













### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Give Where You Live Foundation and Deakin University HOME Strategic Research and Innovation Centre (SRIC) acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We recognise the loss of lands and culture, knowing the consequences for people, communities and nations. We pay our respect to First Nations Elders both past and present, and acknowledge that sovereignty over these lands and waters has never been ceded. We give thanks to the Wadawurrung people of the Kulin nation as the Traditional Owners of the land, waterways and skies of Wadawurrung Country where this research project has been centred, in Djilang. We are so thankful for their ongoing custodianship of the land on which we live and work and pay our respect to all Elders, past and present.

During this research we were grateful for the opportunity to listen and learn from Traditional custodians and community leaders who shared their perspectives on homelessness in the Djilang region. We would like to extend thanks to the individuals who generously shared their experience and knowledge. Homelessness is an issue that is felt deeply in First Nations communities with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 8.8 times more likely to experience homelessness compared to non-Indigenous Australians. We want this research to provide impetus for a continued focus on closing this gap.

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### **PRELUDE**

The research team wishes to thank our Research Advisory Group members, participating agencies and workshop attendees for sharing their valuable insights and knowledge to inform this project.

Research Advisory Group Members:

Alastair Vick **Neami National** 

Erin Lolicato

Give Where You Live

Foundation

Georgia Quill

Department of Justice and Community Safety

Hanna Goorden

Give Where You Live Foundation

Jade Hamilton

**Power In You Project** 

Julia McCusker

**City of Greater Geelong** 

Madeleine Wacher

Salvation Army

Rebecca Callahan

Barwon South-West

**Homelessness Network** 

Sally Edgerton

Give Where You Live Foundation

### **Participating Organisations:**

The research team would like to acknowledge and thank organisation that provided valuable insight or support to the project:

Barwon Community Legal Service, Barwon Health Barwon South-West Homelessness Network

City of Greater Geelong

Cultura

**DJCS Victoria** 

**Drummond Street Services** 

ermha365

Foundation 61

**Geelong Foundation** 

genU

**Lazarus Community Centre** 

Meli

Neami National

**Outpost Geelong** 

Power in you Project

SalvoConnect

The Salvation Army

Victorian Department of

**Justice and Community Safety** 

**Victoria Police** 

**Wathaurong Aboriginal** 

Co-operative

Wintringham

### **Funding Bodies:**

The research was made possible through the generous support of the following funders:











### **GIVE WHERE YOU LIVE FOUNDATION**

The Give Where You Live Foundation is a community foundation that exists to build a fairer, more equitable community across the Geelong region. We are a unique, place-based philanthropic community foundation working in partnership with our community to help all people and all places thrive. With the community at the centre of all that we do, we focus on priority areas of food security, an inclusive economy, inclusive employment and homelessness assistance.

Recent data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2024b) shows that there were over 1,600 people experiencing homelessness in Geelong throughout 2023-2024. This data and information from our involvement with local community organisations highlight the pressing issue of homelessness in our community. As a Foundation committed to creating a fairer, more equitable Geelong, homelessness is an area we focus on to create change, including through undertaking and sharing local research to inform services and supports in our community.

As the Foundation's education partner, collaborating with Deakin University was a natural fit to create Home Truths: Local Insights in Homelessness Report.

Making positive change for people experiencing homelessness in Geelong is also a priority for many local organisations and foundations, including the Anthony Costa Foundation, City of Greater Geelong, Geelong Community Foundation and Geelong Connected Communities who have jointly funded this important research. The collaboration with Give Where You Live Foundation and shared commitment to understanding and addressing homelessness in our community is invaluable.

Across the G21¹ region we continue to see growing disparity and inequity with increasing cost of living impacting many in our region. With these current challenges being felt even more broadly across our community, this research again is timely and provides a point in time picture of the current levels of demand and challenges being experienced by the many service providers in our region. We are fortunate to have such diversity of support available in our region, and hope this research provides some of the context in which they operate, the challenges they experience and the opportunities that exist for us to collectively ensure all people and places thrive.

<sup>1.</sup> The G21 region is the area covered by the G21 - Geelong Region Alliance, a formal alliance of government, business, and community organisations working together on regional planning and development. It encompasses five local government areas in south-west Victoria: City of Greater Geelong, Surf Coast Shire, Golden Plains Shire, Colac Otway Shire, and Borough of Queenscliffe.



### HOME

HOME is a Strategic Research and Innovation Centre (SRIC) based at Deakin University, established in 2018 to tackle the complex and interconnected challenges of affordable housing, homelessness, and social inclusion. Drawing on interdisciplinary expertise from design, health, policy, arts and education, business and law, social science, and lived experience, HOME leads research that is both academically rigorous and community grounded.

Our research approach is relational, systemsoriented, and impact-driven. We work in close partnership with local communities, government, service providers, industry, and people with lived experience to co-create knowledge and solutions. We apply systems thinking and transdisciplinary methods to better understand the structural forces shaping housing injustice, and to support more coordinated, effective, and equitable responses.

HOME's work is grounded in the belief that addressing homelessness requires more than crisis response; it requires joined-up thinking across systems, sustained collaboration, and place-based innovation. This ethos underpins the Home Truths project, which brings together local service providers, community leaders, and other stakeholders in Greater Geelong to build a shared understanding of the homelessness service system, identify pressure points and opportunities, and co-develop strategies for system reform.

Through participatory processes like the STICKE (Systems Thinking in Community Knowledge Exchange) methodology, HOME facilitates deeper dialogue, collective insight, and practical pathways toward a more just and inclusive housing future.

"Home Truths: Local insights into homelessness." Authors: Giles, D. B., Nakai Kidd, A., Mundell, M., Jain, A., Tucker, R., Sal Moslehian, A.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS**

"How do we get to a point together where we're servicing people in the way that they need to be serviced? How do we actually design our services to support those individuals that we're all trying to help?"

"There are gaps at every level. There are boxes that people need to work within, but there's nowhere for them to go."

"We think that we have a lot of solutions already. There's a lot of good ideas that have already been raised even in this room today. But there are so many barriers outside of our control they're in the hands of policy makers..."

The comments of these three research participants effectively sum up the goals of Home Truths, and some of its findings.

They echo comments made throughout our community knowledge exchange workshops, where stakeholders from across Geelong's network of homelessness support services expressed a combination of frustration and hope - frustration reflecting their efforts to support people facing homelessness and the ways in which they feel the system is 'broken', and hope expressed in their imagination and insights with respect to the ways it might be repaired. If a 'home truth' is a difficult but important observation, a sober reflection on something or somebody, told by the people who know it most intimately, this report documents some of the home truths shared with us by the people best situated to tell them.

This research addresses the question: **How can** local service providers best meet the needs of people facing homelessness in the City of Greater Geelong? It explores the local service system available to people facing homelessness in Greater Geelong, a complex ecosystem of agencies and organisations that support people experiencing or at risk of homelessness in a range of ways. This includes: Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) such as: crisis accommodation, social housing, and other ongoing housing support; and other services that may support the needs of people facing homelessness, including, but not limited to: food relief, mental health services, family and gendered violence services, First Nations supports, LGBTQIA+ support, refugee resettlement, alcohol and other

drug (AOD) interventions, and other ongoing health maintenance (see **Appendix A** for a more detailed discussion.) Throughout this report, therefore, we refer to the Greater Geelong local services system, or local ecosystem of homelessness services.

Drawing on valuable insights from Geelong-based service providers and other key stakeholders (including those with lived experience of homelessness) gathered through a series of collaborative workshops, it offers a holistic picture of this ecosystem, including:

- Greater understanding of the current levels of demand and challenges being experienced by homeless services and supports.
- Collation of local data that helps to demonstrate the scale and complexity of the issues across the Geelong region.
- Identification of common systemic challenges or obstacles to access or service provision for Geelong residents experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness.
- Identification of early recommendations and innovative models that could contribute to improved outcomes across the community.
- Increased clarity on where further investment and funding would support improved outcomes across the community.

This research unfolds against the backdrop of Australia's escalating housing crisis, exacerbated by rising cost of living pressures and widening inequality (Heap, 2024: 10). Rental stress now affects more Australians across a wider range of income brackets (Everybody's Home, 2025), while charities nationwide are struggling with unprecedented demand for food relief and material aid (Good 360, 2024; Ipsos Public Affairs, 2024). The housing crisis has placed increased pressure on homelessness services with many agencies struggling to keep up: a recent survey found that 83% of services report being unable to answer calls, 74% cannot respond to urgent emails, and 40% are forced to close their doors during business hours due to overwhelming demand (Jackson and Blane, 2024; Pawson et al., 2024). (See **Setting the Scene**, for more.)

This research applies HOME's relational, systems-thinking, and transdisciplinary approach to homelessness, aiming to produce a report that informs policymakers, service providers, and the people they support. To achieve this, we employed three co-designed community knowledge-exchange workshops with a representative spectrum of key service providers and other stakeholders in Greater Geelong. Through collaborative mapping and systems thinking, these workshops identified critical challenges and opportunities within the local homelessness service system.

### **Five 'Home Truths'**

Insights, Challenges and Opportunities for Action

This report presents five key insights — five 'home truths' — identified through our community knowledge-exchange workshops, highlighting priority areas for systemic improvement across the region. Together, these insights reflect the need for coordinated, place-based responses to the complex drivers of homelessness.

While these five 'home truths' represented challenges for stakeholders across the local ecosystem, in the same breath participants identified them with opportunities for action. Indeed, stakeholders are already 'scaling up' their capacity with new or innovative projects such as: the Geelong Rent Stress Hub (addressing housing access and prevention), the Right to Rest and Youth Foyer (addressing flexible or targeted services), the Barwon Local Area Services Network and the Greater Geelong Homelessness Working Group (addressing information sharing and coordination), and the Geelong Project (addressing prevention). Yet much, much more remains to be done.

Extending these initiatives, participants identified key recommendations, that provide opportunities for different stakeholders to act. We note that many of these calls for action involve diverse stakeholders working together to achieve meaningful outcomes.



# 1. HOUSING AND ACCOMMODATION

Stakeholders across
Geelong's service system
highlighted the significant
barrier of housing shortages.

Supply and demand mismatches in both social housing and private rentals were evident. Participants suggested interventions such as expanding social housing, improving private rental access, and innovating emergency shelter models to address the shortfall.

#### Recommendations:

- 1.1: Increase social housing supply by repairing vacant properties, streamlining allocation processes, using inclusionary zoning, and reforming building codes to enable faster construction. Stakeholders: Housing providers; Local Council; Government and Private Funders.
- 1.2: Improve access to private rentals through partnerships between housing providers, and community (including landlords and realtors), promotion of alternative housing models like modular homes or cooperatives, and tightening regulations to ensure safety and tenant rights. Stakeholders: Housing providers; Local council; Property owners and realtors; Neighbourhood coalitions.
- **1.3: Expand crisis and temporary accommodation** by repurposing unused buildings, setting up supported transitional shelters, and ensuring strong case management and coordination tools to link individuals to longer-term housing and support services.

  Stakeholders: Housing providers; Local Council;

Government and Private Funders.



# 2. FUNDING AND RESOURCING

A key challenge identified was inadequate funding, with an emphasis on the need for structured, flexible, and

long-term funding sources. Participants called for better funding regimes to allow services to tailor resources to community needs and support systemic reform in the homelessness sector.

### **Recommendations:**

- 2.1: Foster collaboration by embedding partnership requirements in funding processes and investing in shared tools like inter-agency referral systems and local data dashboards to improve coordination and evidence-based practice. (refer to Action 4.1) Stakeholders: Government and Private Funders; Direct service providers.
- 2.2: Fund vulnerable communities and needs by increasing support for First Nations-led initiatives, culturally responsive services, and wraparound supports for individuals facing complex challenges like trauma, addiction, or disability. Stakeholders: Government and Private Funders; Direct service providers
- **2.3: Reform funding policy** by considering systemic investments, such as a small Medicare levy to fund housing and support services, and shifting focus from short-term crisis responses to long-term, preventive, and community-driven approaches. Stakeholders: Federal, state, and local government.



## 3. FLEXIBLE SERVICE MODELS

A strong need for flexible service delivery models to address individual and group-specific needs was identified.

Inadequate, inflexible services led to client fatigue and worsened outcomes. Participants proposed expanding service hours, colocating services, diversifying delivery methods, and incorporating feedback, particularly from those with lived experience.

### **Recommendations:**

- 3.1: Commit to flexible, trust-building services by embedding sector-wide flexibility in service delivery and funding, prioritising lived experience in staffing, and using creative, human-centred approaches to reduce service fatigue and build client trust. Stakeholders: Local entry points; Other direct service providers; Government and Private Funders
- 3.2: Establish co-located and mobile service hubs, such as one-stop shops or renovated centres like Lazarus, offering integrated health, housing, and social supports, while also developing mobile or virtual service models to meet diverse accessibility needs. Stakeholders: Local entry points; Other direct service providers; Government and private funders
- 3.3: Extend and coordinate after-hours services through joint agreements across service providers, supported by flexible funding and staffing models, ensuring clients can access help beyond standard business hours. Stakeholders: Local entry points; Other direct service providers; Government and private funders



## 4. COLLABORATION AND INFORMATION SHARING

There is a lack of accurate, up-to-date information flow, resulting in inefficiencies and missed early intervention

opportunities. Participants suggested creating information-sharing portals for clients, providers, and the public, as well as fostering direct communication between service providers and policymakers to improve resource allocation and decision-making.

#### **Recommendations:**

- **4.1: Invest in interagency collaboration and training** by funding regular networking forums, shared education opportunities, and embedding lived experience and mandatory collaboration into service models and funding criteria. (refer to **Action 2.1**) Stakeholders: Government and private funders
- 4.2: Develop integrated digital portals including:
  (a) a public-facing service directory to support community access, (b) a provider portal to enhance coordination, and (c) a secure client information-sharing platform to improve continuity of care while upholding privacy and dignity. Stakeholders: Local entry points; Other direct service providers; Government and private funders
- **4.3:** Create a live housing and homelessness data dashboard to track housing needs, availability, and government responses improving placement efficiency, accountability, and aligning policy with on-the-ground realities. Stakeholders: Local council; Government and private funders



# 5. PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

Amid rising homelessness and housing insecurity in Geelong, homelessness service capacity is increasingly

strained. Participants advocated for a whole of region strategy focused on prevention and early intervention through community partnerships, education, and coordinated supports, particularly for vulnerable populations facing housing insecurity in Geelong.

#### **Recommendations:**

5.1: Strengthen early intervention through public-private partnerships by involving housing agents and community groups in identifying tenants at risk, supporting negotiation with landlords, and connecting clients to legal or housing support services. Stakeholders: Housing providers; Local council; Property owners and realtors; Neighbourhood coalitions.

- 5.2: Adopt flexible, intersectional, and personcentred service models that respond to individuals' diverse and evolving needs, building on approaches like The Geelong Project to support prevention among at risk populations, particularly youth. Stakeholders: Local entry points; Other direct service providers; Government and Private Funders
- 5.3: Invest in public education and awareness campaigns via media, schools, and community channels to inform those at risk about available supports and build broader community understanding and political momentum for systemic housing solutions. Stakeholders: Local entry points; Other direct service providers; Government and private funders



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# SETTING THE SCENE: THE STATE OF HOMELESSNESS IN GEELONG

Homelessness is a complex and multifaceted social problem, driven by a mix of structural forces interacting with more individualised risk factors. Reflecting this complexity, homelessness research is a multidisciplinary field, integrating diverse perspectives from across the social sciences, humanities and public health (Smith and Kopec, 2023).

### **Defining Homelessness**

In the Australian context, 'homelessness' describes a range of insecure, temporary, and/ or inadequate living arrangements, whereby a person lacks suitable alternative accommodation. Nationally accepted definitions encompass 'primary homelessness' (for example, sleeping rough, outdoors in the street or makeshift shelters, living in a vehicle, and so on), 'secondary homelessness' (for example, couch-surfing, or staying in crisis accommodation), and 'tertiary homelessness' (for example, residing in boarding houses, caravan parks, or severely overcrowded dwellings) (ABS 2012; AIHW, 2022).

### Homelessness in Australia

Australia's homeless population is diverse but largely hidden, with visibly homeless people (rough sleepers) accounting for around 6% (AIHW, 2024a). Homelessness is a 'relational' phenomenon, driven by a combination of systemic forces, structural inequalities, and individual vulnerabilities. In Australia, a nationwide scarcity of affordable long-term housing options is acknowledged as the major structural contributor to homelessness. This shortage reflects the ongoing housing crisis, underpinned by an inflated property market, rising rents, low vacancy rates, and a nationwide shortfall of social housing, reflecting historic underinvestment by successive governments (Batterham et al., 2024; Productivity Commission, 2022: 204; Pawson and Lilley, 2022).

Housing shortages cannot be understood in isolation, however. Applying a systems-thinking approach, researchers identify housing as part of a larger socioeconomic ecosystem that

reproduces nationwide patterns of inequality, privilege, and poverty (Elwood and Lawson 2018). This 'poverty relation' is enmeshed in broader systems of inequality — such as gender, Indigeneity, age, income, disability, and migration status — which intersect to create complex and compounding forms of disadvantage (ibid). As the most acute manifestation of this system, homelessness has also been described as 'housing deprivation' (Willse, 2015). Other key contributors to this deprivation include income inequality, unemployment, inadequate welfare supports, and discrimination (Johnson et al., 2015; Pawson et al., 2022).

These structural and systemic elements interact with more individualised risk factors which render some people more vulnerable to homelessness. Nationally, family and domestic violence is a leading 'trigger event' (Lee et al., 2021) that precipitates homelessness (AIHW, 2024a). Other risk factors include disability, mental illness, early trauma, relationship breakdown, family conflict, or job loss (Johnson et al., 2015; Flatau et al., 2021: 6). However, these experiences rarely occur in isolation. Instead, they are deeply shaped by the systems of inequality described above. For example, women fleeing violence, First Nations people affected by intergenerational trauma and dispossession, or young people exiting state care may each experience housing precarity through different pathways, with overlapping legal, health, cultural, and institutional barriers.

Demographic groups at higher risk include First Nations Australians, young people, children on care and protection orders, older people (Pawson et al., 2022; AIHW, 2024a), and newly arrived migrants. This complex relationality

demands a shift away from siloed service responses and linear cause-effect models, toward a more holistic, systems-oriented approach. It also underpins the collaborative, relational methodology of our study, which aims to understand not just the drivers of homelessness in Greater Geelong, but how multiple systems interact in people's lives to either entrench or alleviate housing exclusion.

### **Homelessness Research and Policy:**

Recent Trends

Homelessness research is a multidisciplinary field, integrating diverse perspectives from across the social sciences, humanities and public health (Smith & Kopec, 2023). Recent evolutions in homelessness scholarship and policy include a growing interest in place-based and communitycentred responses (Santa Maria et al., 2024; Raza & Vasko, 2024); a sharpened emphasis on prevention and early intervention, along with critiques of traditionally crisis-oriented service systems (Fitzpatrick et al., 2021; Dej et al., 2020; Fowler et al., 2019; Culhane et al., 2011); a shift toward the goal of ending homelessness, rather than simply managing it (Flatau et al., 2021: 7); a growing focus on evidence-based interventions, supported by robust data collection; and the emergence of more holistic, systems-based perspectives, including new approaches for mapping local service systems, improving service coordination, and fostering effective cross-sector collaboration (Rodrigues et al., 2021; Gaetz and Buchnea, 2023).

Institutions like RMIT and the University of Melbourne have also researched homelessness, each adopting different approaches and areas of focus, such as the national longitudinal survey of individuals experiencing housing insecurity (Bevitt et al., 2015), or data linkage system for SHS workforce analysis (WIDI, RMIT, 2023). In contrast, HOME's STICKE methodology focuses not on individuals or outcomes, but rather the Greater Geelong service system itself, as understood and experienced by its providers and clients.

#### Housing-Led Approaches

Recent decades have seen a shift toward Housing-Led responses to homelessness, which prioritise rapid and permanent rehousing for people experiencing homelessness. Housingled approaches represent a shift away from the traditional "staircase" approach, which requires the person to change their behaviour to prove that they are "housing-ready" before they can access permanent housing (for example, by engaging with specific support services, demonstrating a sustained commitment to sobriety, or completing life skills training). Predicated on the idea that resolving a person's homelessness requires behavioural change on their part, the staircase model is deficit based and overtly conditional (Clarke et al., 2020).

Housing First is the most widely adopted Housing-Led approach, with mounting international evidence of its success as a solution to 'chronic' homelessness and rough sleeping. While models vary internationally, the underlying principle of Housing First is to provide immediate access to permanent housing, followed by support services to be accessed on a voluntary basis (Semborski et al., 2021; Ly and Latimer, 2015; Tsemberis, 2010).

Gaining early traction in the US, UK, Canada and Finland, Housing First has been partially adopted in Australia, with the Street to Home and

Common Ground initiatives being two prominent examples. Housing First does not have a prevention focus (Gaetz and Buchnea, 2023: 55) and its success is contingent on housing supply (Roggenbuck, 2022: 30), particularly social housing. To increase social housing the Victorian state government has programs such as the "Big Housing Build" (Homes Victoria, 2025), and the Federal Government Social Housing Accelerator, Housing Australia Future Fund and the National Housing and Homeless Agreement (Australian Government, 2025). While ostensibly the model rejects the notion of "housing readiness" and associated preconditions, some critics have argued that conditionality often remains a feature of Housing First programs (Clarke et al., 2020).

**Functional Zero** is a community-driven, locality-based approach to ending homelessness. The model emphasises cross-sector collaboration between local organisations, bringing together communities, business and government in a coordinated effort to reduce and ultimately end homelessness within a given local area. The goal is to reach 'Functional Zero': the point where homelessness becomes a rare, brief and non-recurring event within a local community.

The Functional Zero model has garnered growing support in Canada, the US, the UK, and more recently Australia. As a priority, it usually targets rough sleeping, the most harmful and visible form of homelessness. Outreach workers collect data about local individuals sleeping rough, including their specific housing and support needs. Collated data forms a 'By Name List', which local services then use to match people with tailored support and suitable housing. The Functional Zero model tracks real-time inflows/outflows, enabling local communities to monitor progress toward the goal of reducing or eliminating homelessness within their area (Santa Maria et al., 2024; Raza & Vasko, 2024: Batko, 2021). Functional Zero is based on a Collective Impact model, and local projects are typically implemented alongside Housing First approaches.

In Australia, Zero projects usually centres on a Local Government Area (LGA), with varying involvement by council. Most Australian initiatives follow the Advance to Zero framework, a methodology developed and overseen by the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH). Key principles include a person-centred and strengths-based approach, the use of quality real-time data to measure progress, and a shared commitment to evidence-based systems change. Other core elements include assertive outreach teams, the use of common assessment tools and "By Name" lists, and a focus on data-informed prevention. Advocating for policy change and building public support for ending homelessness are also important aspects of the framework (AAEH, 2021).

### Prevention and Early Intervention

There is growing recognition that primarily crisis-oriented systems can limit opportunities for transformative change, potentially serving to embed homelessness rather than solving it (Culhane et al., 2011; Roebuck et al., 2022).

Alongside these critiques has come a recent upswell of interest in prevention-focused programs, which seek to "turn off the tap" by reducing the inflow of people into homelessness (Gaetz and Dej, 2017; Gaetz et al., 2018; Dej et al., 2020; Oudshoorn, et al., 2020; Fitzpatrick et al., 2021). Emerging evidence suggests that relatively small interventions to retain people's housing can yield disproportionately large reductions in homelessness (Dej et al., 2020; Fowler et al., 2019).

### **Homelessness In Geelong**

One of Australia's fastest-growing cities, Greater Geelong, is home to almost 300,000 people (.id, 2025). The municipality spans some 1250 square kilometres and includes the Geelong city centre, along with suburban, coastal, and rural areas. Located 75 kilometres south-west of Melbourne, the City of Greater Geelong is one of five Local Government Areas (LGAs) making up the Barwon region (along with Colac Otway, Golden Plains, Queenscliff, and the Surf Coast).

Homelessness figures more than doubled in Greater Geelong over the five years to mid-2021, surging by 51.5% (CoGG, 2023: 13). When compared to state and national levels, Greater Geelong experienced the most significant increase in homelessness between 2014-15 and 2022-23, rising by 26.12%, compared to 18.62% across Australia. In contrast, Victoria reported a more modest rise of 8.02%. Similarly, Greater Geelong saw a notable 12.89% increase in individuals at risk of homelessness, while Victoria recorded a smaller increase of 4.20%. Nationally,

the at-risk population grew by 8.62%, reflecting a general rise in housing vulnerability. This data indicates that this issue is more pronounced in Greater Geelong, highlighting the need for targeted interventions (AIHW, 2023). The sharp increase seen in Geelong aligns with similar growth in other regional LGAs across Victoria (Tippet and Wong, 2023). It also needs to be noted that the statewide increase reflects improved data collection methods, including a closer count of boarding housing residents and greater clarity on people's whereabouts during Victoria's Covid-19 response (CHP, 2023: 4).

### Demand for local support services

Geelong-based organisations working with people facing homelessness have also noted a sharp rise in demand in recent years. In 2023, The Outpost and Lazarus Community Centre both reported a 60% increase in people seeking help (Tippet and Wong, 2023), while 90% of food organisations across the G21 region reported increased demand for food relief (Sustain, 'Food For Thought' 2023: 9).

Over 4,800 people sought assistance from Geelong-based Specialist Homelessness Services in 2023–2024. Around 1,630 were currently homeless, with the remainder at risk (AIHW, 2024a). However, given that close to two-thirds of people experiencing homelessness do not seek support from specialist services (AIHW, 2024a), the real figures are likely to be much higher.

**Geelong's housing market** is compounding these challenges, with a severe shortage of both private rentals and social housing properties (Geelong Community Foundation, 2024: 5). Over the past decade house prices in Geelong have surged 75.2%, accelerating faster than most capital cities (CoGG, 2024), while rents rose 20% over the three years to 2023 (CoGG, 2023: 6, 3).

Geelong now has 5,200 households on the priority wait list for social housing (defined as being in urgent need of housing) (Claringbold, 2024). One-quarter of Geelong households renting privately are experiencing rental stress (id., 2023), and less than 1% of the city's rental housing is affordable for households on very low incomes (CoGG, 2023: 3).

Median rents in Geelong have increased by 20% since 2020, with renters comprising around one-third of households in the city (30-35 %).

(CoGG, 2023). Comparing this to overall Victoria, rent has increased approximately 38% since 2020 (ABS, 2023; DFFH, 2024) where renters comprised of 29% (ABS, 2019-2020). In Greater Geelong, the percentage of affordable rental properties decreased from 23% in 2020 to 18.4% in 2024, representing a 20% decline over the four-year period. Similarly, across Victoria, affordable rentals constituted 16.3% of the market in 2020, but this figure fell to 12.1% in 2024, reflecting a 25.8% reduction (DFFH, 2024). These trends highlight the increasing pressure on rental affordability in both regional and statewide contexts, indicating a growing housing affordability crisis.

The number of employed people in Geelong seeking homelessness support jumped 59% over 2023-24, with women making up three-quarters of that increase (CHP, 2024: 5). Projections show that by 2041, almost 17,000 Geelong households are expected to need social housing (CoGG, 2024b). Under the Greater Geelong's Social Housing Plan 2020-2041, the city has set a target of 7% social housing by 2041, up from the current 4% (CoGG, 2023).

Family violence figures reveal another concerning trend, with recorded incidents up by 13% in Greater Geelong over 2023–2024 (Crime Statistics Agency, 2024). Figures from late 2022 show that family and domestic violence survivors made up 42% of people seeking help from Geelong's homelessness services (CoGG, 2023: 13). A Geelong trial of the Safe At Home program, which aims to prevent homelessness while enabling domestic violence survivors to remain safely in the family home, was launched in early 2025 (Safe At Home, 2025).

Geelong has one of the highest rates of homelessness among First Nations people in Australia (CoGG, 2023). Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make up just 1.3% of Greater Geelong's population (ABS, 2021), they represent approximately 10% of those seeking support from local homelessness services (CoGG, 2023: 13)

**Rough sleeping** has also increased since the pandemic began, with City of Greater Geelong law officers reporting a growing number of people sleeping in cars, tents, or public spaces (CoGG, 2023: 13). A 2023 survey found that local rough sleepers had been without shelter for

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almost six years on average. Almost 70% said their homelessness was due to a relationship breakdown, three-quarters had experienced physical abuse or harm while homeless, and 80% had chronic health problems (Neami National, 2023).

The Geelong Project, a successful school-based early intervention program launched in 2013, reduced homelessness amongst secondary school students by 40% in its first three years of operation (McKenzie, 2018: 34). However, there was a 60% increase in young people (aged 10–25) seeking crisis housing support from local youth homelessness services during the first year of the pandemic (Shying, 2021).

Geelong Zero was launched in mid-October 2022, with 15 local agencies collaborating on a shared goal of ending rough sleeping in Geelong. The project was led by Towards Home+ (Neami National), a specialist homelessness service focused on local rough sleepers, with funding support from the Give Where You Live Foundation. The Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH), which leads the Advance to Zero campaign in Australia, provides support in the form of training, digital infrastructure and evaluation frameworks.

Homelessness Access Program is a new initiative launched in late 2024 to improve access to healthcare for both rough sleepers and young people in Geelong. Under the 12-month pilot two community nurses, based at local homelessness services Towards Home + and Meli respectively, will work with these two vulnerable cohorts (WVPHN, 2024).



### **FIVE 'HOME TRUTHS'**

## **INSIGHTS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES**

"Agencies are not receiving nearly the amount of funding required to do what it is that they're required to do, and, in fact, operating in an environment where there's not enough to keep your existing staff members and those that are employed, or on reduced contracts, and therefore reducing the services and reducing the capacity of what they're able to do."

"Clients repeatedly presenting to services, over long periods of time, without getting any housing outcome [leads to] service fatigue for both providers and clients, and clients losing trust in the system".

"I think that's kind of like, part of the collective conversation we're having. It's more kind of focusing around innovative housing solutions. Because at the moment, what we're doing clearly isn't working. The crisis model isn't working. The transitional model isn't working. So I think it's really about looking outside the box."

"Systems and structural change take decades. We've had the deinstitutionalisation of mental health. We've had family violence [reforms]. All of the systems are completely broken, and they're not talking to each other — unless we hold people to account."

Over the course of three STICKE workshops, participants painted a picture of a system that is in many respects exceeding its limits. As homelessness continues to grow, participants described many of the ways in which demand for services and support outstrips the resources and service models at their disposal, calling for additional funding, infrastructure, and innovation. When asked how the system might be rendered more accessible, innovative, and better connected, participants described for us a constellation of interrelated factors.

Together with the workshop facilitators, they generated a collaborative vision of the existing system, highlighting cause-and-effect relationships and power dynamics between different forces or elements of the system (see Appendix C: Figure 3).

Through this shared visualisation, participants developed a map of the system as it currently stands, but also of those critical points where intervention and innovation might make a

difference. They identified many, however in the process, repeated key themes emerged — "Home Truths" that capture the hard limits of Geelong's ecosystem of homelessness supports, but also the opportunities for growth and innovation, in order to make that system more accessible and effective for the clients it aims to help. This section therefore presents the key themes that emerged from these workshops, each reflecting recurring insights, challenges, and ideas voiced by a wide range of local stakeholders. The analysis is structured into five 'home truths' or major themes:

- Housing and Accommodation
- Funding and Resources
- Flexible Service Delivery
- Collaboration and Information-Sharing
- Prevention and Early Intervention.

These themes were reflected in the web of important factors visualised by participants themselves in the STICKE process, and the

collaborative diagram that they generated. Each thematic subsection begins with a brief summary insight capturing the overarching 'home truth', the issue or tension discussed.

This is followed by a series of sub-themes that unpack the challenges posed, nuances and complexities within each domain, supported by reflections from workshop participants in their own words that give voice to the lived experience and frontline expertise shared in the workshops. Where relevant, each theme concludes with a set of cross-cutting insights and opportunities that point to potential directions for system reform, innovation, or collaboration.

The five 'Home Truths' provide a grounded, systems-level view of the current landscape of homelessness responses in Greater Geelong — and the community's aspirations for more just, coordinated, and effective solutions.





### **HOME TRUTH 1:**

### **HOUSING & ACCOMMODATION**

"THERE ARE GAPS AT EVERY LEVEL."

One of the most significant issues highlighted by stakeholders from across Geelong's service system, despite their diverse roles and objectives, was the significant obstacle posed by a shortage of available accommodation of all kinds. As they collectively visualised in the workshops, a range of interconnected factors related to housing worked against the goals of the system (see Appendix C: Figure 4).

Victoria's housing system is under extreme pressure, with a severe shortage of all types of housing including social housing, unaffordable private rentals, and unsafe, inadequate crisis accommodation was reiterated by participants throughout our workshops. With respect to housing, supply and demand are poorly matched across the board.

Workshop participants highlighted a lack of housing and accommodation as a major challenge for both service providers and clients. People described Geelong as having 'no vacancies' across the board — including the social housing waitlist, extremely tight private rental market with low vacancy rates, a lack of safe crisis accommodation options, inadequate funding to support this form of emergency response; funding shortfalls in the provision of both Supported Residential Services (SRS) and Specialist Disability Accommodation (SRS); scant vacancies in local rooming houses; and a lack of options for people exiting the three prisons located in the Barwon South West region.

They therefore suggested a number of interventions to mitigate this shortage, focussed on reform, rezoning, innovation, and collaborations with the potential to maintain and expand social housing; enable more equitable access to the private rental market; and develop innovative emergency shelter models to address the shortfall.

"We urgently need accommodation options...
That lack of resources and vacancies is a big
thing for us."

"The housing options just aren't there. People have to rely on agencies to get to the end result [housing], and agencies can't help."

"It's not just about [service] fatigue, it's about us having to tell people: "We've got nothing for you. That leads to distrust in the system: you've told your story that many times, but you've still got no outcome. It depletes the consumer's emotional resources and time."

"Everyone's so busy having conversations about what the perfect housing outcome should be, we're getting stuck in the minutia... that we're missing that every single day we have that conversation, people are sleeping on the streets and experiencing traumatic events."



### **INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES**

### **Insight 1: Inadequate social housing**

The severe undersupply of properties in the social housing system was identified as the major cause of long waitlists on the Victorian Housing Register (VHR). Participants also identified that many properties remained vacant due to slow maintenance turnarounds, VCAT proceedings, or administrative bottlenecks. Some said local services were struggling to obtain clear information about changes to social housing supply, including client eligibility and timelines for new builds funded through the Victorian Government's Big Build program. Local service providers reported that they are rarely informed about how many new homes will be allocated to priority cohorts or where developments were located.

"There's the wait list for [social housing]. There are also no vacancies for private housing... no vacancies for Supported Residential Services (SRS) or SDS [Specialist Disability Accommodation], or rooming houses, etcetera."

"We've got like twenty percent of public housing [that] is uninhabitable. So just fix it. Fix it up so that people can actually live in it. That's a good start."

"And also build more housing. Like, literally build more housing... I think our region's really missed out. If you look at other places, like Melbourne, Whittlesea, and those places, there's been a lot of things put in. Think Geelong isn't really getting its fair share. We need more one- and two-bedroom houses and more stock and the social and affordable housing rent to buy scheme..."

### Insight 2: Inaccessible private rental market

In regional areas such as Geelong, rent prices have continued to escalate with persistently low vacancies due to shrinking rental housing stock resulting in few affordable properties. Some private rentals — particularly in low-income suburbs like Corio and Norlane — fail to meet the minimum standards defined under the Residential Tenancies Act, including basic heating, safety, and structural conditions. Participants stated that housing clients are increasingly forced into overcrowded, insecure, or illegal arrangements. Under these conditions, an unequal balance of power between landlords and tenants also creates added vulnerability for people already at risk of homelessness. Meanwhile, support services struggle to use existing brokerage programs or rental subsidies due to market pressures.

Historically, we've probably seen one person being evicted per week in Geelong that's leaving stable housing... That's now probably up to at least two or three. And that's just with Geelong. That's not Corio, Waurn Ponds, Leopold, so you extrapolate that you probably—and those figures have doubled within the last six to twelve months—we've probably seen more people put down the street than ever before."

"A rental property needs to be home-worthy before being rented out... [but]that would cut out a lot of stock in Corio and Norlane that is not habitable."

"We're hearing from rental providers that are wanting to provide more of a community response and connecting with the most appropriate private rentals available that match appropriate different programs."

### **Insight 3: Crisis and temporary accommodation**

The crisis accommodation system is described as "broken" by many service providers for a range of reasons, including a lack of appropriate emergency shelter options and a lack of adequate Housing Establishment Funds (HEF). The most common option available to those in immediate need is short-term motel stays, described by participants as problematic: motels are typically unsafe, unsupervised, and not trauma informed. Vulnerable individuals, including women, children, and those with mental health conditions (not eligible for psychiatric services admission), report high levels of violence, intimidation, and recurrent traumatisation while staying in these environments.

Additionally, participants report that they have many clients who are released into homelessness from hospitals, prisons, or out-of-home care without adequate coordination or follow-up planning, placing even more pressure on emergency housing pathways. There are also significant gaps in transitional options for individuals who are not acutely unwell but still need time-limited supported accommodation.

In sum, echoing the first two sub-themes in this section, participants reported a shortage of adequate, safe and appropriate crisis and temporary accommodation.

"We need a safe place for the person to go. But there is nowhere. They sleep in a motel for two nights, then come back to you."

"[In hotels and rooming houses] you have people pouring fuel on people, people bullying others"

"We all have a duty of care. If you put someone in a hotel, you're setting them up for failure."

"The services are all short term... The waitlists for housing are huge."

# Insight 4: Other housing types (SRS, SDA, rooming houses)

For individuals with psychosocial disabilities, chronic illnesses, or mobility issues, a broader supported housing ecosystem (including Supported Residential Services (SRS), Specialist Disability Accommodation (SDA), and rooming houses) often presents the only feasible housing options. However, the lack of availability of such accommodation forces many to stay in unsafe or unsuitable conditions. Participants reported that rooming houses are often privately run, poorly regulated, and unsafe. They said that though some providers maintain higher standards, many fail to provide even the most basic amenities and protections. There is little monitoring or public accountability.

Participants suggested that at least a part of the problem was that funding models were outdated, and inadequate. Existing funding models did not support newer and innovative solutions, were instead rigid, unsupported by core services.

"Sometimes people are too unwell to go into a motel, but not unwell enough to call psychiatric services."

"People call an ambulance, and they bring them to us, drop them off at our door [i.e. intake services]. I can appreciate the demand on emergency and health services, but it all leads back to [us]. We get the clients other services don't know what to do with. We don't have a solution; we don't have funding. There are no options for people who can't go anywhere."

"People coming out of prison, they get a couple of weeks accommodation, that's it. There's a big hole there."



# CROSS-CUTTING OPPORTUNITIES: INCREASE SUPPLY AND STRUCTURAL REFORM

Stakeholder voices across all the workshops identified that the worsening shortage of housing stock was damaging service delivery, the system and its responses, and ultimately client behaviour and trust. While they did not single out any particular root cause of this shortage, participants unanimously supported increasing housing and accommodation supply by using innovative solutions, removing administrative hurdles, capacity constraints, increased funding and collaboration between all levels of government and service providers.

### **Opportunity 1: Boosting social housing**

Participants suggested several actions to alleviate the waiting list for social housing, including: surveying vacant social housing properties and expediting repairs/maintenance to free up local supply; reducing allocation delays and moving people out of homelessness more swiftly (perhaps in collaboration with DFFH/Housing Victoria). At the same time providing an online database of vacant houses and application system (as we will describe in a subsequent section), increased funding for homeless services and use of innovative housing solutions such as caravan parks were raised.

Participants also suggested prioritising the use of inclusionary zoning to increase social housing supply, reforms to make it easier to change building codes in order, as one participant put it, to "literally build more housing".

#### **Opportunity 2: Private rental market**

Stakeholders voiced a range of suggestions intended to better render access to the private rental market for people in housing crisis, including: the establishment of public-private partnerships such as the creation of a Private Rental Alliance in Geelong to foster collaboration between real estate agents and community service organisations to identify and assist tenants experiencing housing stress; development of alternate and innovative private housing including tiny home villages, modular housing, or

rental cooperatives; and the development of rentto-own schemes to increase housing supply.

Some also suggested changes to the Residential Tenancy Act or other improvements to regulation and accountability in the private rental sector, including the **introduction of minimum housing standards and certification requirements to ensure safety and habitability, and empower tenants to demand 'home-worthy' housing.** Participants did not directly discuss root causes of the shortage of rental housing stock, however the increasingly unaffordable cost of private housing and the power held by landlords were the elephant in the room.

# **Opportunity 3: Boosting crisis and temporary accommodation**

Participants called for "outside the box" thinking to create innovative stopgap solutions — as one participant put it "literally anything better than sleeping on a park bench." Participants made suggestions such as: government-supported caravan parks; repurposing council-owned or abandoned buildings for use as crisis or temporary accommodation (an idea supported by suggestions to simplify building classification and rezoning processes, as described earlier); or temporary shelter with appropriate supports and living conditions, such as mental health teams, food, and medical facilities to serve as transit crisis accommodation, where clients can stay securely until appropriate long-term housing

with appropriate supports is available. (See **Final Reflections** for consideration of the ethical implications of such shelter.)

In particular, crisis housing attendees **need to be linked into case management** to enable
longer term accommodation appropriate to the
client — whether it be social housing, private
rental, permanent supportive housing, and
so on. Participants also suggested that this
might be enabled by development of an online
dashboard for service providers to help identify
vulnerabilities, develop meaningful engagement
across services, and so on.

### Other Ideas

In addition to the core opportunities outlined above, participants offered a diverse range of innovative and practical ideas aimed at expanding housing options and increasing flexibility within the existing system.

Several participants proposed construction-based initiatives such as engaging trade school apprentices in the development of tiny home villages or other innovative, readily deployed forms of housing, creating both housing and training outcomes. Partnership-based solutions were also prominent. Rent-to-buy models, modular homes, and container housing were raised as alternative solutions to increase stock quickly and affordably. These ideas reflect a strong appetite for local experimentation, cross-sector partnerships, and more inclusive, pragmatic approaches to addressing Geelong's housing crisis.





### **HOME TRUTH 2:**

### **FUNDING AND RESOURCES**

"IT'S ALL ABOUT FUNDING, FUNDING, FUNDING"

Across each of our workshops, funding and resourcing emerged as one of the most foundational, interconnected challenges experienced by stakeholders from across Geelong's local services ecosystem (see Appendix C: Figure 5).

Participants described a service system under growing pressure, with rising demand outpacing funding increases and leaving many organisations unable to fully deliver on their missions. Beyond just adequacy, stakeholders emphasised the structure, duration, and flexibility of funding as key enablers or constraints to systemic reform. The theme of funding intersected with nearly every other issue raised — housing supply, staffing, service continuity, access barriers, and cross-sector collaboration — highlighting its centrality to a functional, equitable, and responsive homelessness system.

"We also ended up drilling down to talk... stronger collective advocacy, especially for more homelessness funding."

"It's all about funding, funding, funding... identifying new funding sources is the real key for the homelessness sector, and also for mental health."





### **INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES**

**Insight 1:** Inadequate and static funding in the face of rising demand

Across the workshops, service providers consistently voiced concern that their funding had not kept pace with the scale or complexity of community needs. While homelessness and housing stress in Greater Geelong have sharply increased, funding arrangements have remained largely static.

This mismatch between funding and demand has cascading effects across the service system — impacting staff retention, program continuity, and client outcomes. Smaller community-led organisations reported having to "do more with less," often relying on unpaid labour or volunteer goodwill to fill critical gaps.

"The issue has gotten bigger, but our funding has stayed the same... So we know that our program works well, but we don't have enough reach."

"Agencies are not receiving nearly the amount of funding they need to deliver services in a consistent way. That's reducing the capacity of what we're able to deliver."

"There's not enough funding for services. Just CPI indexation, which is not enough to keep existing staff." **Insight 2:** Need for Long-Term Funding for Core Services

Unstable, short-term, or pilot-based funding models were seen as a major obstacle to effective service planning and delivery. Several agencies noted that these arrangements undermine job security, disrupt trust with clients, and prevent sustained collaboration across services. Participants also emphasised that long-term investment was not only a matter of operational sustainability but essential for retaining experienced staff, building cross-sector trust, and fostering continuous improvement.

"We're always in the same old business of working with short-term funding, which affects services in all sorts of ways. Some people are in jobs, or have programs running, and that funding affects the viability of long-term planning."

"Instead of that flavour-of-the-month, four-year cycle or 12-month cycle, are we looking for... a sustained 20-year investment in the sector?"

"We need a commitment to long-term funding for [core services]. But we also need innovation. Both of them need to be funded."

# **Insight 3: Funding for innovation and pilot** programs

While sustaining the foundations of the service system was seen as non-negotiable, participants also spoke to the importance of innovation, particularly in trialling flexible, trauma-informed, or culturally safe responses for marginalised groups. However, many noted that current funding models make it difficult to develop, test, or scale new approaches.

The tension between innovation and continuity was a recurring theme. Participants advocated for dual-track funding models that recognise the importance of both stable service delivery and experimentation in tackling entrenched challenges like chronic homelessness or rough sleeping.

"We still need the base of the service system to function, because it's really hard to do that when there's not much money going into it. But you still need to trial new things to tackle really tricky issues."

"There needs to be an innovative model that is not being captured by the current guidelines or funding processes... but also there are core services that need to operate to make sure those innovative models can actually work."

"People don't seem to want to fund doing what we do well. They want to fund the sexy... the innovative."

# **Insight 4:** Funding models that incentivise collaboration

Several agencies emphasised that current funding arrangements rarely support, and sometimes actively discourage, collaboration. Service providers noted that collaborative work is often unfunded, under-resourced, or reliant on goodwill. This runs counter to the reality that complex client needs span multiple services and sectors.

"We all say we don't get paid to network... maybe put it in the funding [guidelines], the tender proposal."

"How do we integrate services better? I would love to see something in reference to tender applications. So services applying for a tender, making it mandatory that they engage with some group. They have to make network connections that better the outcomes [for] the consumers."

# **Insight 5:** Gaps in funding for high-need or overlooked cohorts

Multiple agencies raised concerns that certain groups were underserved by current funding models, particularly people with complex or overlapping needs who do not fit within narrow eligibility criteria. This included older people, young people exiting care, people with cognitive impairments, or those with dual diagnoses.

Participants recognised that homelessness is not simply a single phenomenon, but rather the culmination of intersectional struggles or disadvantages, such as refugee status, neurodiversity, family violence, LGBTQIA+ identity, and so on, and the needs particular to these intersections require more flexibility (as we will describe subsequently).

"There's a lack of funding/support for people who fall through the gaps — whose support needs are too high to be able to manage a tenancy independently."

"Many [young people] in out-of-home care... they might have ten [workers] involved. There's significant funding, but it's ineffective. It doesn't really serve much purpose. So I think it's about being accountable to what actual funding you hold, where that comes from, and where you've got vacancies, eligibility, all of that "



### **CROSS-CUTTING OPPORTUNITIES**

Throughout the workshops, it became clear that funding was not just a background condition — it was a determinant of system design, service behaviour, and client experience. Participants framed funding reform as an essential enabler of broader systems change, whether in data sharing, prevention strategies, or collaborative planning.

### **Opportunity 1: Incentivising collaboration**

Some participants proposed mandating partnerships in tender processes or embedding collaboration metrics into funding guidelines. Others suggested resourcing shared infrastructure, such as inter-agency referral systems or local data dashboards, to support more coordinated and evidence-informed practice.

### Opportunity 2: Funding specialised need or overlooked cohorts

Some agencies also called for increased funding for First Nations-led housing and homelessness initiatives, and greater support for culturally responsive services. Others noted the lack of wraparound supports for people placed into housing, especially where trauma, addiction, or disability are present.

### **Opportunity 3: Broader funding policy**

In a blue-sky conversation, participants proposed models such as **a modest Medicare levy increase** to fund community housing and support services or redirecting resources from short-term crisis responses to long-term investment in public education, lived-experience leadership, and integrated prevention efforts.

#### **Other Ideas**

In addition to the key opportunities outlined above, participants suggested a range of innovative and collaborative funding approaches that could help address systemic gaps. These included pooling resources across organisations through shared or collective funding arrangements, allowing agencies to stretch limited budgets further and respond more flexibly to local needs. Some called for increased transparency in how funding is allocated and spent across the sector to foster trust and accountability.

There was also strong interest in exploring new funding sources alongside calls for longer funding periods that move beyond the standard two-to three-year cycles.

Short-term supports were also seen as critical, with proposals for external resource funding, such as three-month grants, to provide rapid relief or bridge funding in times of acute need. These ideas reflect a desire for both immediate relief and long-term structural reform, underpinned by local collaboration and innovation.



### **HOME TRUTH 3:**

### **FLEXIBLE SERVICE DELIVERY**

"WE ALL KNOW THAT HOMELESSNESS DOESN'T END AT 5PM."

In addition to the need for housing and funding, stakeholders from across Geelong's homelessness services ecosystem highlighted the need for more flexible service delivery options and models, responsive to the needs of individual clients and distinctive cohorts. The difficulty of finding (or adapting) appropriate, effective supports that are well matched to clients' needs not only slowed or obstructed positive outcomes, but also entrenched the difficulties of homelessness and led to fatigue and mistrust among clients and service providers alike. Participants collaboratively visualised a web of ways in which available models of service delivery fall short of the goals of the system (see Appendix C: Figure 6).

In contrast to housing and funding, which are largely (although not wholly) determined by forces external to the ecosystem of homelessness services, participants identified challenges that are largely (but not wholly) embedded within the system's infrastructure and implementation. In other words, while participants noted that service providers are doing remarkable work within the limitations of the existing system, below we capture stakeholders' descriptions of the current limitations shaping what services are possible.

Participants therefore suggested a range of prospective interventions to work within and expand those limits, including the extension of hours of availability; the co-location of services; targeted service design for specific client cohorts; expansion of translation services; and the opportunity for meaningful feedback and input, particularly by clients and others with lived experience.

"One size doesn't fit all. Everybody comes with different presenting issues."

"Have a look at how the client needs to be supported. Our major challenge is that... we require homeless people to go into an office at a time to receive the support, to tick our boxes and go through the bureaucracy, the red tape."

"Things go up and down. We need a system that allows us to [recognise] fluidity of risk, fluidity of need."



### **INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES**

Insight 1: Overwhelmed or overlooked — the need for client-centred services

As participants told us, providers are often overwhelmed not only by the magnitude of demand for housing and services, but also by the breadth of clients. For both of these reasons they are often unable to provide rapid support.

Targeted services, tailored to the needs of key priority groups, may therefore be more effective for clients, more efficient for providers, and ease the burden on mainstream services. (One participant gave the example of payments available specifically to those escaping domestic violence, whose ability to avoid homelessness may hinge on such targeted support at just the right time.)

At the same time, a range of clients find their particular needs or struggles overlooked in the spectrum of available services. This may apply to accommodation, for example, as described earlier. As a participant told us, some clients are "too unwell to go into a motel, but not unwell enough to call psychiatric services", while other clients present at local intake that "other services don't know what to do with", vet the intake point cannot offer them a place. "There are no options for people who can't go anywhere." The challenge also applies to more specific client needs that fall between available services, from healthcare (e.g. psychiatric care not covered by the NDIS or prescriptions not covered by the PBS) to technological assistance (e.g. access to or use of the internet).

The absence of tailored, client-centred services may have the paradoxical effect of seeing some people 'fall through the gaps' because their support needs are too specific or acute, while others may find themselves interfacing with an overwhelming number of providers, such as young people in out-of-home care (who we heard may have contact with ten or more workers). To these practical needs must be added the complexities of clients whose needs are shaped by other identities, experiences of marginalisation, and needs for self-determination, such as refugees, LGBTQIA+, and First Nations communities.

The ability of service providers to respond to this spectrum of needs is also obviously compounded by the shortage of funding for innovative service responses for high-needs or overlooked cohorts, as highlighted earlier in this report.

"It's about effectiveness by focus."

"The organisations... serve a different purpose, and some of them are more effective because they're actually more focused in on a certain area of the of the issues, right?"

"As an Aboriginal organisation, we talk a lot about self-determination, Aboriginal self-determination... It's about that selfdetermination and dignity of choices across the board"

"If they're couch surfing, the person's vulnerability is still the same, but... not prioritised."

"People cannot access the medication they need. Sometimes it's not on the PBS. It's very complicated, it's a massive thing. Some meds can only be prescribed by a Psychiatrist. Some scripts are time-dated."

"Access to psychiatric services. That's not covered by Medicare. It's such a key issue amongst the rough sleeping community. People can't access those services. There's no follow up appointment, no continuity."

"All these ideas are fine and great but for folks with disabilities, CALD, LGBTIQA+ (but mainly trans and non-binary), First Nations, family violence, regional-rural, etcetera, there will still be additional barriers to secure housing."

"A lot of people we work with don't have a phone. So they can't get e-scripts. But if someone's sleeping rough, they might lose that piece of paper [prescription]."



### **Insight 2: Service fatigue**

One of the consequences of a mismatch between client needs and service models is service fatigue. While it is a consequence of the dynamics already listed, it was highlighted numerous times by participants across all three workshops — perhaps because it carries its own distinct consequences, which compound the difficulties already described.

These consequences negatively impact both service providers and service users. Providers may be forced to make choices about where and how to expend scarce resources like care and attention (putting some things in the 'too hard' pile) while clients may find their own limited time, health, and other resources depleted in ways that make existing homelessness even harder. For both groups, this service fatigue forecloses other more helpful ways of interacting with the system and each other.

"Alleviating the service fatigue, that's a big one."

"People are not getting the services they need or want. There's a big gap between the client presenting, and them getting the service. And that contributes to the service fatigue."

"Consumers repeatedly have to keep going back to SalvoConnect [the homelessness entry point] every day, but they don't get the outcome. They're sick of it, they don't want to keep doing that."

"They have to tell their story 17 times: They have to tell you their story, then they have to tell Salvos, then they go to another service, tell their story again."

"It's an issue for workers too."

"The GPs in Corio don't speak the [patient's] language, but they won't use interpreters. It's 'too hard.'"

"There's nothing to say, 'Hey, you're worth it.' There's nothing to take their mind off being homeless."

### **Insight 3: Client trust**

Perhaps also related to the difficulty of providing client-centred services, low client trust was identified as creating barriers for both service access and service delivery. Service fatigue and mistrust of services reinforce each other. Like service fatigue, client mistrust has distinct consequences of its own and was highlighted numerous times by participants.

This challenge echoes other themes. For example, it is related to the absence of adequate housing options, as one participant pointed out, repeatedly being unable to offer clients adequate support "leads to distrust in the system... It depletes the consumer's emotional resources and time."

In addition, participants told us that mistrust is sown not only when services are inadequate, but when agencies, policies and procedures adversely impact people experiencing homelessness. It is important to acknowledge, for example, that local authorities do have a legislative responsibility to manage public space and amenity equitably and safety for all community members. However, this can create tensions when enforcement intersects with the complex realities of homelessness.

Participants reported that clients' belongings may be disposed of, or stored for retrieval, albeit in a non-central location difficult for some clients to access, leading to the loss of possessions such as backpacks, identification, and so on, which some participants described as "dispossession".

This confirms the need for continued dialogue and collaboration between local authorities, support services, and those with lived experience to ensure enforcement practices are both compassionate and consistent.

"Breaking silos builds trust."

"Clients think all services are connected. So when we have [clients' belongings being removed by authorities], people lose trust in other services."

"A lot of people that we support...
They just don't trust anyone. They think
everyone is up against them... So it's more
about just that knowledge of trusting in

the system and try to give them back that positivity somehow."

"We have [clients] that can't make medical appointments because [of] fear of hospitals, or who won't go see housing because they think that everybody's against them... It's that lack of trust of service providers."

# Insight 4: Limits in space (distance and accessibility)

One of the obstacles that participants highlighted most often was, simply, the challenge of getting clients and services together in the same physical location. While the average person, homeless or not, already has a complex range of needs, the lack of a stable residence, income, or physical mobility can greatly amplify the difficulty of simply getting to where those needs can be met. When the system of homelessness-related services is not as plentiful or accessible as other services, therefore, the requirement for clients to attend multiple services in different locations poses a barrier to client access and effective service delivery. It also increases service fatigue.

Participants highlighted specific factors such as the cost of getting to service locations; accessibility of those locations by foot or public transportation; the distance between services; accessibility with respect to disability, and so on. As a result, many participants advocated some means of shrinking the distance between clients and services, and making the connection between them more convenient, such as making those services more mobile, or co-locating them in a 'one-stop shop', as several of them called it.

"Homelessness is not nine five, but how many service providers are coming out after hours to the places where the clients are?"

"Our major challenge is that we require homeless people to go into an office at a time to receive the support they need, to tick our

boxes, go through the bureaucracy, the red tape. We need to look at how the client needs to be supported."

"Can we bring services to [the person] if they can't get to the emergency department?... Is there another organisation that can do that if [the person] can't get to us?"

"The Geelong community has quite a lot of food relief services around. And drop-in centres... So we find that something Geelong does really well. And it's really accessible because it's in the city, so people don't have to travel far. And then... mental health services. So we have the big local hub in Geelong, which is a new building that you can just drop into and you don't need a referral."

"The Salvation Army [on Bourke Street, in the Melbourne CBD] is a really great inspiration. They've got five levels of stuff. So they've got doctors. They support around 600 people per day."

"The other [idea] we came up with was putting more health or clinical support into the entry point. Because that will help with the entry points, because they come in, not just asking about homelessness. There are some about a whole lot of other services. Why don't we actually have that?"

#### **Insight 5: Limits on time - business hours**

Related to the challenge of where services are offered is the question of when. While the complexities of clients' needs take place around the clock, many of the agencies that make up Geelong's landscape of homelessness-related services work according to traditional business hours, forcing clients in crisis outside of those hours to wait until offices reopen, while others are obliged to choose between different needs, (e.g. healthcare appointments, employment services, housing inspections, and so on) if they are all only possible within the same small window of time. (Relatedly, many participants told us that certain days of the week were especially overwhelming, like Mondays or Fridays, as they reflect the scarcity of care and support that were available over the weekend.)

Not only do services largely work according to traditional business hours, but they approach other aspects of time management and scheduling in a businesslike way that does not always correspond to the experience of

homelessness or housing stress — for example requiring referrals for services, followed by intervals of waiting, followed by appointments that occur during specific narrow (and often short) windows of time.

Importantly, participants pointed out that the limitation of time was a matter not only of certain services being time-constrained, but rather of norms that applied across the sector, making it difficult for services to work in different timeframes even if they wanted to and were funded to.

All of the above may be difficult, prohibitive, or even catastrophic, if those services are needed urgently to address critical situations that take place outside of the services' timeframe, such as mental health crisis or domestic violence.

"After-hours services are urgently needed. We need more responses on the ground."

"With more funding, and thus more available and flexible staffing, we would be able to offer support beyond 9 to 5. We all know that homelessness doesn't end at 5pm."

"When proper care isn't given at the right time, this puts more pressure on the healthcare system."

"I work with a man who's neuro-impaired. I can work with him because I've done it for so long. But I'll set up a meeting and book an interpreter, but by the time the meeting happens, his needs are not the same."

"What if someone is drug or alcohol affected, and they can't engage with services immediately?"

"An immediate next step would be identifying the need for an after hours response... But then also, our funding has gone by midday. So if we're open, what are we actually going to be able to provide past five o'clock anyway? Because we have no money, we're turning away two thirds of the people that walk in our front doors so we can be there. But will we even be helping at all from an entry point perspective?"

"Would other services be open to refer onto [us] if someone needed something at eight o'clock at night? ...core services would need to be open to being flexible, not just one service. So that's a conversation that can happen virtually right now."

### Insight 6: Limits on time - failure to follow-up

Time also represented a limitation on service access and availability in one more distinctive way — in terms of duration, particularly after clients' successfully transitioned out of homelessness, but remain vulnerable in a range of ways. Workshop participants therefore pointed out that wraparound services are needed to support people once they're in housing, to prevent them falling into homelessness again.

"We need more housing options with varying support levels."

"Wrap-around services need to support people once they're in housing, to prevent them falling into homelessness again."

"Some clients need a lot of support. Once they're housed, they may lose their tenancies. [Supports] need to meet the client's changing needs as they become more adjusted in a property. A lot of clients lose their housing because [inaudible]... It's circumstantial. If someone else came in and caused the damage [to the property]..."



# CROSS-CUTTING OPPORTUNITIES: MEETING CLIENTS WHERE THEY ARE AT

Here, stakeholders described ways in which they need the sector to grow. Many of these opportunities are tied in with other opportunities described in this report — particularly funding, without which little change is possible. Nonetheless, here we present a set of opportunities, some of which may represent a topic for long-term advocacy, while others may be actionable in the shorter term. In either case, identifying and advocating for such goals is the first step in resourcing and implementing them.

Several of these opportunities describe more general principles (for example, expanding/tailoring services, mitigating service fatigue, building client trust) that could be applied in a range of ways, small and large, while others are more specific (for example, creating a 'onestop shop' or extending service hours). These opportunities may be in tension with each other—for example, meeting clients where they are may, at times, be at odds with bringing them to a centralised 'one-stop shop'. It remains to be seen how the sector might adopt or adapt these goals.

# Opportunity 1: A sector wide commitment to tailoring services, mitigating service fatigue, building trust

Participants had a wide range of thoughts about how to address the interrelated obstacles of service inflexibility, fatigue, and mistrust. There was no 'silver bullet' solution proposed, and these broad goals are easier identified than actioned. Yet identifying them as objectives is in itself an opportunity. Perhaps one of the most important steps suggested by participants, therefore, was simply to make an explicit, sector-wide commitment to flexibility of service delivery and flexibility of funding.

Further, many of the opportunities participants already identified elsewhere in this report might contribute to alleviating these three challenges. The multiplication of housing options, flexibility of funding regimes, and transparency of communication and information sharing, for example, highlighted in other sections, would all have implications for flexibility, fatigue, and trust.

In addition, participants offered more concrete suggestions that may alleviate these three challenges. One called for **up to 50% of service provider staffing to require lived experience** of homelessness, for example, as this may, conceivably, reduce barriers to communication and understanding in both directions. Another simply called for **additional small, fun interventions like free movie tickets** for clients to transcend the everyday constraints of the client-service relationship.

# **Opportunity 2:** A one-stop shop and other conveniently located services

One concrete suggestion that many participants offered (most notably those who worked as direct service-providers) to overcome the limitations of time and space and make a wider range of services more conveniently, consistently accessible to clients was **to co-locate them.** 

Recognising that clients have a broad spectrum of needs, participants suggested that colocation on or near a single site might make more accessible supports including but not limited to: healthcare, mental health supports, childcare, employment, financial counselling, food security, material aid, access to medication, transport, identification documents, and so on. In particular, they highlighted the need for clinical services to be available at entry-points to the system.

Perhaps the catchiest such suggestion was to **create "a one-stop shop".** Participants reflected positively on other places where a similar model had been successful, such as the Salvation Army's Bourke Street offering in the Melbourne CBD:

"The Salvos have five levels. It's a one-stop shop. They support around 600 people every day, breakfast lunch and dinner."

Importantly, participants have already initiated **co-located projects** of various kinds in Geelong. and these could be expanded and resourced. At least one participant drew attention to the Lazarus Community Centre, for example, where "we've started renovations [on a] big mezzanine hall. We're going to create a consulting room [with] inreach and outreach services. So we've already got Neami coming every second day... We've got Wathaurong Co-Op coming once a fortnight as well. SalvoConnect potentially could come down. Instead of [saying], 'We refer 2530 people up that way,' have [frontline staff] come down for an hour or two." The Centre also offers free haircuts, free eye checks, glasses and so on there. The same participant suggested a range of other services appropriate to the space that might address common needs of people facing homelessness, such as nursing, podiatry, osteopaths, general practitioners. "But make it not too clinical... a more family friendly environment."

Some participants recognised, however, that while such one-stop shops may be more accessible to a range of clients, they may also pose difficulties for others, who either cannot get to a single location, or have their own reasons for avoiding large concentrations of providers or clients. Any co-located services will need to address these concerns. Therefore, participants also suggested alternative strategies for facilitating client access, autonomy, and selfdetermination, calling for additional systems to direct services to clients, for example to do mobile in-place care on the street, or else a virtual one-stop shop that could direct clients to more convenient local options based on their presentation and self-determined service options. (This resonates with the suggestion in our next section of streamlined portals for information sharing and client-provider communication.)

## Opportunity 2: After-hours services and outreach services

As described in the previous section, numerous participants identified a critical opportunity for local SHS providers to work together **to make their service hours more flexible.** As one front-line provider asked, "If homelessness doesn't end at 5pm, so why should services?"

Therefore, numerous participants called for additional funding for more available and flexible staffing, in order to offer after-hours support, and importantly, to respond to clients where and when their circumstances might dictate. One participant asked, "We're funded from nine to five, and that's our contract. So would... DFFH be open to fund changing the contracted hours and funding staff, in addition to what they're already funding for any penalty rates or whatever that comes after contracted hours?" Additional funding might also be supplemented by volunteers, which might allow greater flexibility in service delivery.

Importantly, however, this was a matter not only of additional funding, but of developing sector-wide agreements, norms, and protocols, involving not only service providers, but local government stakeholders such as the Department of Families, Fairness, and Housing. As one participant pointed out, there is limited value to a single service expanding its availability if other services do not do the same and are therefore not available for referrals: "Core services would need to be open to being flexible, not just one service. So that's a conversation that can happen virtually right now."

#### Other Ideas

In addition to the specific challenges and opportunities presented above, participants made frequent mention of the importance of providing "wrap-around services" and "post-housing supports", two common terms in the sector that suggest a supportive and continuing safety net of care and support, to address the full spectrum of client needs across their full duration. While participants did not spend much time specifying further, these principles are nonetheless valuable to highlight here.



### **HOME TRUTH 4:**

### **COLLABORATION AND INFORMATION-SHARING**

"IMAGINE TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THIS SECTOR FROM THE OUTSIDE... IT'S A NIGHTMARE."

Collaboration and information-sharing were identified as key issues requiring attention for improving service delivery and achieving better outcomes for clients. Across the landscape of local services, stakeholders identified bottlenecks and blockages in the flow of accurate and current information about available services, clients' needs, and other essential details.

These gaps lead to confusion, inefficiencies, and missed opportunities for early intervention and support. Participants included numerous factors related to information sharing in their collaborative visualisation of the system (see Appendix C: Figure 7).

Participants emphasised the need for stronger collaboration between local homelessness service providers. Some described the system as frustrating and fragmented. Many expressed a desire for ongoing opportunities to network, share practices and exchange knowledge – to work together, with a clear focus on improving client outcomes. Yet despite its importance, there are currently limited opportunities for staff across the landscape of homelessness related services to build inter-agency relationships and alliances.

Similarly, a lack of information-sharing between the service sector, policy makers, and the general public has implications for policy and resourcing. Participants also reflected on how structural change has stalled partly due to a lack of political will and understanding. Participants proposed the establishment of distinct information-sharing portals for clients, service providers, and the general public, as well as increased opportunities for direct information-sharing and networking among stakeholders, and between them and the wider public.

Participants called for a range of interventions and innovations in networking, service integration; and information-sharing to address:

- Inadequate or opaque information available to clients regarding the availability of supports and services.
- Inadequate information-sharing between services — both about one another and about clients.
- Insufficient communication between policymakers and service providers.
- Limited public awareness and information of available local services.
- Public misunderstandings of the complexities surrounding homelessness.

"Service navigation is really difficult most of the time... there's a lot of bouncing around."

"There's just so much misinformation and so much miscommunication."

"All of the systems are completely broken, and they're not talking to each other... There's already an existing sharing portal, but they're not funded adequately."

"[We] need information-sharing to help break down silos, bureaucracy, and red tape to improve services for clients."



### **INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES**

### **Insight 1: Networking and service integration**

Participants strongly emphasised the importance of building meaningful, long-term relationships between service organisations as essential to maintaining a detailed, accurate, up-to-date understanding of the system, and using available resources effectively, which in turn is essential to achieving optimal client outcomes. In contrast, a lack of collaboration or relationships poses ongoing difficulty, as service providers may often be unaware of what other organisations actually do, leading to inappropriate referrals and unrealistic expectations.

The lack of structural support and recognition for such collaborations and relationship-building represented a key challenge. As one participant pointed out, "We don't get paid to network." While collaboration and networking are informally recognised as valuable, they are often undervalued in practice due to a lack of time, resources, and formal recognition.

The lack of dedicated time and resources hinders sustained collaboration. The issue is further compounded by workforce turnover, as high staff mobility leads to the loss of institutional knowledge inter-agency understanding over time.

To address this, several participants proposed integrating collaboration and networking into funding structures, such as mandating interagency partnerships in tender applications and budgeting for networking activities. Such measures would formalise and resource the relationship-building work that underpins effective service integration.

"...there seems to be a big deficit in building meaningful relationships between our organisations. And that's typically where the [good] outcomes come from."

"I think having more access with lived experience would be more helpful... maybe trying to have 50% of the workforce have a peer support angle, they will be able to talk to people that have been in that position a lot easier, and have the understanding and provide pathways into potentially continuing, keeping them in stable accommodation."

"It's the great stuff that comes from organisational bonds that occur in these kinds of forums. That's what allows us to make those really long, lasting and professional and beneficial relationships."

"Unfortunately, those services are reliant off their own back to have a broader understanding of how homelessness services work. And, like, I've been in the sector for a while now, and it's a nightmare trying to keep up with changes in policies and programs."

"There's a lot of change in our sector as well, people changing jobs and things like that... And when people [change] jobs, sometimes the organisation loses that knowledge as well. When people move...those relationships change, and the person in that role has to start again. So if we can somehow mitigate that, that'd be amazing."

### **Insight 2: Inter-service information-sharing**

In addition to the shared understandings and collaborations that come from inter-agency relationships, participants told us that the lack of specific, detailed, day-to-day information about other agencies could also pose their own challenges such as:

### • Inadequate client support:

Services often lack accurate, accessible information about individual clients — leading to poor coordination and disjointed support pathways.

#### • Referral inefficiencies:

Without clear information on referral processes and service limitations, clients are often redirected multiple times — creating frustration and service fatigue.

### Absent feedback loops:

Once a referral is made, referring organisations often don't know what happened next, leaving gaps in understanding and accountability.

Participants told us that these knowledge gaps led to considerable service fatigue for both service providers and clients — who are frequently asked to repeat their stories to multiple providers, causing distress, frustration, and disengagement. (As one participant pointed out, the importance of minimising repetition and emotional burden for clients echoed a recommendation from the Royal Commission on Family Violence to create service hubs like The Orange Door, precisely in order to avoid forcing clients to keep telling their story.) They described the need for a more transparent and traceable service history, enabling organisations to understand who a client has already engaged with and what support has been offered.

Several participants called for a portal, perhaps similar to that offered by the NDIS, by which providers can share information with and about their clients.

"A lot of frustrations [from clients] come from having to share their story multiple times."

"Are we sending the person to the correct service? What happens at the referral points?"

"That almost creates that silo... as agencies, if we don't have a level of understanding about the limitations that the end service has to work within. Without meaning to, we can end up placing blame on a service for not doing something, when in fact their limitations are the same as what other services are facing."

"Having information [about clients] that is immediately accessible would improve clarity of referrals and reduce misinformation between services."

"If someone has been homeless for three, four, five years, it's about everyone understanding what the next process is for them, how do we get the best outcome for them?"

"If we sent someone to SalvoConnect, did they get there or not? What was the outcome?"

## Insight 3: Informing clients and public accessibility of service details

At the same time as service providers need to better understand their clients and one another, people facing homelessness also face an uphill struggle to navigate the landscape of supports and services. Workshop participants pointed out that a significant lack of public knowledge about what services exist and how they function, poses an important obstacle to preventing and mitigating homelessness.

Many clients are unaware, for example, of where services are located, what they offer, or how to engage with them. This difficulty is compounded by other intersectional barriers to communication, such as literacy, language barriers, mistrust of providers, and the location of services. Even frontline services and professionals, such as GPs, often struggle to connect clients with appropriate services — particularly in communities where language barriers are not being adequately addressed.

"People don't know what services are available locally."

"There's a lack of information, a lack of knowledge, about services for clients. People aren't sure where they are, and what they do."

"A lot of people are not aware of the different services and what they do."

"We all exist in a bureaucratic environment: the programs we work in, the work we do, the very specific eligibilities... We exist in this part of the bubble, the housing and homelessness sector... Imagine trying to understand this sector from the outside. Trying to explain it to someone, it's a nightmare..."

## Insight 4: Broader public understanding of homelessness

A significant gap in addressing homelessness is the lack of public understanding about its drivers, impacts, and solutions. This stems partly from prevalent stigma and misconceptions, and partly from a lack of inclusion of people facing homelessness in public discourse, both of which can influence public attitudes, policies, funding, and service delivery.

Such misunderstandings can hold direct, concrete implications for service providers and clients alike, as they may pose obstacles to service provision or relationship building, for example in the relationship between specialised homelessness services and other service providers (such as healthcare providers or police), or indeed in the relationship between specialised homelessness services and vulnerable people themselves. One participant, for example, told us that they simply didn't understand that their situation met the definition of 'homeless', and as a result had not accessed services.

Equally important, however, are the indirect impacts of public misunderstandings, which have powerful implications for the funding, policy, and political will required to address many of the other issues described in this report.

"I didn't think I was homeless, so I didn't reach out for a lot of that stuff [services]. So it would be nice if we had better education, with more lived experience [input]... continuing collaborative alliance of representatives in the service sector."

"Public education and awareness is honestly really important... We're not quite [at the point] where homelessness is well understood. It's, you know, 'If you're rough sleeping, you're homeless.' No one considers unstable tenancies and couch surfing, so [those people] kind of get left behind."

"We need to address stigma and misconceptions around homelessness. Mental health has been slowly de-stigmatized... how do we get that to happen in this space [homelessness]?"

"How do we let the general public know that homelessness can happen to anybody,

particularly in the current economic climate? That these are real, you know, human beings? How do we advocate better for that?"

"You know, it's a fundamental right of humanity is to have a safe place to live. Why are we not promoting that message widely?"

# **Insight 5: Policy makers' and sevice providers'** mutual understanding

A significant gap in addressing homelessness is the lack of policymakers' understanding about its drivers, impacts, and solutions, as well as the landscape of services and jurisdictional bottlenecks. Policymakers often lack real-time insights into the actual needs and challenges on the ground, resulting in misaligned policies. As a result, participants called for ongoing research, more data, and better channels of communication regarding services — and the demand gap — to inform policy.

Conversely, policy makers' decisions and discussions are often conducted in ways that are inaccessible to service providers. For example, some participants singled out one particular gap in information-sharing between policymakers and service providers for special attention: the disconnection between housing demand and the supply of affordable housing. Service providers are disconnected from timely updates on social housing builds, timelines, and eligibility, impacting their ability to effectively assist clients — for example, around large housing projects like the Big Housing Build.

Thus, with respect to information flow in both directions, participants highlighted a need to hold governments accountable for delivering on their commitments and responsibilities.

"It's also about keeping government bodies accountable. If government bodies were able to access the information sharing portal, perhaps that would lead to more accountability? There's strength in numbers. We could say: 'You guys are not doing the things you're supposed to be doing.'"

"[There's a] disconnect between providers and policy makers. They don't have an awareness of the problems. No place for them to go...

need homes. They don't see the multifaceted problems that come with homelessness, for example, medication and psychiatric services".

"We need a way to monitor how much housing is being supplied."

"With the Big Housing Build, there are 117 social housing units being built... all one to two bedrooms. But we just found out those units will not be available for people on Newstart or Youth Allowance."

"Even if it comes down to, like, a tent city... that's all good and well, but then it becomes an argument between local laws of the city council and Victoria Police about who moves, who won, because it's council owned, and then people aren't allowed to sleep on council-owned land. But then, while everyone's trying to figure out a solution, we're still fighting about all of this stuff that ultimately gets us nowhere. So I think it's about potentially having advocacy in front of people who have the option to change those decisions, right? And the research to back it up."



### **CROSS-CUTTING OPPORTUNITIES**

Participants emphasised the need to strengthen and/or create a range of pathways and portals for information-sharing to reduce silos, cut through bureaucracy, build mutual understanding, and ultimately improve services and outcomes for clients. The following outlines six information-sharing opportunities in response to identified challenges and current barriers:

# Opportunity 1: Create (and fund) ongoing opportunities for interagency networking and education

Participants called for creation and resourcing of ongoing opportunities for interagency collaboration and networking to build collaborative alliances that could better leverage existing local resources between agencies, strengthen professional relationships, inform policy, advocate for change, and drive strategies to improve outcomes for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness in Greater Geelong. These might take many forms, including:

- Dedicated forums such as a Homelessness Working Group.
- Paid opportunities for networking and continuing education among staff and volunteers.
- Client-centric best practices that prioritise the incorporation of lived experience into service delivery (for example, by requiring a certain percentage of staff to have lived experience).
- A commitment by agencies to incentivise collaboration through funding requirements (for example, by including mandatory interagency collaboration in tender applications).

# Opportunity 2: Create a centralised public information portal about local services

A key response to the current information-sharing gap is the creation of a **publicly accessible**, **centralised portal** that provides clear, up-to-date information about local services — all in one place. This would help individuals, families, and service providers understand what support is available and how to access it.

A centralised public information-sharing portal could reduce confusion, support service navigation, and promote equitable access — especially for culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

# Opportunity 3: Develop a Service Provider Information Portal

Participants strongly advocated for a **centralised**, **regularly updated portal** specifically for service providers. This platform would enable agencies to access accurate, up-to-date information about each other's services — including scope of work, referral pathways, eligibility criteria, key contacts, and current capacity.

A shared service provider portal could significantly improve collaboration, reduce inefficiencies, and strengthen continuity across the homelessness and housing support system. Of course, this would require dedicated resourcing and oversight. As one participant put it, "You'd need someone constantly running and updating that portal" with details like changes in management, updated addresses, and so on. Participants noted that a shared portal could also serve a systemic function.

# Opportunity 4: Create a Secure Client Information-Sharing Portal

Participants strongly recommended the development of a **secure, centralised portal** to enable service providers to share up-to-date information about clients' housing and support needs, referral history, current service involvement, and any recent changes in circumstances. Such a system would support continuity of care, reduce misinformation, and help ensure clients aren't forced to repeatedly retell their stories.

The system may also support early intervention and prevent escalation, as one participant described, "If something has happened to the person, something hasn't gone well during their day, the staff member can add [a note about] that: 'Just letting you know X's presentation has changed." (It is worth noting that some agencies have taken preliminary steps towards this goal, such as allowing providers to book beds online, however issues like privacy and confidentiality remain to be worked through.)

While the benefits are clear, participants also emphasised the need for a carefully balanced approach that prioritises clients' rights. As one participant pointed out, it is imperative to exercise caution with respect to clients' "dignity of choice and self-determination around sharing of information", and to be transparent and vigilant about the security and privacy of their data: "I would err on the side of extreme caution and make sure that there's really clear understanding. Because it's fraught with challenge". As another put it, "It's about finding the right balance between privacy and reducing service fatigue".

# **Opportunity 5:** Create a Local Housing Needs vs. Housing Supply Dashboard

The creation of an information platform that clearly tracks local housing needs versus housing supply, including new builds, eligibility criteria, and vacant properties, could significantly improve decision-making and accountability. One participant envisioned "A dashboard of required housing outcomes, what exists currently, and [which could] monitor state and federal government responses to this housing need."

Participants also suggested **expanding existing vacancy management systems** to improve communication about available units. This transparency could help service providers place clients more efficiently and reduce delays in finding suitable housing options.

Such a dashboard could also present an opportunity to effectively link policy and practice by tracking the current housing supply, including vacant properties and new builds, allowing policymakers to see the real-time impacts on the ground. It might also monitor eligibility criteria for social housing, ensuring clear communication with service providers.

### **Opportunity 6: Public Education Campaign**

Many participants voiced the need for a public education campaign to raise awareness and challenge the stereotypes surrounding homelessness, ensuring that it is understood as a complex issue affecting individuals in various situations, not just those who are rough sleeping. This campaign would highlight how homelessness can affect anyone, especially in the current economic climate, and underscore that individuals experiencing homelessness are real human beings deserving of empathy and support.

Participants shared that the campaign could incorporate **storytelling** to build empathy and connect with the community. One participant described the need for clear messaging: "Well thought-out plans aren't the plans that actually land with government and change things. You need to have a really compelling, simple story.... And it's got to resonate with the community. Because we need the community on board to be like, we don't want to see... more tents [along] the river, more people sleeping [rough]".

Additionally, leveraging **lived experience** as part of the narrative will humanise the issue and foster greater understanding, as highlighted by one participant.

To ensure such a campaign's success, it should be led by sector-based organisations and involve mainstream media. The goal is to create widespread community buy-in by effectively communicating the benefits of reducing homelessness and showing how it positively impacts society as a whole.

#### Other Ideas

Beyond the structured opportunities for reform, participants shared a range of additional, locally grounded ideas that reflect the sector's desire for more responsive, integrated, and people-centred collaboration.

These included the development of a Barwon specific service directory, similar to Ask Izzy, designed to match clients with appropriate services based on intake details and individual preferences, thereby enhancing choice and self-determination. Participants also proposed formalising collaboration as a core requirement in funding agreements, with mechanisms to demonstrate ongoing partnership and shared responsibility across the sector.

A yearly public-facing report on the state of homelessness and key regional priorities was suggested to promote transparency and collective accountability. To complement this, a weekly media feature series was proposed, highlighting both the strengths and challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness, aimed at reshaping public perceptions through real-life stories. Importantly, participants emphasised the need to clarify roles and responsibilities for maintaining shared portals or service systems, ensuring these tools remain current and effective.

Finally, there was strong support for integrating case management and coordinated care planning into all forms of temporary or crisis accommodation, building on existing models within youth programs, to ensure smoother pathways into long-term, stable housing. These ideas speak to a sector ready to harness both innovation and collaboration to drive systemic change.



### **HOME TRUTH 5:**

### PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

Throughout our workshops, many of the challenges and suggestions identified by participants were underpinned by the growing demand for SHS and other homelessness-related services. Across the landscape of Geelong's support services, as more people are experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity, services face compounded obstacles in meeting clients' needs.

As one previously quoted participant suggested, the number of evictions in the Greater Geelong region from private rentals had perhaps doubled within the last year: "We've probably seen more people put down the street than ever before."

While prevention and early intervention were not explicitly highlighted in participants' collaborative vision, they emerged as an important aspect of several key themes within their visualisation and were referenced by name in many of their comments (see Appendix C: Figure 8).

"We need more focus on prevention."

"Early Intervention impacts on... things like the housing waitlist, because in theory, you decrease your demand."

"There needs to be opportunities for an early intervention space in these models."





### **INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES**

#### **Insight 1: Proactivity versus reactivity**

Calls for prevention resonated throughout the workshop discussions and, like many of the factors identified by our participants, were interconnected with many issues they raised. Yet participants made a point of highlighting the need for a proactive, rather than reactive approach to these interconnected issues.

Participants therefore called for a whole of region strategy to enable prevention or early intervention, from community partnerships and alliances to education efforts to augmented supports for those experiencing housing stress, for example among Geelong's most vulnerable communities such as refugees, LGBTQIA+, individuals, and recently incarcerated residents.

"We don't have a lot of early intervention up here... We're very reactive in our spaces."

"...when these people start getting into the rental stress at the start, their real estate agents have the referral capacity to go to... a Barwon legal rental stress hub. The real estate agents could refer to them after they missed a couple of rental payments, and try to stop that and then get that supported at that stage. And then when they get to VCAT, they have some mediation process or alternative options where they could then go. (I know we've got no alternative options at the moment.)"

"We need community awareness... It's an issue people don't want to think about. They don't want to see homeless people... that's how it has been in the past with people with disabilities. How do we create some community campaigns, maybe on social media or through strong advocacy groups to change the general public's ideas?"

"The other thing we thought of, from a prevention point of view, was the education

in high schools: telling younger people about actual homelessness, having people from the sector... hitting all the schools, not just the schools that have volunteers, so that people, particularly young people, when they go sideways and they end up out on the street, they know what potential options are available for them from the start and what other places they can go."

"We talked also about extending resources to support prison release. Usually [it's] only a couple of days out of prison, so... they're set up to fail straight away. And then, obviously, give it a week or two and then possibly [they] want to go back in, because that's what they know. So that's their safety. You know, everything's there three meals a day. There's everything."

"Trying to identify people who are struggling financially, early or whatever the triggers are for homelessness, identifying them early, whether that be through schools, outreach services, GPS, emergency services, and then trying to intervene before the crisis point becomes unmanageable. So if your estate agent, or their bank manager or a key reading Centrelink to try and get rental assistance, or something like that, identifying that they're in a financial crisis, they're about to become homeless, or there's a potential there to become homeless within six to twelve, eighteen months, and then taking that early while the problem's relatively small, rather than later on."



### **CROSS-CUTTING OPPORTUNITIES**

In some sense, all of our workshop conversations integrated questions of prevention and early intervention with questions of service delivery. As such, the opportunities in this section each refer back to other opportunities and "home truths" already described. The implications for prevention are, nonetheless, highlighted here not only to reflect the comments of workshop participants, but to emphasise the holistic system-wide effects of any intervention taken across the ecosystem.

### **Opportunity 1: Forestalling housing vulnerability**

Participants made clear that scarcity of housing and accommodation was not only an obstacle to getting people out of homelessness but that pressures created by housing shortages are central to creating the problem in the first place. Thus the opportunities described earlier to address these shortages have the potential to act as both prevention and early intervention.

In addition, participants offered specific thoughts about concrete, preventative housing-related interventions, such as **public-private alliances involving community members, and realtors** to identify and support individuals in housing stress, help them negotiate with landlords before their housing ends, relocate them to other appropriate properties, or refer them to other forms of funded representation or remediation (such as VCAT). (This builds on the existing work of projects such as the Barwon Renter Stress Hub, which offers legal support to vulnerable tenants).

Similarly, participants suggested that rental/ real estate agencies may function to connect women and children to family violence agencies, to facilitate their exist from unsafe homes to something longer term."

### **Opportunity 2:** Meeting clients where they are at

While they did not offer additional concrete proposals related to prevention, participants noted that suggestions described earlier for less rigid program response that "Meet the clients' needs where they are at", as several participants put it, had important implications not only for exiting homelessness but also for preventing it. (Participants highlighted the work of The Geelong Project, for example, as illustrative of the value of youth-tailored supports for prevention.)

Similarly, they noted that because people facing homelessness inevitably experience intersecting struggles, **an intersectional framework** designed to address these struggles holistically (for example, addressing the implications of ethnicity, nationality, gender, disability, and so on), as described earlier, also has important relevance for prevention and early intervention.

 $^{AA}$ 

### **Opportunity 3: Public information**

As described earlier, participants highlighted the importance of the public education and communication for a range of reasons. They explicitly singled out its relevance to prevention and early intervention in two ways, both for equipping people who are at risk of homelessness with understanding and information about available supports that might mitigate their risks, and also in terms of cultivating the shared understanding and concern of a well informed community, which may in turn not only facilitate the other forms of prevention and early intervention described throughout this report, but may also contribute to the political will to fund them.

To this end, participants enthusiastically called for community engagement via many channels, including news media, social media, and high school curriculum.

### **Other Ideas**

Finally, participants acknowledged that because a wide range of other issues intersect to produce housing vulnerability, a wide range of additional concerns are relevant to prevention, including, but not limited to: Primary health services; education; effective and up-to-date data management via Centrelink; the regulation of gambling and online payments such as Afterpay.

In these ways, participants acknowledged perhaps the most holistic elephant in the room, which is that homelessness is neither a single phenomenon with a root cause, nor is it an attribute of individuals so much as it is a characteristic effect of the entire social fabric, affected by every thread therein.

### **FINAL REFLECTIONS**

FIVE 'HOME TRUTHS': INSIGHTS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES FROM THE SECTOR

This report has presented five clusters of key insights, challenges, and opportunities — five 'Home Truths' — identified through our community knowledge-exchange workshops, highlighting priority areas for systemic improvement across the Geelong region. Together, these insights reflect the need for coordinated, place-based responses to the complex drivers of homelessness.

What emerges from this report is a portrait of a system built for a different set of problems. The growing scale of homelessness means that a system built to catch and support individuals who have fallen through the gaps of the housing system cannot simply 'scale up' as more and more people come through. Like the proverbial frog in boiling water, what was initially a change in magnitude has now become a change in the nature of the problem itself.

Our intention from the outset, in partnership with the Give Where You Live Foundation and with the generous support from funding partners, has been to provide a safe conversation space and time for organisations, community service providers, local government, and of course people facing homelessness themselves, operating at the coalface of homelessness. Listening to each other, these diverse groups in Geelong's local services ecosystem offered valuable insights into the needs and capacities of local communities, including at-risk cohorts, current levels of demand, emergent trends, available supports, service capacity, and unmet needs.

Beyond shared understandings of the current local homelessness context, the workshop participants co-identified key challenges and opportunities, and together explored existing and potential collaborations between and within local services, to support the effective use of limited resources, and improve outcomes for people facing homelessness in Geelong.

Each of the specific insights here calls for further discussion, research, and action. While it is beyond the scope of this report to develop these themes further than the agreements generated by the process of community knowledgeexchange, we note that they are part of a larger international discourse of research, advocacy, service provision, and policy, from which lessons may be learned.

Research in other locales, for example, has demonstrated that calls to simply 'build more housing' can have unintended effect on housing access (for example, bolstering the portfolios of private investors and developers, thereby raising housing costs) unless that housing is accompanied by careful planning and regulation (Logan and Molotch, 2007). In addition, research elsewhere has demonstrated both the benefits and dangers of 'outside the box' thinking. 'Innovative policy' may also circumvent established regulations and protections (Lea, 2020), for example, leading to increasing forms of surveillance and criminalisation, allowing authorities a greater capacity to pry into and control the lives of people receiving assistance without affording them better outcomes or support (Fox-Piven and Cloward, 1972; Willse, 2015; Rankin, 2019). "Tent cities", for example (mentioned by several participants), have often been proposed in the United States in conjunction with greater criminalisation (Herring and Lutz, 2015). (Indeed, we note that among the earliest usages of the term "concentration camp" in the United States was its application to a 1930s Cleveland homeless shelter (Kerr, 2004: 29.))

Yet the research also suggests that if based on careful research and consultation with stakeholders — and above all with people experiencing homelessness — such innovations can make a powerful difference.

A very different form of self-governed tent city, for example, is modelled in American cities like Seattle, where residents democratically govern their own tent communities (see SHARE/WHEEL, Nd.), allowing them to develop stable supportive communities and maintain greater agency and arguably better long-term outcomes than many people accessing the city's overburdened shelter system (Sparks, 2024).

Above all, we note that research suggests that exiting homelessness is possible not via a single 'silver bullet' solution, but rather within a holistic ecosystem of services, supports, community, affordable housing, accessible job markets, and so on, which amount to what Marr terms "forgiving contexts" (2015). The researchers hope that this project, and the opportunities described here, contribute to community-led efforts to foster just such a context in Greater Geelong.

Finally, the HOME research team wishes to thank our valued and ongoing partners at the Give Where You Live Foundation. We also thank each of the Research Advisory Group members, participating agencies and workshop attendees for sharing their valuable insights and knowledge to inform this project.

We acknowledge the generous support from funding bodies that have made this project possible: the Anthony Costa Foundation, the City of Greater Geelong, the Geelong Community Foundation, the Geelong Connected Communities and the Give Where You Live Foundation.



### **APPENDICES**

### BACKGROUND: OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

In recent years the City of Greater Geelong has seen a major surge in homelessness. The number of homeless residents doubled over the five vears to 2021, far outpacing the Australia-wide increase of just 5% over that period (CoGG, 2023: 13; AHURI, 2023). Geelong is home to a wide range of agencies providing important services to people who may be homeless or at risk. This includes Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS), which assisted some 4870 residents altogether over the 2023-2024 financial year (AIHW, 2024a). SHS work in conjunction with many other support organisations in housing, health, family violence, mental health, youth support, and other allied sectors. SHS differ from other services through targeted government funding, specialised support for vulnerable groups, participation in standardised data collection, a wide range of services including accommodation and counselling, varied service delivery models across regions, and tracking unmet needs to identify service gaps and improve future provision (AIHW. 2025).

With high rates of rental stress and a fast-growing population (Everybody's Home, 2025: 11; .id, 2025), Geelong's service ecosystem faces growing pressures. Local service providers and community organisations have reported surging demand for food relief and material aid (Sustain, Food For Thought 2023: 9; Tippet and Wong, 2023), reflecting widening financial hardship in the community. There has been a notable increase in people sleeping rough in recent years, while 5200 people in Geelong are currently on the 'priority' (urgent) waitlist for social housing (Claringbold, 2024).

Clients and community service providers operate at the coalface of homelessness. Working directly with housing crisis gives these individuals and agencies valuable insights into the needs and capacities of local communities, including at-risk cohorts, emergent trends, available supports, service capacity, and unmet needs. To leverage this valuable knowledge, this research brought together a diverse mix of agencies to build a shared understanding of the local context, identify key challenges and opportunities, and

develop strategies to improve responses to homelessness in Geelong.

# **Greater Geelong's Local Ecosystem of Homelessness Support Services**

A key object of this research was to study and identify the local ecosystem of Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) and related agencies accessed by people experiencing homelessness.

In theory: These services are intended to work together smoothly and systematically. Guidelines like Victoria's Opening Doors Framework (2008) articulate a coordinated system of local area service networks to ensure that homelessness is rare, short-lived, and that nobody falls through the cracks. In Geelong, the system is ostensibly organised around several key principles (see Figure 1).

- First, local entry points serve as critical hubs, from which people facing homelessness may be referred to crisis accommodation in the short term, transitional housing, in the medium term, and then in the longer term to tailored supports or permanent housing, either through the private rental market, social housing, or other permanent supportive housing.
- Second, outreach agencies, drop-in centres, and other mainstream services (such as emergency health care, food relief, family violence services, and so on) exist to a) attend to immediate care and survival needs of people facing homelessness; and b) funnel them to local entry points (see above);
- Third, the same outreach agencies, dropin centres, and other mainstream services are woven together with other preventative supports and early interventions, (such as regular health care, tenancy supports, and so on) to keep housing stress or housing crisis from becoming homelessness.

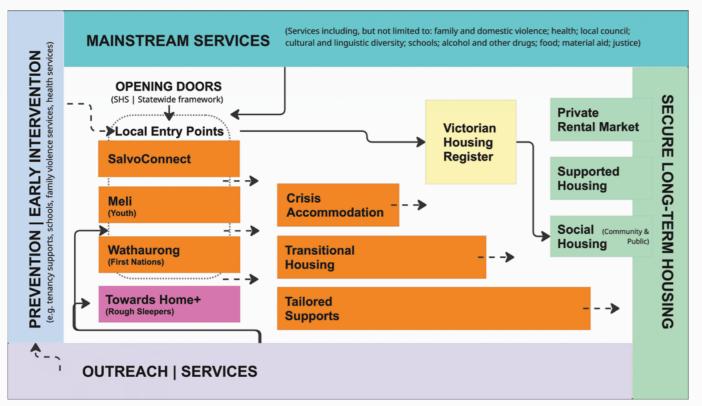
In practice: As participants in this research reported, the system is much more complex, and less linear. People facing homelessness may encounter an interconnected web of different, sometimes overlapping services which is opaque and difficult to grasp, even for long-term service providers. Individuals with complex needs may find no specific service tailored to their situation, and as a result find themselves with nowhere to go. Other clients find themselves with a patchwork of too many points of contact, working with too many case workers and telling their story too many times.

The following overview (see Figure 2) reflects this intricate local service ecosystem in Greater Geelong as of 2025. It has been compiled through a combination of desktop research and insights shared by participants during the STICKE workshops. While not exhaustive, this snapshot highlights the range of organisations currently working to support people experiencing or at risk of homelessness in the region. It includes both SHS designated agencies and a wider network of services across housing, health, family violence, mental health, youth support, and other sectors. Where possible, interconnections and collaboration efforts — such as participation in

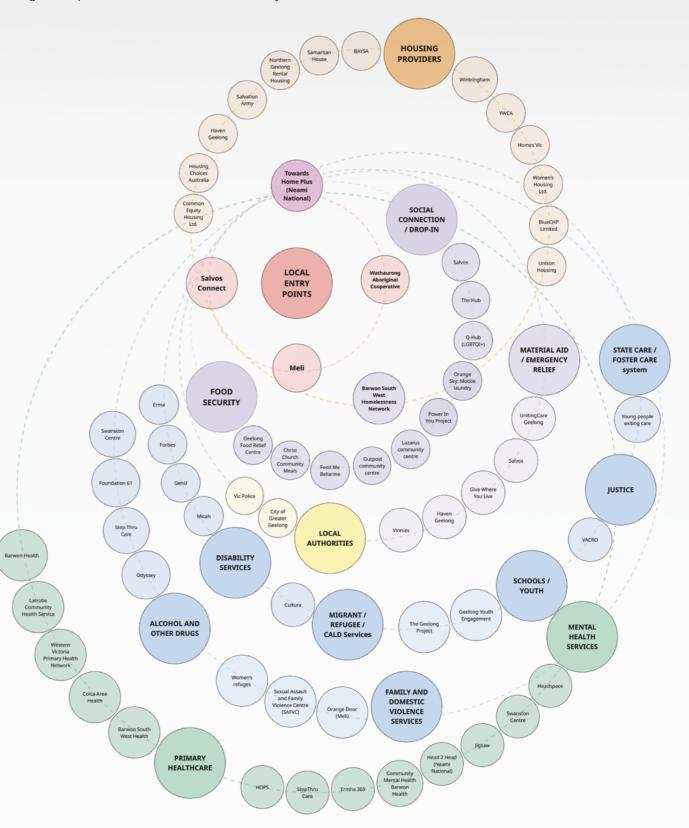
the Geelong Zero initiative — have also been noted to illustrate the system's dynamic and interdependent nature.

Given the complex and rapidly evolving local context, there is an urgent need to better understand how Greater Geelong's broader service system is functioning for people facing homelessness, where its strengths lie, and where gaps or barriers may be limiting its effectiveness. This research responds to that need by bringing together diverse local service providers to examine the system as a whole, identify key challenges and opportunities, and co-develop strategies for improving outcomes for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The following section outlines the methodology used to undertake this collaborative, systems-informed inquiry.

**Figure 1:**Geelong Local Specialist Homelessness Services Ecosystem - In Theory



**Figure 2:**Geelong Local Specialist Homelessness Services Ecosystem - In Practice



# **Greater Geelong Local Specialist Homelessness Services**

(Non-exhaustive list)

## The Salvation Army Homelessness Entry Point - Victoria - Barwon

- Entry Point (Adults)
- Initial Assessment and Planning (IAP), housing support, crisis accommodation, transitional housing, support services
- Geelong Zero partner

### **Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative**

- Entry Point (First Nations)
- Initial Assessment and Planning (IAP), housing support, emergency accommodation support, transitional housing referral
- Multiple support services

#### Meli

- Young people (age 16-25)
- Entry Point (Youth)
- Initial Assessment and Planning (IAP), housing support, youth refuge/crisis accommodation, transitional housing, support services
- Geelong Zero partner

### **Towards Home Plus (Neami National)**

- Rough sleepers
- Geelong CBD; assertive outreach, multidisciplinary team, wraparound services, post-housing support;
- Geelong Zero lead agency

#### **Barwon South West Homelessness Network**

### Family and Domestic Violence (FDV) Services

- Sexual Assault and Family Violence Centre (SAFVC)
- The Orange Door
- Women's refugees

#### **Local Authorities**

- City of Greater Geelong (Geelong Zero partner)
- Victoria Police (Geelong Zero partner)

### **Primary Healthcare**

- Barwon Health
- · Barwon South West Health
- Western Victoria Primary Health Network
- Colca Area Health
- Latrobe Community Health Service

#### **Mental Health Services**

- Ermha 365: MH + disability, NDIS, The Hub (North Geelong), Hive (Noble Park)
- StepThru Care: MH + AOD; Neami (lead agency) with partners Windana, Drummond Street, Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative
- Headspace
- Head 2 Head (Neami National)
- Swanston Centre (Barwon Health)
- · Community Mental Health team, Barwon Health
- HOPS (Homeless Outreach Psychiatric Service), Barwon Health
- Jigsaw

### **Disability Services**

- GenU
- Erma
- Forbes
- Micah

### Migrant/Refugee/CALD Services

 Cultura: settlement services (HSP), migration services, citizenship, sponsorship, community supports, social workers

### Schools/Youth

- The Geelong Project: Lead agency: Meli; successful prevention program, 7 local schools
- Geelong Youth Engagement (https:// geelongyouthengagement.org.au/#vision)

### **Alcohol and Other Drugs**

- Step Thru Care
- Swanston Centre
- Foundation 61
- Odvssev
- The Power In You Project

### Justice (post-release support)

- VACRO
- The Salvation Army (Geelong Zero partner)
- The Power In You Project

### **Food Security**

- Geelong Food Relief Centre
- · Christ Church Community Meals
- · Feed Me Bellarine
- · Lazarus community centre
- The Outpost

#### Material aid/Emergency relief

- The Salvation Army
- UnitingCare Geelong
- Vinnies
- Give Where You Live
- Haven Geelong

### Social Connection/Drop-In

- The Outpost
- · Lazarus community centre
- · The Hub
- The Salvation Army
- Q-Hub (LGBTQI+)
- The Power In You Project
- Wintringham: Older people (50+), homeless/at risk; outreach, housing and support
- Orange Sky: Mobile laundry

#### State Care/Foster care system

Young people exiting care

### **Housing providers**

- Homes Vic
- Samaritan House
- The Salvation Army
- Common Equity Housing Ltd.
- Unison Housing
- Women's Housing Ltd.
- Northern Geelong Rental Housing Coop (NGRHC)
- BlueCHP Limited
- Housing Choices Australia (Geelong)
- Haven Geelong
- Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-Operative
- BAYSA (Meli)
- Wintringham
- YWCA

### *METHODOLOGY*

This research project asks: How can local service providers best meet the needs of people facing homelessness in the City of Greater Geelong? It explores the insights of service providers, clients, and other stakeholders with regard to barriers to access, innovation, and connectivity across the local constellation of service providers, government agencies, advocates, funding bodies, and communities. Taking a holistic view of this broader service ecosystem and its role in supporting residents experiencing/at risk of homelessness, the study addressed the following goals:

To document current levels of demand and challenges being experienced by homeless services and supports in the region.

To collate local data that helps to demonstrate the scale and complexity of the issues facing individuals experiencing homelessness across the region.

To identify existing disconnections and barriers to service provision within or between service models and providers.

To develop recommendations to support improved service coordination, innovative solutions, and better outcomes for people facing homelessness across Geelong.

To achieve this, Home Truths employed a unique local, collaborative, workshop-based approach to directly capture insights into the Greater Geelong homelessness service system from providers, clients, and other stakeholders. Unlike projects that take different kinds of systemic approaches to the subject, such as longitudinal surveys or quantitative data analysis, Home Truths represented an opportunity for stakeholders from across the local ecosystem to share their experience, to build collaborative insights with one another, and to draw attention to the way their organisations function as a system to enable or interrupt outcomes for Geelong residents facing homelessness.

### **Background Research**

To inform the study's early stages, the research team conducted initial background research to compile a snapshot overview of homelessness in Greater Geelong. This involved collating available data about the local context, including key figures, recent trends, and at-risk cohorts. To establish a baseline picture of the local service ecosystem, the research also drew on publicly available information to compile a list of local agencies that work with residents who may be experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Along with local SHS a wide array of other organisations was identified, including but not limited to healthcare providers, community centres, food relief agencies, domestic and family violence services, local government, and school-based programs. To ensure the research reflected diverse demographics and manifestations of homelessness, efforts were made to include services that work with specific at-risk groups, including First Nations people, women and children, young people, migrant communities, disabled residents, and older people.

### **Systems-Based Approach**

The academic literature and policy landscape both reflect a growing awareness of homelessness as a complex societal problem that impacts and is perpetuated across multiple systems and sectors. While the mandate to respond has traditionally sat with homelessness and housing services, a more holistic view is emerging, in which responsibility is shared across "public systems responsible for health and mental health, justice, children and child protection, income supports, families, training, equity and employment, and education" (CoGG, 2023: 4).

Accordingly, recent scholarship exploring effective solutions to homelessness has identified the value of systems-based perspectives, including systems thinking (Nourazari, Lovato and Weng, 2021; Marshall and Bibbey, 2020: 150; Fowler et al., 2019). Systems thinking is a holistic approach that involves engaging multiple stakeholders to share their views of complex problems, integrating those diverse perspectives.

supporting participants to co-develop solutions, and committing to a shared vision of the future (Stroh and Zurcher, 2012: 4; in Spinney et al., 2020: 15). However, systems thinking has rarely been used in homelessness research within the Australian context (Spinney et al., 2020: 14–16).

#### **STICKE Collaborative Workshops**

This research draws on insights shared by key workers, former clients, and other stakeholders from Geelong-based community service providers and agencies across a series of three collaborative workshops held in early 2025. These organisations included both Specialist Homelessness Services (SHSs) and a wide range of other services that work directly with residents who may be facing homelessness in Greater Geelong. Workshop participants included a mix of frontline workers, program leaders, service managers, representatives of local government agencies, and people with lived experience of homelessness.

As its core research method, this project used a participatory process known as Systems Thinking in Community Knowledge Exchange, or "STICKE". Developed at Deakin University, STICKE is a collaborative, systems-mapping process designed to bring together diverse stakeholders to build shared understanding of complex social problems. It is particularly well-suited to issues like homelessness, where multiple systems and actors intersect, and where solutions depend on cross-sector collaboration and systemic change.

In other words, the STICKE process convenes a cross-section of people who may know an issue intimately, albeit in very different ways — like the proverbial blind men describing an elephant to one another — to generate shared understandings richer than any of them might have arrived at separately. More importantly, these stakeholders' separate relationship to the issue often means that they rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to collaborate collectively. As such, the STICKE process enables a community knowledge exchange which is, in itself, often revelatory for participants.

At the heart of the STICKE process is the coproduction of causal loop diagrams — visual maps that illustrate the interrelationships between factors contributing to a complex issue. These diagrams are not static or prescriptive; rather, they are dynamic representations of stakeholders' lived knowledge and insights, which evolve through collective discussion and reflection. The process aims to surface feedback loops, unintended consequences, and leverage points for intervention, helping participants shift from reactive problem-solving to more strategic and systemic thinking.

Three workshops were held between February and April 2025, each attended by a cross-section of local service providers working directly with people experiencing or at risk of homelessness in Greater Geelong. Participants included frontline workers, program leaders, service managers, and individuals with lived experience of homelessness. A deliberate effort was made to ensure diversity across sectors — including housing, health, mental health, family violence, youth, First Nations services, local government, and food security — reflecting the multifaceted nature of homelessness and the service ecosystem that responds to it.

Each STICKE session followed a structured, facilitated format. Participants were invited to reflect on key challenges within the local service system, identify contributing factors, and explore how those factors might be linked. Using an interactive online tool (Kumu), facilitators supported the group to develop a collective causal loop diagram during the workshop, enabling participants to visualise their shared understanding in real time. Diagrams were refined across sessions as new insights emerged. The workshops also included open discussion to contextualise the diagrams, identify barriers and enablers of system change, and generate ideas for future action.

The STICKE process provided more than just a visual output; it functioned as a critical space for dialogue, mutual learning, and collective sensemaking. By stepping back from day-to-day service delivery and viewing the

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system holistically, participants were able to recognise patterns, dependencies, and points of misalignment that may otherwise go unnoticed. The process also fostered a sense of shared ownership and accountability across agencies, laying the groundwork for more coordinated, collaborative responses to homelessness in Greater Geelong.

Insights from the STICKE workshops form the basis for the emergent themes presented in the next section of this report.

# Informed Consent and Workshop Documentation

Following approval from Deakin University's Human Research Ethics Committee and ensuring compliance with privacy and data security standards, three collaborative workshops were conducted. Drawing on background research, key local agencies and staff with relevant expertise were identified and invited. Participants received a Plain Language Statement outlining the study's aims, objectives, and procedures, along with a Consent Form explaining their role, data collection processes, and their right to withdraw at any time. It was also made clear that workshops would be audio-recorded and all data anonymised and de-identified prior to analysis.

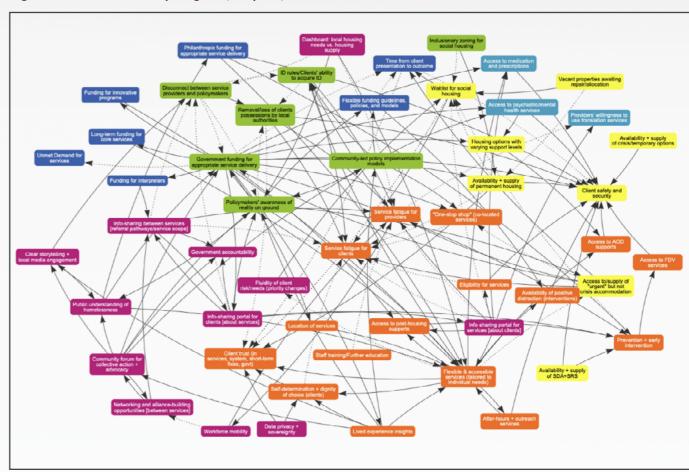
Using the STICKE process (as above) the workshops created and visualised causal-loop diagrams. This digital STICKE platform was employed to map out the influential factors and actions related to the challenges discussed. Participants engaged directly with the platform to contribute their insights and collaboratively build a dynamic Systems Map.

Proceedings were audio-recorded, with files securely shared with researchers. Facilitators also took detailed notes to supplement the recordings. Transcripts were produced, with all identifying information removed and replaced with codes.

### **APPENDICES**

CAUSAL LOOP DIAGRAMS

Figure 3: STICKE Causal Loop Diagram (complete)



Across three Systems Thinking in Community Knowledge Exchange Workshops (STICKE), stakeholders identified the following interconnected factors as important contributors to access and positive outcomes for clients, and represented their impacts on one another through the collaboratively generated causal loop diagram above. Factors were grouped into the six emerging themes, colour-coded on the diagram above. Note that factors are listed in alphabetical order, without ranking or evaluation, and are represented simply in terms of their cause-and-effect relationship to other factors. Solid arrows indicate a direct, proportional influence (i.e. when Factor A increases, Factor B increases). Dotted arrows represent a direct, inverse influence (i.e. when Factor A increases, Factor B decreases).



### **Funding and Resources**

- Flexible funding guidelines, policies, and models
- Funding for interpreters
- Funding for innovative programs
- Long-term funding for core services
- Philanthropic funding for appropriate service delivery
- Time from client presentation to outcome
- · Unmet demand for services

### **Policy**

- Community-led policy implementation models
- Disconnect between service providers and policymakers
- Government funding for appropriate service delivery
- ID rules/Clients' ability to acquire ID
- Inclusionary zoning for social housing
- Policymakers' awareness of reality on the ground
- Removal/loss of client possessions by local authorities

#### **Service Delivery Approaches**

- Access to AOD [Alcohol and Other Drugs] supports
- Access to FDV [Family Domestic Violence] services
- Access to post-housing supports
- After-hours + outreach services
- Availability of positive distraction (interventions)
- Client trust (in services, system, short-term fixes, government)
- Eligibility for services
- Flexible & accessible services (tailored to individual needs)
- Lived experience insights
- Location of services
- "One-stop shop" (co-located services)
- Prevention + early intervention
- Self determination + dignity of choice (clients)
- Service fatigue for clients
- Service fatigue for providers
- Staff training/Further education

#### **Housing & Accommodation**

- Access to/supply of 'urgent' but not crisis accommodation
- Availability + supply of crisis/temporary options
- · Availability + supply of permanent housing
- Availability + supply of SDA+SRS [Specialist Disability Accommodation and Supported Residential Services]
- · Client safety and security
- · Housing options with varying levels of support
- Vacant properties awaiting repair/allocation
- · Waitlist for social housing

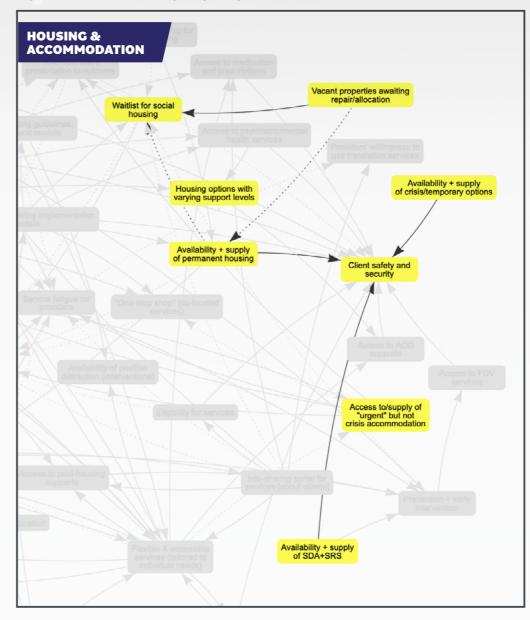
#### **Collaboration & Information Sharing**

- Clear storytelling + local media engagement
- Community forum for collective action + advocacy
- Dashboard: local housing needs vs. housing supply
- Data privacy + sovereignty
- Government accountability
- Fluidity of client risk/needs (policy changes)
- Info-sharing between services [referral pathways/service scope]
- Info-sharing portal for clients [about services]
- Info-sharing portal for services [about clients]
- Networking and alliance-building opportunities [between services]
- Public understanding of homelessness
- Workforce mobility

#### **Physical & Mental Health**

- Access to medication and prescriptions
- Access to psychiatric/mental health services
- Providers' willingness to use translation services

Figure 4: STICKE Causal Loop Diagram (partial)



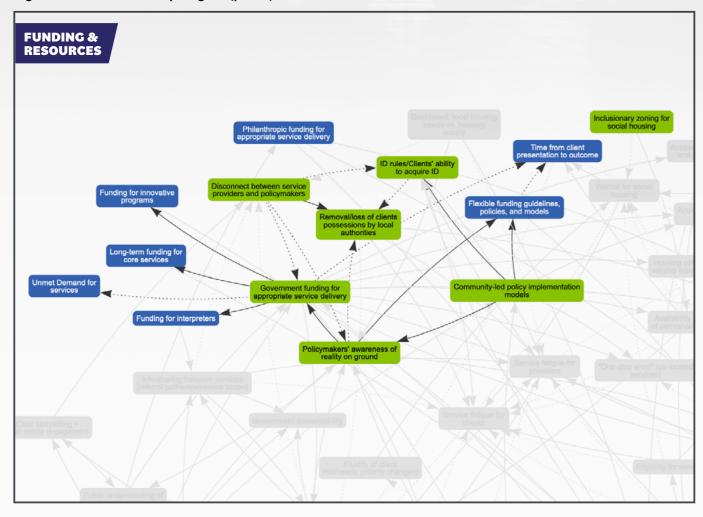
Stakeholders identified the following interconnected factors as important contributors to access and positive outcomes for clients, grouped under the theme of "Housing and Accommodation".

### **Housing & Accommodation**

- Access to/supply of 'urgent' but not crisis accommodation
- Availability + supply of crisis/temporary options

- · Availability + supply of permanent housing
- Availability + supply of SDA+SRS [Specialist Disability Accommodation and Supported Residential Services]
- Client safety and security
- · Housing options with varying levels of support
- Vacant properties awaiting repair/allocation
- Waitlist for social housing

Figure 5: STICKE Causal Loop Diagram (partial)



Stakeholders identified the following interconnected factors as important contributors to access and positive outcomes for clients, related to the themes, "Funding and Resources" and "Policy".

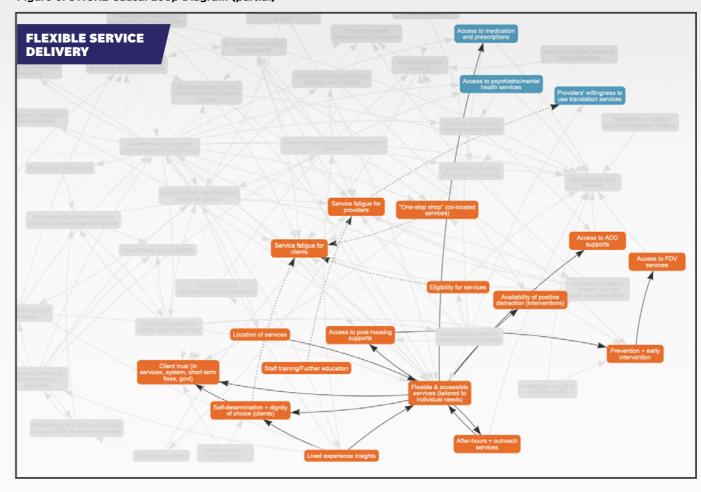
### **Funding and Resources**

- Flexible funding guidelines, policies, and models
- Funding for interpreters
- Funding for innovative programs
- Long-term funding for core services
- Philanthropic funding for appropriate service delivery
- Time from client presentation to outcome
- Unmet demand for services

### **Policy**

- Community-led policy implementation models
- Disconnect between service providers and policymakers
- Government funding for appropriate service delivery
- ID rules/Clients' ability to acquire ID
- Inclusionary zoning for social housing
- Policymakers' awareness of reality on the ground
- Removal/loss of client possessions by local authorities

Figure 6: STICKE Causal Loop Diagram (partial)



Stakeholders identified the following interconnected factors as important contributors to access and positive outcomes for clients, grouped according to the themes "Service Delivery Approaches" and "Physical and Mental Health".

#### **Service Delivery Approaches**

- Access to AOD [Alcohol and Other Drugs] supports
- Access to FDV [Family Domestic Violence] services
- Access to post-housing supports
- After-hours + outreach services
- Availability of positive distraction (interventions)
- Client trust (in services, system, short-term fixes, government)

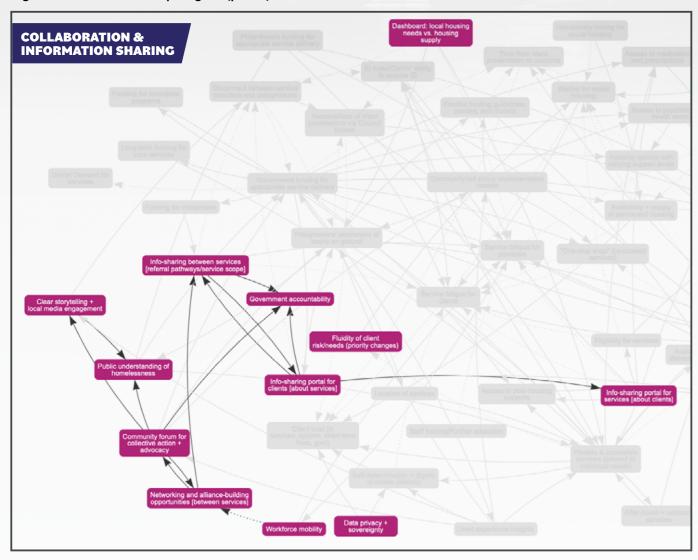
- Eligibility for services
- Flexible & accessible services (tailored to individual needs)
- Lived experience insights
- Location of services
- "One-stop shop" (co-located services)
- Prevention + early intervention
- Self determination + dignity of choice (clients)
- Service fatigue for clients
- Service fatigue for providers
- Staff training/Further education

### Physical & Mental Health

- Access to medication and prescriptions
- Access to psychiatric/mental health services
- Providers' willingness to use translation services

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Figure 7: STICKE Causal Loop Diagram (partial)



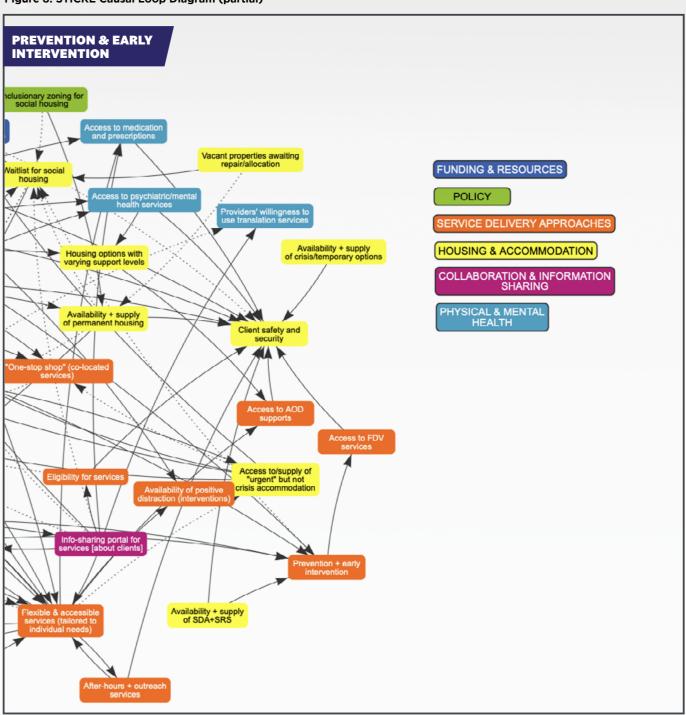
Stakeholders identified the following interconnected factors as important contributors to access and positive outcomes for clients, grouped according to the theme "Collaboration and Information Sharing".

### **Collaboration & Information Sharing**

- Clear storytelling + local media engagement
- Community forum for collective action + advocacy
- Dashboard: local housing needs vs. housing supply

- Data privacy + sovereignty
- Government accountability
- Fluidity of client risk/needs (policy changes)
- Info-sharing between services [referral pathways/service scope]
- Info-sharing portal for clients [about services]
- Info-sharing portal for services [about clients]
- Networking and alliance-building opportunities [between services]
- Public understanding of homelessness
- Workforce mobility

Figure 8: STICKE Causal Loop Diagram (partial)



Stakeholders identified prevention and early intervention as a factor inextricably linked with factors from various other themes.

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