansion has assisted 1,122 individuals. The program has been expanded to six sites, which include Port Stephens (376 clients), Griffith (206), Coonamble/Walgett (87), Albury Wodonga (294) and Richmond Valley (159).
Supported Transition and Engagement Program (STEP)	Support 255 individuals with housing and supports. STEP includes 90 transitional housing leases linked to wraparound support in inner city Sydney; ten transitional housing leases linked to wraparound support for people living in the inner city and wishing to return to regional locations; ten transitional housing leases linked to wraparound support on the Mid North Coast; and ten transitional housing leases linked to wraparound support in Central West NSW.	There are three packages under STEP: • A – where support is required for more than 3 months • B – involving post-crisis support to clients of the assertive outreach team to assist in successful transitions from rough sleeping into temporary accommodation and then into long term public housing • C – for people who are sleeping rough in, or wish to relocate to, regional areas. As at 30 April 2021: • STEP A: 92 people have been assisted into leasehold tenancies; 38 people have been provided support to sustain their tenancies. • STEP B: 742 people have been supported since the contract commenced in 2018. • STEP C: 29 people have been provided with leasehold tenancies in the Mid North Coast region; and two people have been provided with leasehold properties in the Central West region.
Next STEP	Assist 75 individuals who have progressed from the STEP program with a head leased property and individualised supports	A decision was made to transfer the majority of these funds to the Together Home program, a program established to provide a head-leased property and supports to individuals sleeping rough during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is envisaged that this will provide additional placements in areas of high demand, as well as provide funding for the evaluation of the Together Home program. The remainder of the funding was transferred to expand the Sustaining Tenancies in Social Housing action to Parkes.
Universal Screening and Support Program	Screen 20,000 high school students in Albury and Mount Druitt to determine risk of homelessness, and providing necessary supports	As at 9 April 2021, screening has been conducted in schools in the two target LGAs in 2019, 2020 and the beginning of 2021. There have been approximately 6,800 surveys administered. As at February 2020, the universal screening support program is supporting 144 high school students at the Albury sites, after being identified from screening procedures. As at January 2021, the program is supporting 48 students at the Mount Druitt site.

Actions	Aims/targets	Achievements to date
Youth Foyer	Assist 77 young people leaving out-of-home care (OOHC) by providing accommodation, and supports, in self-contained units with supports to live independently and engage in education or training.	Commencement in March 2021 with up to 53 young people to be referred in first 12 months. Eleven young people were expected to be accommodated by the end of April 2021.
Social and Affordable Housing Fund (Phase 2)	Deliver 1,200 new social and affordable homes (at least 70 per cent of which are to be social dwellings and 30 per cent affordable housing).	As of December 2020, 444 clients were housed in Social and Affordable Housing Fund (Phase 2) social housing dwellings.
Pathways to Homelessness	Conduct an actuarial analysis of pathways into homelessness to inform investment in future strategies.	The Department's 'Pathways to Homelessness' report presenting the findings of the actuarial analysis has been completed (see Exhibit 4).
Sustain tenancies in the private rental market	Increase early intervention tenancy supports through localised real estate engagement projects.	Projects involving training and information for real estate providers have been trialled. As at March 2021, three pilot delivery sessions have been held with 39 workers across regional and metro locations, and 12 meetings were held with property managers in Forster, Taree, Port Macquarie and Kempsey. Further events in metro and regional locations were planned to be held in April, May and June 2021.
Alcohol and other drugs pathways	Increase access to alcohol and other drug services by removing eligibility barriers and improving service integration.	The Department was unable to provide information on the progress of this program.
Homelessness Dashboard	Present consolidated data on homelessness services to highlight areas of need and improve transparency of funding and outcomes.	A decision was made not to progress this action as the Department advised that the information is available elsewhere. In 2019, the Department produced a draft dashboard which reported on the number of specialist homelessness services clients, main reasons for seeking assistance, groups at most risk of homelessness, and the number of clients engaged via assertive outreach.
No Exits into Homelessness	Undertake a review across multiple agencies of current exit planning policies and practices to prevent people leaving Government care from entering into homelessness	A revised framework has been developed to better coordinate actions to prevent people from exiting state care into homelessness. Annual action plans are developed to promote awareness and encourage monitoring of key actions.

Actions	Aims/targets	Achievements to date
Roundtable on overcrowding	Build understanding of overcrowding as a form of homelessness and the factors leading to it.	A Ministerial Forum on Overcrowding was held in September 2018. The Department engaged the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute to research the scale and scope of overcrowding and severe overcrowding. The findings of this research were published in the 'Overcrowding and severe overcrowding: an analysis of literature, data, policies and programs' report.
Financial hardship	Identify approaches to manage financial stress and potentially prevent individuals from falling into homelessness, including encouraging financial institutions, energy and telecommunications companies to offer information on available supports for customers experiencing financial hardship.	A forum was held to better understand the links between financial hardship and homelessness, and options for intervention. Following this, the Department commissioned further work to better understand financial hardships that contribute to people being at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness, including gambling-related difficulties and payday lending.
Training programs to improve frontline services	Provide training for frontline Department and specialist homelessness services staff in Aboriginal cultural competency and trauma-informed care.	As at December 2020, approximately 2,020 DCJ staff have completed the 'Connecting with Aboriginal Communities' training.
Australian Service Excellence Standards (ASES) accreditation	Seek ASES accreditation for all homelessness service providers by 2023.	Implementation affected by COVID-19. ASES standards will be applied to all New South Wales specialist homelessness services providers from 1 July 2024.
Human Services Outcomes Framework	Develop the Human Services Outcomes Framework application for homelessness, including cross-agency requirements for reporting on homelessness outcomes.	The Department has undertaken work to: identify the desired outcomes, indicators and measures across agencies for homelessness clients and populations; determine the best available evidence of what services and supports are needed to achieve the desired outcomes in the Homelessness Strategy; and developed the evaluation plan for the Strategy mapped to the Human Services Outcomes Framework using a program logic approach. The Department expects to have new outcomes-based contracts in place for specialist homelessness services from 1 July 2021.

Source: Department of Communities and Justice (unaudited).

Appendix four – Key homelessness data collections

Data source	Collected	Locations	Type	Data items identifying homelessness
ABS Census and Homelessness Enumeration Strategy	5 yearly since 1911	National: all jurisdictions and all areas, including remote, in Australia	Point-in-time count	• People living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out. • People in supported accommodation for the homeless. • People staying temporarily with other households. • People in other temporary lodgings. • People living in severely crowded dwellings.
NSW State-wide Street Count	Annually since 2020	State-wide: 79 local government areas across NSW including 264 towns and suburbs, and 135 other sites where there was evidence of street homelessness.	Point-in-time count	Headcount of all people who are: • carrying substantial belongings and who appear to have no accommodation • sleeping, laying or sitting on the footpath, street, parks, shop/business fronts, parking lots, road or railway underpasses • inhabiting a tent or a makeshift structure • obviously sleeping in cars, or • indicating to those undertaking the count that they are homeless.
Specialist Homelessness Services National Minimum Data Set	Submitted monthly by providers to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). AIHW publishes an annual report.	National: all jurisdictions and all areas where a specialist homelessness service operates (including by phone)	Trends data on cohort characteristics, risk factors, service need and use	• People presenting at a specialist homelessness service. • People receiving a service from a specialist homelessness service. • Instances where a person received no immediate services from a specialist homelessness service.
The Department's Link2Home 24/7 information and referral service data	At point of client contact (calls/emails)	State-wide	Real-time	People seeking assistance with information, assessments and/or referrals to homelessness support and accommodation services across New South Wales.

Data source	Collected	Locations	Type	Data items identifying homelessness
Available research	Ad hoc	Various	Various. Often trends data on cohort characteristics, risk factors, service need and use	Various

Source: Audit Office analysis 2021.

Appendix five – Temporary accommodation for people sleeping rough - standard practice vs COVID-19 response

Element	Pre-COVID standard practice	COVID-19 response
Referral pathways	Individuals can contact a telephone service, Link2home, the Department's Housing office or a Community Housing Provider to commence an application for temporary accommodation.	Assertive outreach was rolled out state-wide, with increased patrols where such an approach was previously established. In some areas the Department partnered with NGOs to conduct further outreaches. Individuals could also still use the pre-existing pathways listed at left.
Eligibility criteria	Clients should: be a citizen or Australian resident, 16+ years old (or accompanied by parent or guardian), meet the social housing income eligibility limit, have no more than \$1,000 in case assets, be facing imminent homelessness, be unable to find alternative accommodation and demonstrates situations in which their personal safety or mental health may be at risk (or that of another household member), be facing a short wait for a more permanent housing solution.	Unchanged, but individuals identifying as sleeping rough were allocated more initial temporary accommodation (up to 30 days) than other clients (up to five days).
Application process	As part of the application process for temporary accommodation, individuals are required to provide two formal documents to verify their identity	This requirement was temporarily removed.
Initial accommodation period	Individuals are provided with two nights' accommodation and support, then need to attend the relevant Departmental office for a full housing needs assessment, which may include an extension of temporary accommodation. Individuals are limited to 28 days temporary accommodation per financial year. Temporary accommodation will not be continued where a client has received an offer of alternative appropriate accommodation (which may include social housing, private rental including share accommodation, registered boarding house or crisis accommodation).	The policy was changed to allow for individuals who self-identified as sleeping rough to be provided with 30 days accommodation initially, and assistance to work towards a long-term housing outcome. This period could be extended if the client continued to work with the Department to secure long term housing. Individuals who required temporary accommodation, but were not sleeping rough, were entitled to five nights' accommodation. The limit of 28 days temporary accommodation per financial year was removed until 1 July 2020.

Element	Pre-COVID standard practice	COVID-19 response
Engagement with supports and housing services	Individuals are required to contact a Departmental Housing Office, or relevant Community Housing Provider to commence working towards long-term housing outcomes.	Cross-agency 'pop-up style' service access points were established in seven inner city hotels to assist people in temporary accommodation, and to provide information, support, housing assistance, access to mobile phones, and referral to other supports including health services. The Department contracted a service provider to liaise with every person entering temporary accommodation in Sydney during the pandemic to make an initial assessment of their needs and link them up with appropriate services.
Annual capacity	Approximately 24,000 households and 169,000 nights' accommodation.	Approximately 36,000 households and 169,000 nights' accommodation.

Source: Audit Office analysis 2021.

Appendix six – Key measures in the COVID-19 response to homelessness

Actions	Description	Date
COVID-19 Crisis Refuges Deep Cleaning Program	Additional funding for the deep cleaning of crisis refuges and congregate care properties, over three tranches that extended the program to December 2020.	17 March 2020
Additional rental subsidies via Rent Choice Assist, Rent Choice Assist COVID-19, Start Safely and Rent Choice Youth.	Rental subsidies to accelerate pathways for existing clients of homelessness services and priority social housing applicants to secure stable housing in the private rental market.	27 March 2020
Temporary Accommodation	Temporary accommodation for people sleeping rough and deconcentration of congregate homelessness services not conducive to social distancing.	27 March 2020
Domestic and family violence services	Funding for expanded supports to victim-survivors and children, and adaptation of services as a result of COVID-19 (e.g. technology, safety equipment, personal protective equipment, additional staff support and training).	May 2020
Together Home (Tranche 1: 2020–22)	400 packages to support those housed in temporary accommodation during COVID-19, into a head-leased property with wrap-around supports for two years.	9 June 2020
Supports for unaccompanied under 16s	Increase the capacity of the Homeless Youth Assistance Program and specialist homelessness services to provide emergency alternative accommodation for unaccompanied children and young people aged 12 to 15 years.	August 2020
Together Home (Tranche 2: 2021–23)	An additional 400 packages to support people experiencing homelessness into a head-leased property with wrap-around supports for two years.	3 November 2020
Aboriginal Together Home	Funding for an Aboriginal-led model and expansion of the Together Home program in the Hunter Central Coast District for two years.	January 2021

Source: Department of Communities and Justice.

Appendix seven – About the audit

Audit objective

This audit assessed how effectively the Department of Communities and Justice was implementing the NSW Homelessness Strategy and addressing homelessness in its COVID response.

Audit criteria

We addressed the audit objective by examining whether:

1. The Department has effectively developed an evidence-based strategy and established supporting governance and operational arrangements to implement it.
2. The Department was ensuring that the strategy is achieving its objectives and outcomes to prevent and improve responses to homelessness.
3. The Department was effectively supporting people experiencing homelessness into temporary accommodation during COVID-19 and supporting them to transition into more sustainable longer-term housing.

Audit scope and focus

The audit focused on the Department of Communities and Justice. We completed a detailed review of its implementation of the NSW Homelessness Strategy and its response to people experiencing street homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Audit exclusions

The audit did not:

- assess the Department's contracting of NGOs to deliver homelessness services
- assess the performance of NGOs in delivering homelessness services
- assess the delivery of social housing, beyond the specific actions in the Homelessness Strategy
- question the merits of Government policy objectives.

Audit approach

Our procedures included:

1. interviewing
 - relevant Department staff
 - key government, and non-government stakeholders
2. examining:
 - relevant data and documents, including legislation, policies, strategies, plans, guidelines and reviews
 - documents related to the implementation and monitoring of the NSW Homelessness Strategy and its COVID-19 response to people experiencing street homelessness
 - research into relevant practices in other jurisdictions.

The audit approach was complemented by quality assurance processes within the Audit Office to ensure compliance with professional standards.

Audit methodology

Our performance audit methodology is designed to satisfy Australian Audit Standard ASAE 3500 Performance Engagements and other professional standards. The standards require the audit team to comply with relevant ethical requirements and plan and perform the audit to obtain reasonable assurance and draw a conclusion on the audit objective. Our processes have also been designed to comply with requirements specified in the *Public Finance and Audit Act 1983* and the *Local Government Act 1993*.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the co-operation and assistance provided by the Department of Communities and Justice. In particular, we would like to thank our liaison officer and staff who participated in interviews and provided evidence for the audit. We would also like to thank the non-government organisations that we consulted for providing their time and sharing their experiences while dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Audit cost

The estimated cost of the audit is \$515,000.

Appendix eight – Performance auditing

What are performance audits?

Performance audits determine whether state or local government entities carry out their activities effectively, and do so economically and efficiently and in compliance with all relevant laws.

The activities examined by a performance audit may include a government program, all or part of an audited entity, or more than one entity. They can also consider particular issues which affect the whole public sector and/or the whole local government sector. They cannot question the merits of government policy objectives.

The Auditor-General's mandate to undertake performance audits is set out in section 38B of the *Public Finance and Audit Act 1983* for state government entities, and in section 421B of the *Local Government Act 1993* for local government entities.

Why do we conduct performance audits?

Performance audits provide independent assurance to the NSW Parliament and the public.

Through their recommendations, performance audits seek to improve the value for money the community receives from government services.

Performance audits are selected at the discretion of the Auditor-General who seeks input from parliamentarians, state and local government entities, other interested stakeholders and Audit Office research.

How are performance audits selected?

When selecting and scoping topics, we aim to choose topics that reflect the interests of parliament in holding the government to account. Performance audits are selected at the discretion of the Auditor-General based on our own research, suggestions from the public, and consultation with parliamentarians, agency heads and key government stakeholders. Our three-year performance audit program is published on the website and is reviewed annually to ensure it continues to address significant issues of interest to parliament, aligns with government priorities, and reflects contemporary thinking on public sector management. Our program is sufficiently flexible to allow us to respond readily to any emerging issues.

What happens during the phases of a performance audit?

Performance audits have three key phases: planning, fieldwork and report writing.

During the planning phase, the audit team develops an understanding of the audit topic and responsible entities and defines the objective and scope of the audit.

The planning phase also identifies the audit criteria. These are standards of performance against which the audited entity, program or activities are assessed. Criteria may be based on relevant legislation, internal policies and procedures, industry standards, best practice, government targets, benchmarks or published guidelines.

At the completion of fieldwork, the audit team meets with management representatives to discuss all significant matters arising out of the audit. Following this, a draft performance audit report is prepared.

The audit team then meets with management representatives to check that facts presented in the draft report are accurate and to seek input in developing practical recommendations on areas of improvement.

A final report is then provided to the head of the audited entity who is invited to formally respond to the report. The report presented to the NSW Parliament includes any response from the head of the audited entity. The relevant minister and the Treasurer are also provided with a copy of the final report. In performance audits that involve multiple entities, there may be responses from more than one audited entity or from a nominated coordinating entity.

Who checks to see if recommendations have been implemented?

After the report is presented to the NSW Parliament, it is usual for the entity's audit committee to monitor progress with the implementation of recommendations.

In addition, it is the practice of Parliament's Public Accounts Committee to conduct reviews or hold inquiries into matters raised in performance audit reports. The reviews and inquiries are usually held 12 months after the report received by the NSW Parliament. These reports are available on the NSW Parliament website.

Who audits the auditors?

Our performance audits are subject to internal and external quality reviews against relevant Australian and international standards.

The Public Accounts Committee appoints an independent reviewer to report on compliance with auditing practices and standards every four years. The reviewer's report is presented to the NSW Parliament and available on its website.

Periodic peer reviews by other Audit Offices test our activities against relevant standards and better practice.

Each audit is subject to internal review prior to its release.

Who pays for performance audits?

No fee is charged for performance audits. Our performance audit services are funded by the NSW Parliament.

Further information and copies of reports

For further information, including copies of performance audit reports and a list of audits currently in-progress, please see our website www.audit.nsw.gov.au or contact us on 9275 7100.

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Our insights inform and challenge government to improve outcomes for citizens.

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To help parliament hold government accountable for its use of public resources.

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Courage (even when it's uncomfortable)

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