COVID-19 and the housing and homelessness sector

Thematic analysis and future directions for discussion

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1   Introduction

1.1   The emergence of COVID-19

COVID-19 began to emerge during late 2019. The first recorded diagnoses in Australia appeared from 22 January 2020 and by 15 March 2020 there were nearly 300 confirmed cases. At this point community services including housing and homelessness services began to accelerate their efforts to adapt policies, procedures and practices to achieve these key objectives:

- Continuity of service delivery to vulnerable Queenslanders
- The health and safety of tenants and people who are homeless
- Workforce health and safety.

1.2   About Q Shelter

Q Shelter is a peak body for the housing and homelessness sector in Queensland. Q Shelter emerged during the 1980s and was formally incorporated in 1993. Q Shelter's vision is that *Every Queensland has a home.* Q Shelter's purpose is to lead the sector in solutions that address the housing and homelessness needs of vulnerable Queenslanders. Q Shelter works to enhance sector capacity through workforce development and engagement activities and also works with Government and the sector to ensure input and involvement in shaping policies, programs and investment. To this point, Q Shelter has played a role in engaging the sector in understanding and shaping two main policy frameworks led by the Queensland Department of Housing and Public Works: Partnering for Growth and Partnering for Impact.

1.3   Q Shelter COVID-19 engagement

From 18 March 2020 until 30 June 2020, Q Shelter facilitated 14 COVID-19 Learning Exchange teleconferences to:

- Explore and document issues, needs, trends and questions
- Facilitate a learning exchange as the sector rapidly adapted to the emerging situation.

The events were held weekly before reverting to fortnightly from mid-May. A specialised event was also held in late June to discuss and explore the funding package of $100 million released by Queensland Government which included a social housing component.

Total registrations not counting Q Shelter staff included 226 people from 124 different agencies across Queensland[1]. Agency types spanned general community services,

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[1] Appendix 1 includes a list of agencies and services. There were several instances where multiple people and/or services registered from the same agency.

specialist homelessness services, community housing providers, other peak bodies, State Government agencies, local government and interested individuals.

Further, Q Shelter offered regional COVID-19 Learning Exchange meetings to provide place-focussed opportunities to raise issues and trouble-shoot solutions. Q Shelter has also provided an opportunity for tenants and service users to raise issues and engage in dialogue about COVID-19 related matters through a weekly teleconference.

Q Shelter has a number of mechanisms through which there is contact with sector stakeholders and these mechanisms continued to yield questions, issues, information and ideas that were taken into account in working towards responses.

Q Shelter also participated in a number of formal meetings facilitated by the State Government involving other peak agencies and key service providers which have also been a source of information exchange and solution development. Q Shelter has engaged through various national networks namely through National Shelter and CHIA National.

In the week of 17 March 2020, Q Shelter developed and submitted a communique to the Queensland Department of Housing and Public Works and also contributed suggestions for a service delivery model to guide COVID-19 responses. These are included in Appendix 2 as reference material.

1.4   Scope

This paper aims to analyse the issues, questions and responses collected through these meetings as a source of consolidated learning for Q Shelter, Government and the sector. This paper also proposes some future directions for consideration now that COVID-19 restrictions are easing.

1.5   Contact and further engagement

Q Shelter will continue monthly learning exchange events to create an informal gathering point for housing and homelessness services to raise issues and share solutions. These will occur monthly on the first Tuesday of each month at 4.00pm. Attendees can register for this event at this link. Q Shelter can be contacted at any time on 07 3831 5900 with questions or ideas and members and stakeholders are welcome to email solutions@qshelter.asn.au with COVID-19 related questions and concerns.

2 Thematic analysis

The following themes are summarised from the COVID-19 Learning Exchange teleconferences and from other engagement as described in section 1.3.

2.1 Sector and workforce development

2.1.1 Flexible formats to support workforce development

The rapidly emerging situation with COVID-19 coupled with significant uncertainty about its future trajectory raised the need for workforce support and access to learning and development. The need for connection, dialogue and knowledge exchange was apparent and capturing the creativity, learning, flexibility and practice that has emerged will be important into the future.

Regional and centralised COVID-19 Learning Exchange teleconferences provided a touch-point for sector participants to talk to Q Shelter, the Department of Housing and Public Works, as well as each other.

The range of learning activities that are undertaken by peak bodies such as Q Shelter are important, however COVID-19 restrictions placed serious limits on direct contact and travel. Formal training is valuable however the speed with which COVID-19 emerged also required quick, responsive input and information. This has highlighted the value of shorter learning formats which include information, input, content and also a facilitated exchange between participants. Q Shelter will integrate this approach with other learning formats to extend our offering into the future.

The use of technology has also been transformed by the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 and while there are limitations, there are also opportunities to expand learning offerings and improve access to more people at a lower cost. This is very relevant to a decentralised State like Queensland. The experience of adapting as a peak body to the realities of COVID-19 will have permanent and positive implications for the methods used to reach more people in the sector with meaningful engagement and learning experiences.

2.1.2 Housing and homelessness sector as essential services

In the early stages of COVID-19, the sector articulated many questions about whether they were considered essential services. This had implications for service continuity and for service models adapted to COVID-19 restrictions.

As the early weeks passed and more Government advice about restrictions emerged, there remained ambiguity and a reliance on deductive analysis of available information rather than definitive statements about housing and homelessness services being confirmed as essential.

Questions through the learning exchange sessions included:

- Are we considered essential?
- Are we able to dispatch workers in pairs or groups in the context of social distancing measures?

Going forward it is important that housing and homelessness services are clearly identified as essential services within disaster management frameworks including global pandemics. This will have positive implications for:

- Business and service continuity planning to include tangible provisions for how to sustain a workforce for front-line activities *and* keep them safe
- Access to specialised information and practical assistance from Queensland Health
- Prioritisation for PPE and cleaning products.

2.1.3 Product availability and workforce safety

As COVID-19 escalated in early March, the need for personal protective equipment (PPE) and products to support additional cleaning and sanitisation emerged. Like the broader community, housing and homelessness services were struggling to procure adequate supplies which were absolutely essential to service continuity. The time and effort involved by individual services to secure these products were not always successful and while services were creative in how they adapted, it was difficult to procure much needed items as a basis for service continuity. Housing and homelessness services like others were also vulnerable to price gouging causing increased costs for service delivery.

Central Government has worked with peak and industry bodies to assist with adequate procurement and distribution however this lagged behind the acute health crisis with impacts on service delivery.

Going forward the following measures are important:

- That proactive, centralised procurement strategies led by Government are in place to support community service continuity during global pandemics
- That the needs of housing and homelessness services are assessed and included as part of this strategy
- That the strategy aims to ensure adequately stockpiled PPE and sanitisation products for housing and homelessness services
- A strategy should include working with suppliers to achieve guidelines that prevent panic buying even as the earliest cases emerge.

2.1.4 Business continuity and service continuity

The term business continuity has wide currency and there are various tools and templates to support housing and homelessness services with business continuity plans. The early stages of the declared pandemic saw service delivery change and adapt with some services and contact being reduced to ensure the safety of the workforce and compliance with restrictions. The early COVID-Learning Exchange sessions flagged a reduction in some services with some building-based services closing and services heavily reliant on volunteers reducing or ceasing (such as food services). Many adaptations were in place reflecting the commitment and creativity of the sector however the sector was also citing concerns about service reductions and the impacts on vulnerable people.

It is possible that while agencies achieve business continuity and sustainability, that there is still a net reduction in direct service delivery. This requires broader dialogue about appropriate and agreed service delivery models during an acute health crisis caused by an infectious disease.

Many if not all services give specific and expert attention to the continuity of service delivery. Perhaps business continuity plans should be encouraged to ensure specifically articulated measures for service delivery continuity as well. Service continuity will aim to ensure:

- A workforce is pre-identified and triaged in terms of who is willing and able to work under modified, front-line arrangements
- Policies and procedures exist that guide practices under pandemic conditions
- Guidelines for specialised environments such as building-based services, unit blocks and larger living environments are drafted and endorsed and consideration is given to an appropriate level of endorsement by government, regulatory bodies and other appropriately qualified organisations (see 2.1.6)
- Workforce training is provided in infection control and in any other procedures and guidelines intended to sustain front-line services under pandemic conditions
- Clear working from home provisions and guidance including hybrid arrangements.

2.1.5 Workforce

In the early stages of the declared pandemic, it was not yet clear whether the spread of the disease could be contained. There was concern that the extent of the pandemic could radically impact the availability of the workforce.

Since that time there has been some initial investment and effort in building the infrastructure to support the identification and deployment of a replacement or surge workforce if needed. Being able to induct and train a new workforce will be important including:

- Agency level training about internal procedures and practices
- Sector level training and induction for people new to housing and homelessness responses.

The timing of a surge workforce is important and current efforts to build infrastructure to support the availability of a surge/replacement workforce should continue. Q Shelter considers it important to identify within this infrastructure the availability of housing and homelessness sector experience. Further it is recognised that people with transferrable skills will be valuable and will require access to readily available induction training to the housing and homelessness sector. To this end Q Shelter is building a sector induction product that can be used ongoing and also within disaster management scenarios.

2.1.6 Technical guidance

The emergence of COVID-19 resulted in frequent requests for endorsed guidance on technical health matters for specialised environments in housing and homelessness services. The sector had many questions about how to interpret widely published health measures for specialised environments such as congregate living arrangements, boarding houses and crisis accommodation with shared facilities.

The sector also sought technical guidance on service delivery, support provision and outreach while maintaining social distance. There was significant discussion about how to adapt service delivery with respect for health advice and emerging restrictions.

Q Shelter and other industry bodies worked on various complementary tools and resources including work by Q Shelter to adapt guidelines on pandemic responses in aged care facilities to congregate living environments. This was issued as a draft document and progress is now needed to formalise guidelines and advice that can be followed in similar situations.

It is noted that various organisations also shared policies, procedures and guidance that they produced for their agencies and that across Australia and world-wide more guidance emerged. These is an opportunity as the acute crisis becomes more manageable to work

proactively to curate, collate and publish technical guidelines for housing and homelessness services in Queensland that are endorsed.

As COVID-19 restrictions are now easing in Queensland the issue of sustained requests to work from home, the scope to continue working from home arrangements and how this impacts service delivery sustainability, service models and organisational performance has emerged. Q Shelter is planning learning events that respond to this set of challenges and opportunities.

Another frequent request was for direct access to the Department of Health for specialised assistance. This request included seeking a negotiated response by central government to achieve clear points of access including regional access with people appropriately qualified to interpret general advice for social housing and specialist homelessness services. Contact information was helpfully clarified by the Department of Housing and Public Works in mid-May. Q Shelter suggests that central and regional protocols between this sector and Queensland Health need to now be consolidated and widely published. This type of access is essential as soon as a pandemic is declared if not earlier.

Two important follow-up tasks include:

- Developing formal guidance for homelessness and housing services in the management of pandemic responses across all relevant areas of service delivery including the following:
    - Service continuity
    - Congregate living environments
    - Outreach including street outreach
    - Building based-services and management and tracking of all visitors and workforce
    - Home visits
    - Property inspections
    - Welfare checks
    - Management of incidences and outbreaks of disease
    - Infection control
    - Using PPE
    - Cleaning protocols
    - Workforce planning
    - Working from home arrangements including service delivery sustainability and organisational performance
    - Mental health responses to clients and staff in pandemic conditions.
- Consolidating a formal protocol and specialised advice services between Queensland Health and the housing and homelessness sector.

2.1.7 Interpreting rental reforms

Rental reforms were welcomed with recognition that sustaining existing tenancies would be vital to preventing an insurmountable growth in homelessness.

With rental reforms there emerged a need for the sector to have access to tailored information and training to interpret the provisions and apply them to community housing. The role of homelessness services and other support providers in information provision and sustaining tenancies also raised the need for broader information and training products for all staff in contact with homeless people and vulnerable tenants to ensure optimal effort in sustaining tenancies.

Active links to the RTA to provide contact, information and responses to emerging questions has proven vital. It is suggested that industry specific guidance and training is also provided in the future to assist CHPs, specialist homelessness services and other support agencies to contribute optimally to tenancy sustainment.

Concerns did emerge that varied interpretations of announcements relating to rental reforms including evictions and rental payments would impact community housing tenants' understanding of their responsibilities. The importance of early clarity, clear communications and specific information products for CHPs and their tenants was identified.

2.2 The structure of the sector

2.2.1 Service integration and multi-agency partnerships: strengthening prevention and reducing demand

The learning exchange series has highlighted the critical role of service integration in resolving system issues and individual situations of homelessness. The timing of the Service Integration Initiative has been helpful in providing regional groups focussed on care coordination mechanisms involving a range of community and government sector agencies.

The learning exchange series highlighted that issues can be exacerbated by a lack of coordination and integration including across government agencies. Working to address how government agencies work together to prevent homelessness and reduce demand for street level and crisis services is an important element to consider in the context of COVID-19 and more generally as a response to homelessness. This includes how people exit institutions and care, and also needs to encompass guidance for housing providers when tenancies are at risk.

A number of government agencies also fund support and there has been input and dialogue about needing to coordinated and leverage these contributions into a coherent service system that achieves a greater guarantee of support where needed.

The continuation of care coordination groups will augment the efforts of individual agencies as each region attempts to address growing demand as well as strive for sustainable solutions for people temporarily housed in response to COVID-19. Care coordination groups are an ongoing platform for sector and workforce development and provide much needed collegial support as front-line people grapple with the intensity of need under modified working arrangements.

The COVID-19 rapid response to rough sleepers also highlights that the volume of assistance needed requires a multi-agency approach. While services are each unique, multi-agency mechanisms create the opportunity to identify and deploy a multi-agency, multi-disciplinary team focussed on immediate safety and then enduring housing and support solutions. Multi-agency approaches also increase business and service delivery continuity in the event of outbreaks in single services which reduce that workforce temporarily. Multi-agency teams geared to the immediate rapid response and ongoing solutions are help to reduce overall risk.

The following learning and directions are important:

- Coordination of support funding across state agencies to ensure optimal impact and reach including a support guarantee to prevent homelessness and sustain tenancies
- Agreed protocols and practices across State agencies and with the sector regarding exits from social housing, institutions and care
- Agreed protocols and practices to prevent homelessness when social housing tenancies must end or be transferred
- An agreed multi-agency framework for relocating rough sleepers in the context of pandemics and other disaster responses so that there is time and focus on high quality front-end assessments, a multi-agency response and the identification of a lead-agency for support
- Further consideration of integrated client information management systems to support service integration and multi-agency involvement where needed
- Sustained resourcing and commitment to care coordination groups at the front-line combined with regional leadership groups focussed on regional strategies, trouble-shooting and deployment of resources to solve emerging challenges.

2.2.2 Centralised policy with place-based capacity

The COVID-19 response has highlighted the vital importance of both:
- Central government support and policy direction to guide overall responses to a high level of quality and consistency

- Decentralised, place-based responses that devolve roles, resources and relationships to function effectively in response to more localised need.

As the situation evolved, it was possible to clarify the mechanisms through which people could address emerging needs and issues:

- Existing disaster management response mechanisms at the regional level are vital points of contact and also have flexible funding to provide assistance
- Each DHPW Regional Director has a defined role within this mechanism
- Each Housing Service Centre and Area Manager also have vital roles in responding to the needs identified at the place-level
- Contract managers are also a formally identified point of contact during disaster management for agencies who have emerging needs, challenges or questions.

Additional place-based capacity for service responses have been supported and facilitated through:

- Place-based response teams within the DHPW
- Care coordination groups in nine regional locations.

As this clarity emerged, going forward it will be possible to provide the sector with clearer instructions for how to raise or escalate more localised matters relating to system or client needs. The synergy and relationship between central government and decentralised regional and local infrastructure is vital and needs to transfer into future ways of ensuring system effectiveness.

During 2019, Q Shelter consulted the sector about the structure of our engagement as a sector and with Government. Two important layers of engagement and capacity were acknowledged and identified:

- Front-line care coordination groups and housing and homelessness networks
- Regional structures that convene leaders to address regional issues with the delegated authority to allocate resources and made

2.3   Service delivery

2.3.1 Service delivery models: from crisis response to tenancy sustainment

The early stages of the declared pandemic resulted in rapid efforts to address the needs of highly vulnerable people including people who were rough sleeping and people in congregate living environments.

These efforts have raised fruitful discussions about service delivery models based on evidence. The emergence of the pandemic emphasised evidence-based approaches to service delivery which are already under discussion and reflected in the following tenancy sustainment framework developed through Q Shelter's engagement with the sector during 2019-2020:

The crisis response related to COVID-19 reflects some of the challenges of service systems where significant resources are allocated to crisis and temporary responses. People who are enduringly homeless almost always have complex needs and significant vulnerability. The available evidence for ending homelessness points to the need for an approach aimed at sustaining tenancies including the appropriate provision of integrated housing and support. There are a number of models operating in Queensland which integrate housing and support in a way intended to ensure people are sustained in an appropriate tenancy.

The learning and momentum from the COVID-19 response needs to galvanise thinking and planning for a revitalised service delivery framework and model built on proven evidence in how homelessness is sustainably ended. This requires attention to four key components including:

- housing supply
- support
- connections and coordination
- enablers such as effective assessment tools, a shared IT platform for client information management, agreed practices in informed consent and brokerage all underpinned by a deliberate approach to workforce development.

Q Shelter strongly suggests that learning from COVID-19 needs to consolidate and advance efforts to move from a service delivery framework focussed on crisis responses and temporary housing to clearer practices supporting prevention, early intervention and the integration of housing and support where it is needed. To this end, Q Shelter has worked with the sector across 2018-2020 to define a multi-dimensional tenancy sustainment framework identifying those resources and service system elements that are necessary to tenancy sustainment and therefore a reduction and end to homelessness. Not every household or individual needs all elements but an effective service system will include housing supply, support, connections and service integration and enablers such as assessment tools and brokerage.

Tenancy Sustainment Framework

Housing	**Support**	**Connections and service integration**	**Enablers**
• Diverse housing options (public, community, private housing systems) • Supportive tenancy management • Tenant advice, information, and education • Favourable legislative framework.	• Direct support (appropriate intensity, across any wellbeing domain and including a focus on ending homelessness and sustaining tenancies • Specialist support (for example: mental health, substance use, disability)	• Community support • Tenant and service user participation including peer leaders • Regional care coordination groups • Place-based groups of leaders.	• Tools: Assessment tool, shared IT platform, informed consent tool • Enabling investment framework, funding contracts and program specifications • Brokerage • Workforce development.

2.3.2 Creative contact and outreach: capturing best practice

Agencies used the learning exchange to share ideas and practices which addressed the need for service delivery in creative ways. Some examples include:

- Working to make mobile phones and other devices available to bridge the digital divide
- Providing activities and engagement through online meetings and apps
- Reducing non-essential services while increasing active phone contact with clients
- Rapidly writing policies and procedures to guide service delivery, social distancing and engagement of contractors to ensure service continuity
- Reaching out to young people for face to face contact while undertaking activities and integrating social distancing measures.

Good practice and emerging quality improvements are relevant at all times pointing to the value of facilitating this type of exchange beyond the COVID-19 response.

2.3.3 The needs of particular groups

A number of learning exchanges raised the needs of particular groups including:

- Older people vulnerable to isolation and experiencing technological barriers
- Young people
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Rough sleepers and people couch surfing
- People in congregate living environments with shared facilities

- Families or individuals experiencing domestic and family violence
- People without entitlements including income.

The articulation of specific needs as well as shared needs has been important to working on tailored responses.

2.3.4 Loneliness, isolation and mental health

In populations already vulnerable to mental health issues, isolation and restricted access to social connections, COVID-19 has reportedly increased feelings of isolation and loneliness. The learning exchange raised the issue of isolation and loneliness for clients in several ways. As the crisis unfolded, isolation and confinement to home was exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and causing neighbourhood tensions.

The need to address issues with loneliness and isolation at the different stages of restrictions emerged as important. At the beginning the issues and impacts were at a different stage of emergence and intensity.

The potential risks to mental health warrant a more considered investigation into good practice in addressing loneliness and isolation during global pandemics requiring restrictions. This could result in a good practice guide for future reference and workforce development.

The learning exchange did identify instances of suicidal ideation expressed to housing providers. Ideas exchanged included targeted use of emergency services for outreach and welfare checks and linking with Primary Health Network funded services for mental health and suicide prevention.

2.3.5 Managing complex behaviours

Complex behaviours are responded to through service delivery models based in part on the importance of face to face contact including through mobile support. The learning exchange events highlighted that some complex behaviours were a heightened risk due to increased income for individuals and households who were more vulnerable to the impacts of substance use. The extended period of time that people were in isolation also saw some issues escalate and compound over time.

This highlights the need to define practice and service delivery models where households may be at greater risk at the same time as face to face contact is restricted. There is also further learning to be captured about how housing providers and homelessness services have creatively offered social and recreational programs and innovative outreach.

2.4   Engagement

2.4.1 The voice of tenants and service users

The following issues have been raised through a focus group of service users facilitated by Q Shelter:

- Deteriorating mental health driven by isolation
- Feeling isolated and locked-in
- Reduced direct contact from services
- Lack of access to internet, mobile phones, data and phone credit
- Older people particularly isolated including through lack of technology

- Need for enduring tenant engagement mechanisms and the suggestion that regional tenant engagement groups could be connected to have dialogue and input
- Exposure to DFV and child safety matters linked to or exacerbated by isolation
- Overcrowding of some households responding to the needs of family members (one example of DFV causing overcrowding and the subsequent risk to that tenancy)
- Property maintenance issues
- Greater intensity in living arrangements during isolation with reduced opportunities to go out and spend time elsewhere and with others (linked to behavioural issues)
- Neighbourhood issues and conflicts.

Agencies including housing providers support a range of tenant engagement activities which are positive and lead to service improvements. The acute nature of COVID-19 highlights the importance of strengthening these mechanisms and including the capacity for regional and state-wide groups supporting meaningful exchange and input to policy, programs and service delivery.

Q Shelter has submitted a suggested framework to Government for peer leader support and has included peer leadership support in a pre-budget submission to the Department of Housing and Public Works. Training has been written by Q Shelter to support its implementation.

The context and impacts of COVID-19 highlight how important it is to advance systems and structures that support and embed the input of tenants and service users not just within services but across initiatives and regions. Q Shelter will continue to offer a peer learning exchange opportunity for tenants and service users with training. Feedback and ideas will be documented for Q Shelter stakeholders such as CEOs, leaders, members and regional delegates to consider.

2.4.2 Building community support

Engagement with private sector accommodation providers has been essential to the rapid response to rough sleepers and people in congregate living environments. Community and private sector stakeholders have also reached out with offers of assistance.

There also emerged some articulated community concerns about private buildings deployed to a homelessness response. As these interventions need time, engagement needs to be ongoing to provide support and information to the community and private sector. Infrastructure to receive and evaluate offers of help is also important otherwise there may be an impression of not valuing the intention to assist with negative implications for community support for homelessness over time.

The scale of the COVID-19 response warrants an explicit engagement and communication plan. Q Shelter has developed resources and training in building community support for social housing and homelessness responses in light of documented history of community opposition impacting the capacity for growth activities. Looking ahead to possible stimulus measures, it is important to implement sector capacity activities for building community support.

Two key directions include:

- Develop a community engagement and communications plan regarding ongoing COVID-19 responses

- Develop a broader, agreed strategy to build regionalised community support for housing and homelessness solutions
- Implement learning and development activities supporting the sector in their own activities to build community support and involvement in community solutions.

2.5   Resources, support and stimulus

2.5.1   Cost impacts of COVID-19

A number of costs have been identified by the sector including:

- Procurement costs for PPE and cleaning products
- Procurement costs for extra cleaning
- Reduced rents impacting social and affordable housing (more the latter) as people's incomes reduce due to loss of employment
- Specialist HR costs in the process of adapting business and workforce practices to working from home, increased personal distance at work and other workforce health and safety measures.

Agencies have also worked to deploy extra staff in some circumstances to provide additional support and funding/revenue has been applied to acquiring extra head-leases to support supply solutions.

The DHPW package of funding provided support for PPE and extra cleaning which was very welcome. The ongoing cost impacts require further discussion amid concerns that housing growth projects and development plans may be negatively impacted depending on how long reduced revenue continues.

2.5.2   Resources for housing supply and support: ending homelessness and sustaining tenancies

The Queensland Government rapidly responded to the challenge of COVID-19 with a $24.7 million package in funding for a range of measures. These were well-received at a critical time when the scale and impact of the crisis was difficult to predict. The announcement of this package was timely and reassuring in the context of great uncertainty.

As the response to COVID-19 unfolds and restrictions begin to be lifted a number of key elements from the proposed tenancy sustainment framework outlined in section 2.5 remain challenging in terms of available resources:

- Securing adequate supply of housing to respond to all need including emerging needs due to broader economic impacts
- Ensuring adequate support for the duration of need to assist people diverted to hotels and other temporary arrangements
- Ensuring adequate support for the sustainment of tenancies more generally thus contributing to reduced risks to people in primary homelessness from any future impacts of COVID-19 as well as the known impacts of homelessness on health, morbidity, mortality and wellbeing.

In March 2020, Q Shelter suggested the need for stimulus funding for housing supply options which would:

- Reduce homelessness
- Strengthen the community housing sector and its ongoing capacity to achieve growth activities

- Stimulate employment and the economy through construction.

Recently the Queensland Department of Housing and Public Works announced an additional $100 million for the development of 215 units of social housing in targeted regional locations with a focus on smaller developments using existing land and smaller, regionally based trades.

Q Shelter acknowledges existing mechanisms whereby peak bodies and key agencies meet with Government to discuss a range of COVID-19 issues and solutions. It is suggested that a more focussed discussion is needed to explore supply strategies and the need for enhanced support programs to sustain tenancies. The following themes need focussed attention and problem solving with leaders from diverse stakeholder groups:

- Housing supply linked to stimulus measures including consideration of funding contributions through all levels of Government
- Actions that will help accelerate Partnering for Growth projects including addressing identified barriers to growth projects including NHFIC funding
- Good practice approaches to composite funding and partnerships through existing opportunities such as Specialist Disability Accommodation and the Housing Construction Jobs Program
- Enhanced funding for support to achieve sustainable tenancies and to prevent the re-emergence of primary homelessness.[2]

The funded housing sector has been working to achieve growth projects through Partnering for Growth arrangements. These need accelerated support including the identification of additional projects which could also contribute to stimulus. While Q Shelter has contributed to national efforts to shape federal funding for social housing stimulus measures, there is a need to discuss how State funds could accelerate Partnering for Growth activities and therefore contribute to stimulus and employment. Growth in housing supply then flows on to the need for an expanded workforce to manage tenancies and assets all of which contribute positively to the Queensland economy.

The substantial unmet support needs among individuals and households impacted by homelessness and the risk of homelessness became even more apparent in the context of COVID-19. The housing and homelessness sector clearly articulates unmet need for support and expanded investment for support is essential.

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3 Summary and future directions

3.1 Overview

Overall COVID-19 has catalysed innovation and creativity in pivoting service delivery to the challenges of social distancing and other mandated restrictions. The Learning Exchange has captured ideas, suggestions and solutions among professional peers in an environment of risk, uncertainty and change.

Services have actively assisted with significant interventions to relocate homeless people to safety and reduce risk in congregate living environments. Agencies have adapted governance, management practices, HR measures, policies, procedures and business processes to ensure business continuity and modified yet continued services. Peak bodies and service providers have produced and shared guidance on specific matters such as personal protective equipment, congregate living environments, governance, outreach, property inspections and maintenance.

The sector has benefited from the speed and focus of Government assistance packages which responded early to sector concerns and advice. As the COVID-19 crisis transitions to recovery, there is willingness and focussed determination to sustain positive changes in service delivery models and practices. There is also purposeful dialogue with Government about the role that growth in housing supply and support can play in economic recovery.

If COVID-19 proves anything, home is everything. We are a sector focussed on helping people find, get and keep housing. As we move forward there are opportunities to:

- Enhance a systems' approach that synergises private, social and affordable housing products
- Further accelerate Partnering for Growth combined with capital funding to achieve growth in housing solutions through a stronger community housing sector which converges with urgently needed economic stimulus
- Consolidate front-line care coordination and service integration initiatives to achieve housing and support solutions while also strengthening and supporting the workforce
- Address unmet support needs for the sustainment of tenancies through additional funding which will grow the workforce and contribute to economic recovery
- Further build regional leadership structures that help drive strategic solutions now and into the future.

The Learning Exchange is a reminder that learning experiences can be brief episodes using light-touch technology. While this doesn't replace other more direct learning modalities such as face-to-face training, Q Shelter goes forward with a reinvigorated outlook about how to deliver learning programs that are decentralised, accessible and affordable.

3.2 Future directions

The following directions are offered for further discussion:

Sector capacity

1. That creative and innovative approaches to service delivery continue to be shared and captured through Q Shelter offering a technology assisted learning exchange program.

2. That the housing and homelessness service system is understood and endorsed as essential services as a foundation for business and service delivery continuity, access to PPE and other specialised guidance and support from Government.

3. That proactive approaches to stockpiling and coordinating PPE and cleaning products for housing and homelessness services are proactive and sustained.

4. That further sector capacity building is undertaken to provide training and guidelines in business and service continuity during a pandemic. This includes documentation of service delivery models that sustain contact, outreach and support at the same time as the workforce is made safe.

5. That technical guidance is documented and endorsed responding to the needs of housing and homelessness services in the context of a pandemic. This includes collating and curating examples of good practices, tools, resources, policies and procedures from housing and homelessness services.

6. That a consolidated protocol with Queensland Health results in housing and homelessness services having access to specialised assistance during pandemic conditions (including regionalised on-site assistance).

7. That a coordinated and specialised approach to sector training and information products is available in the context of legislative reforms relating to renting in Queensland that respond to pandemic conditions.

8. Enhanced funding for a sector training and development program is available. Unmet needs for training, tools and resources during COVID-19 underlines the need for a funded program of learning and development for the combined housing and homelessness sector.

The structure of the sector
9. That agreed protocols and practices are negotiated across State agencies and with the sector regarding exits from housing, institutions and care during a pandemic.

10. That an agreed-multiagency framework and service delivery model is adopted if rapid and wide-scale relocation of homeless people is needed in the future. This includes risk management through the coordination of multiple agencies doing street level work using an agreed service delivery model, assessment tools and client information management systems.

11. That regional place-based structures engaging leaders and front-line staff are consolidated and continued. This includes the need for regional leadership arrangements involving housing and homelessness services as well as front-line care coordination groups.

Service delivery
12. That support funding is enhanced to respond to demand for services with a focus on tenancy sustainment and broader wellbeing domains that improve lives and address any issue directly or indirectly impacting or impacted by housing stability.

13. Enhanced support funding should include a coordinated approach to state funding across key agencies to sustain tenancies in response to unmet and emerging need from COVID-19.

14. That Government and the sector works together to agree a tenancy sustainment framework and service delivery model, moving away from an emphasis on crisis and short-term responses and towards sustainable housing solutions integrated with support depending on assessed need. This framework includes housing, support, coordination and service integration and enablers such as data systems, brokerage and workforce development.

Engagement and participation

15. That formal structures for supporting the emergence and involvement of peer leaders who are tenants and service users are funded in Queensland.

16. That training and resources for building community support for social housing and homelessness services are widely provided to the sector and an agreed strategy for building community support for housing and homelessness solutions is developed and implemented collaboratively involving the sector and Government.

Resources, support and stimulus

17. That the costs to CHPs and homelessness services of responding to or emerging from COVID-19 continue to be monitored and addressed in partnership with Government.

18. That stimulus funding is made available by Queensland Government to support growth projects responsive to unmet and emerging housing needs. This includes the need to accelerate Partnering for Growth support and to address barriers to participation by CHPs in growth activities including barriers to NHFIC funding in Queensland.

Appendix 1: Attendances

This list includes Q Shelter and also lists different services that may be part of one overarching entity. The total number of 124 entities or services cited in section 1 counts entities or services once. Excluding Q Shelter staff, there were 226 separate attendees registered across 14 learning exchange events. Some attendees participated in multiple events.

121 Care
ABIS Community Co-Operative Society Ltd
Access Community Housing Company
Althea Projects
Adventist Care
Anglicare Central QLD
Anglicare North Queensland
Anglicare SQ
Anglicare St Margaret's House
Anglicare Insync youth services
Australian Red Cross
BHC
BlueCHP Limited
Bowman Johnson Hostel Manager
Bric
Brisbane City Council
Brisbane North PHN
Bundaberg Regional Council
BYS
Cape York Institute
Cassowary Coast Regional Council
Centacare North Queensland
Centacare CQ
Central Highlands Regional Council
CHIA Vic
Churches of Christ in Queensland
Coast to Country Housing
COAST2BAY HOUSING GROUP LTD
Common Ground Queensland
Communify
Community Accommodation & Support Agency (CASA)
Community Action Inc.
Community Housing and Information Centre Incorporated
Community Kitchen Homeless Food Service
Compass
Connect Housing Group
Deicke Richards

Department of Housing
Disability Community Awareness
Douglas Shire Aged Persons Home Incorporated
DVAC
DVConnect
Elam Inc
Encircle Ltd
Families Supported Accommodation Brisbane North
Family Emergency Accommodation Townsville Incorporated
Footprints Inc
Gateway Community Group
Gold Coast Project for Homeless Youth Inc
Hervey Bay Neighbourhood Centre
Home Maintenance & Security Service Association Inc. (HOMESSA Inc.)
Homeless Health Outreach Team HHOT
Horizon Housing Solutions
IFYS
INCH Housing
Ingham Parents Support Group Incorporated
Jacaranda Housing
Kalyan Youth Service
Kingston East Neighbourhood Group Inc
Kingston East Neighbourhood Group Inc.
Kyabra
Lowanna House Inc.
Lutheran Services
Mareeba Community Housing Company
Mareeba Shire Council
Mercy Community
Metro North Mental Health
Metro South Addiction and Mental Health Service
Micah Projects
Mission Australia
MNHHSD
Moreton Bay Regional Council
National Affordable Housing Consortium
NDIA
NHFIC
Noosa Council
Not for profit
NQCWS - The Women's Centre
Orange Sky Australia
OzHarvest
Peace Lutheran Church Gatton

QCOSS
Qld Police Service
QLD Youth and Families Support Services Inc.
QTC
Queensland Corrective Services
Queensland Department of Housing and Public Works
Queensland Youth and Families Support Services
Queensland Youth Housing Coalition
RDAMB
Reconnect
Red Cross
Redland Community Centre
Regional Housing Limited
Roma House - Mission Australia
Roseberry Qld
Saint Vincent de Paul Society Cairns DARRS
Saint Andrew's Uniting Church Community meal
Salvation Army
Sharehouse Youth Programs Inc
Sheltered By Grace
Southern Downs Regional Council
St George Aboriginal Housing Company
St Margaret's House Anglicare NQ
St Vincent de Paul - Ipswich Accommodation Support Service
St Vincent de Paul -Ozanam House-Rockhampton Hostel
St Vincent de Paul Society Qld Housing - Vinnies Housing
Tableland Community Housing Association
Tablelands Regional Council
Tenants Queensland
The Salvation Army Queensland
Transitional Housing Team Metro South Health
Umpi Korumba
Valley Hearts Inc
Volunteering Queensland
Watson & Associates
Whitsunday Housing Company Limited
Wesley Mission Queensland
Yellowbridge QLD
YFS
Yourtown
Youth Housing Project Association Inc
Youth Service Providers Inc
YWCA Australia
Zonta Club of Brisbane

Appendix 2:   Q Shelter communique

The following communique was sent to Government in mid-March and circulated to the sector at the same time.

COVID-19 Communique

Q Shelter has listened to sector concerns and proposed solutions that respond to the need for service continuity and workforce safety in the context of this unprecedented event.

We are working closely with the Department of Housing and Public Works to support their response. We have focussed on providing information and advice based on our engagement with you and also an examination of evidence about how to best meet the needs of service users who are already more vulnerable than the general population.

We provide you with this summary about Q Shelter's understanding of sector concerns and suggested solutions. We are also working with others on guidelines to support appropriate practices for service delivery to social housing tenants and homeless people.

Assumptions

Our engagement and advice is guided by these underpinning assumptions:

- That service provision to social housing tenants and homeless people is front-line and essential
- Services that house people and support the sustainment of tenancies are preventative and reduce longer term costs including increased population risks from COVID-19 and increased presentations to health services including hospitals
- Social housing tenants and homeless people are particularly vulnerable because of health issues including mental health, substance use and chronic disease. They are among those population groups most vulnerable to serious illness and death from COVID-19.

Solutions

Q Shelter has collated 12 actions around six focus areas as follows:

- Supply and stimulus
- Workforce capacity and capability
- Congregate Living Environments
- Procurement
- Food Security
- Data.

Supply and stimulus

1. That funding is identified to augment service delivery enabling higher levels of sustained assistance to vulnerable social housing and homelessness populations. This should be

available for a scaled-up workforce and for additional costs associated with cleaning and providing staff and clients with products that assist with infection control. Flexible brokerage and funding for head-leasing or adapting new properties should also be included.

2. That a stimulus package is needed that supports the adaptation of existing buildings, new acquisitions and new builds that help to address the housing impacts of COVID-19. This supply strategy needs to respond to people currently in housing stress or who are homeless, or who experience housing stress related to the unfolding impacts of COVID-19. This could build-on and accelerate arrangements under Partnering for Growth supporting increased supply through community housing providers.

3. That alternative properties including buildings and houses are identified to accommodate people who are homeless or living in congregate living environments who need to isolate or be relocated.

4. That measures to ensure sustainable tenancies in the private rental market are facilitated by central government. This needs to prevent homelessness from increasing and prevent evictions and mortgage defaults while COVID-19 is still a population risk.

Workforce capacity and capability

5. That a platform is launched to identify and facilitate access to a temporary workforce for potential redeployment to housing and homelessness services. This needs to include a priority workforce that can be mobilised and deployed to sustain supervised housing options for young people and children.

6. That a basic level of infection control training is provided to the housing and homelessness sector and to volunteers to enable employers to deploy a workforce with higher capabilities responsive to the current context.

   That an induction training product is developed quickly to support a redeployed workforce to take up roles within the housing and homelessness sector.

7. Additional detailed guidance for service delivery is needed for the broader housing and homelessness sector in the context of a pandemic. This needs to be in the form of clear guidelines based on evidence.

8. That a central information platform is endorsed where organisations can provide regular updates on service provision without relying excessively on emails from individual services every time something changes.

Congregate living environments

9. That a separate strategy is urgently actioned responding to the needs of people in congregate living environments and people who are homelessness. This needs to include

detailed guidance for providers of congregate living environments in how to achieve business continuity and reduce risks to residents and staff.

Procurement

10. That a central government procurement strategy is launched to secure products needed by the sector to ensure business continuity including sanitiser, disinfectant, personal hygiene packs for workers and vulnerable people and other related items.

Food security

11. That a food security strategy is developed and actioned in the context that food outlets typically available to homeless people and social housing tenants are withdrawing from or reducing service delivery. This could involve privately run food outlets and restaurants otherwise negatively impacted by reduced patronage.

Data

12. That data is collected from people diagnosed with COVID-19 about their income source and housing status to monitor incidence of disease and death among homeless people and people in social housing.

Contact and future engagement
The Deck
Q Shelter now has a section on The Deck devoted to capturing tools, resources and information that the sector might benefit from. Visit The Deck at https://thedeck.org.au/update/
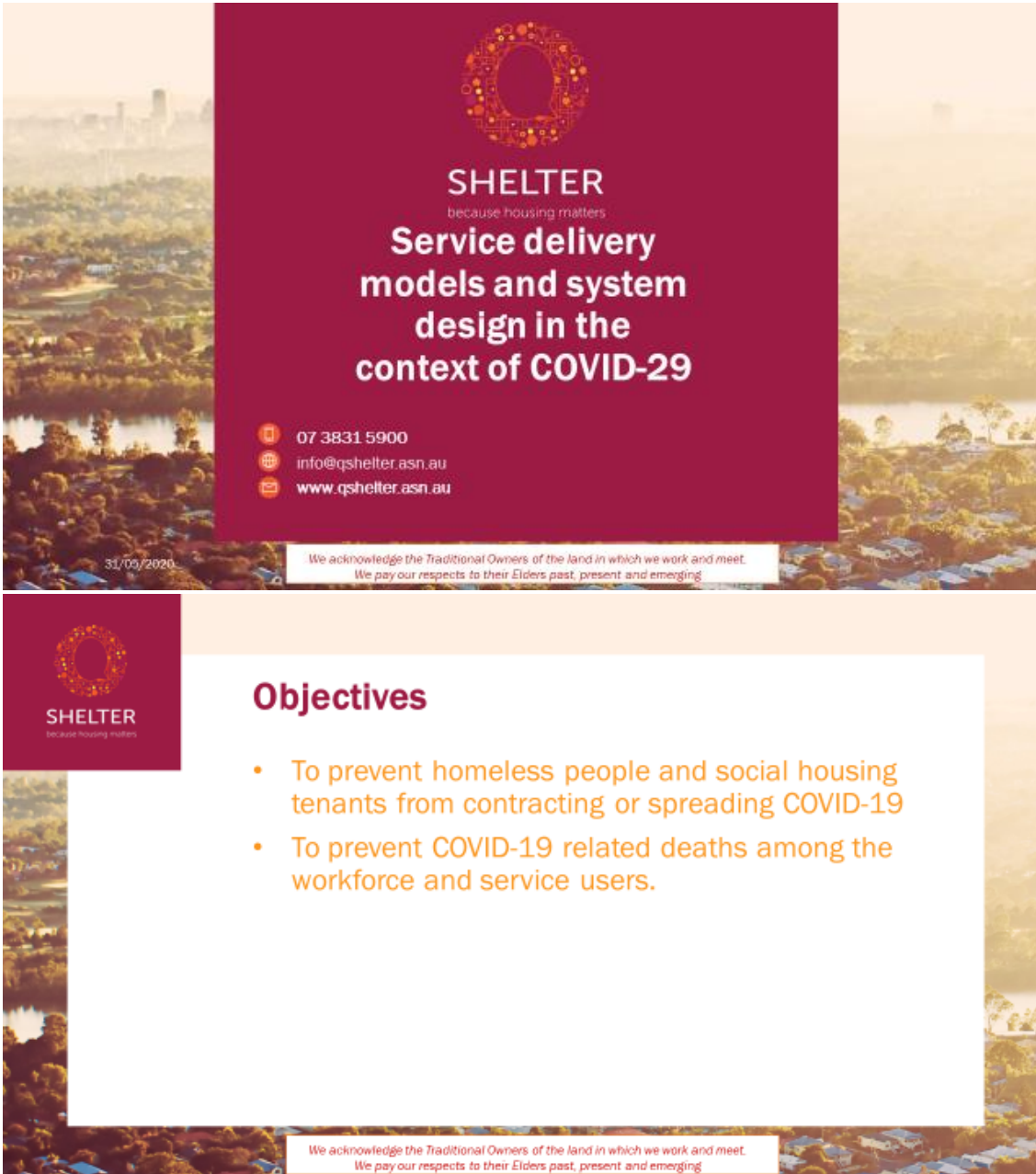
Weekly teleconference
Q Shelter is also standing up weekly teleconferences with the sector to share challenges and exchange solutions. The teleconference can accommodate 100 people calling in and the details are: Every Tuesday at 4.00pm-4.30pm

Contact Q Shelter
You can contact Q Shelter on 3831 5900 or at solutions@qshelter.asn.au to raise new concerns and even more importantly exchange ideas on solutions.

Appendix 3:   Service delivery model

Assumptions

That service provision to social housing tenants and homeless people is front-line and essential

Services that house people and support the sustainment of tenancies are preventative and reduce longer term costs including increased population risks from COVID-19 and increased presentations to health services including hospitals

Social housing tenants and homeless people are particularly vulnerable because of health issues including mental health, substance use and chronic disease. They are among those population groups most vulnerable to serious illness and death from COVID-19.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land in which we work and meet. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging

Strategies we need to consider

- To sustain existing tenancies and prevent the growth of primary homelessness
- To augment support to vulnerable people who are housed but at risk of homelessness with the goal of tenancy sustainment
- To provide an intensive period of street outreach to identify and accommodate people in primary homelessness in each region
- To provide enough support to sustain those new tenancies where it is needed
- To ensure the workforce has the capability to practice in this new environment.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land in which we work and meet. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging

Workforce capacity

- Assess your workforce and identify who is willing and able to sustain front-line services
- Redeploy people including through working from home arrangements who are identified as vulnerable
- Provide training and equipment to keep the workforce safe.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land in which we work and meet. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging

Clients

- Assess client needs and ensure current contact details
- Triage the most vulnerable clients to know who requires prioritised service delivery particularly in the context of a reduced workforce
- This includes knowing who cannot be contacted by phone and/or email

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land in which we work and meet. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging
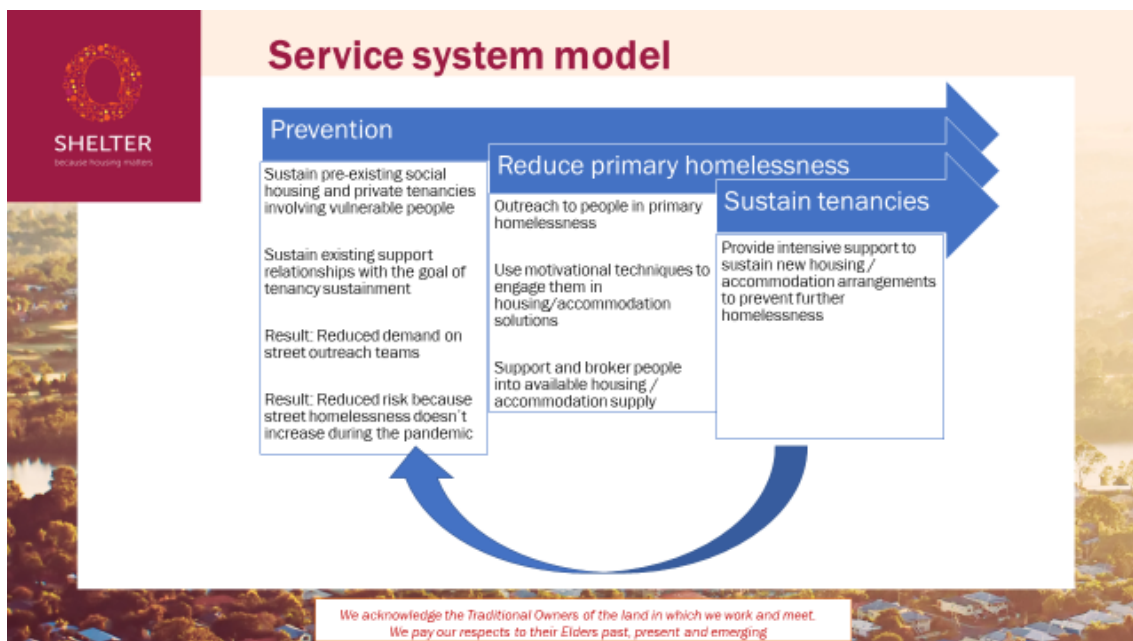
Priorities for resources

Safety equipment to enable service delivery

Funds for new/additional dwellings including adapted buildings

Funds for increased support to vulnerable households who are at risk of homelessness

Funds for intensive street outreach over a very defined period of time to assertively relocate people in primary homelessness to safety

Flexible brokerage to solve problems as they arise.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land in which we work and meet. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging
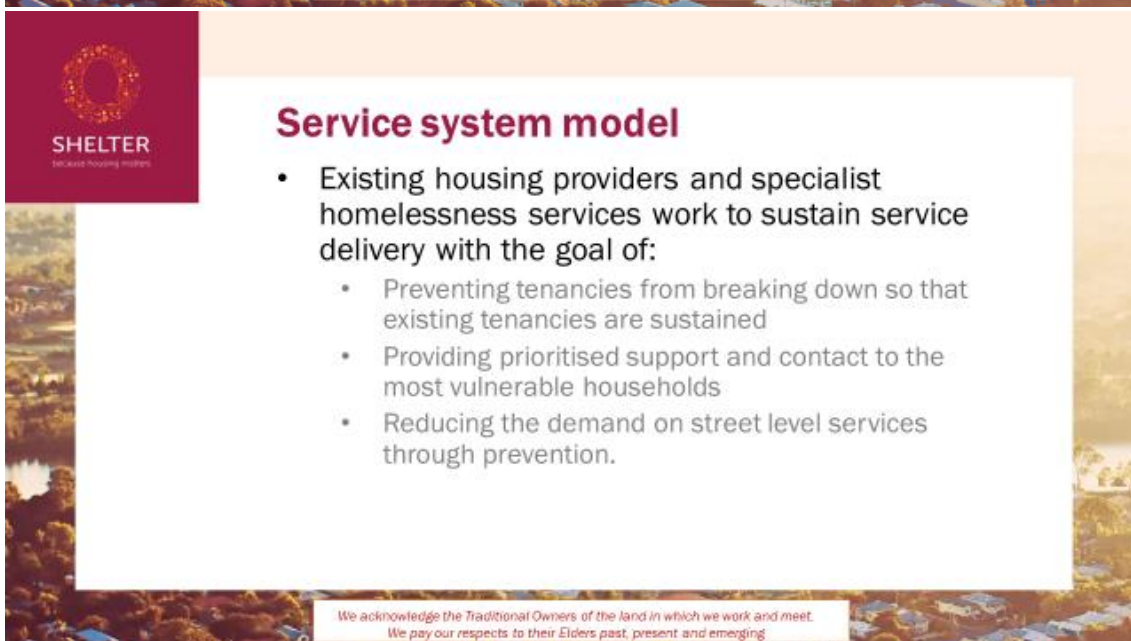
Service delivery model

To the most vulnerable clients services will be:

- Assertive
- Persistent
- Protective
- Coordinated and integrated.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land in which we work and meet. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging

Service system model

- Utilise regional service integration groups to assist in situations where people have high and complex needs and where an outcome is proving difficult

- Regional service integration groups can also assist with support and other resources to sustain existing and new tenancies

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land in which we work and meet. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging

Workforce capability

- Infection control training

- Assertive outreach and motivational engagement techniques (phone and face to face)

- Service delivery model overview so people know where they are in the system and how they are making a difference

- Specific guidance for congregate living environments including private boarding houses

- Access to health specialists on the phone who can help trouble shoot specific enquiries for larger facilities.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land in which we work and meet. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging