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A Profile of Households Experiencing Homelessness in Western Australia

Survey 7

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Introduction

Homelessness affects all types of people, singles and families, men and women, old and young, those who had a good education and those who did not.

This report is part of a project called *A Profile of Households Experiencing Homeless in Western Australia (Profile)*, which has been running since early 2001. The project aims to provide a series of snapshots highlighting changes in the nature of homelessness in WA. *Profile* focuses on the needs and composition of the State's homeless population.

As part of *Profile*, Shelter WA has conducted regular Surveys aimed at identifying the nature of homelessness in Western Australia. The current study details the findings of Survey 7. Reports on previous surveys are available from www.shelterwa.org.au.

Survey 7 added a complementary questionnaire to its original format. The purpose of this was to identify the level of support and to help identify possible models for the delivery of a Homeless Persons Legal Clinic in WA. The findings of the complementary questionnaire shall be released in early 2007.

Shelter WA released an overview report of developments in homelessness over the last three years in December 2004. Named *No Place Like Home: Homelessness in Western Australia*, this report summarised the findings of Survey 1 through to Survey 5, and highlighted trends and developments in this area. It is available from www.shelterwa.org.au/publications.htm.

Methodology

For Survey 7 of *Shelter WA: Counting the Homeless*, Surveys and information packages were distributed to 314 community agencies in September 2006.

Participating agencies were asked to complete 1 Survey form for each homeless household requesting accommodation assistance but not housed on the night of Tuesday 5th September 2006. Agency

workers completed the Surveys on behalf of the household requesting assistance.

Completed Surveys were returned to Shelter WA by participating agencies via fax or post. A total of 42 Surveys were completed with information on 91 homeless people. An additional 14 Surveys were completed by agencies that participated in the research but did not receive any requests for assistance.

The response rate was 18% - significantly less than the response rate of 40% in the 2005 Survey. This response rate was the lowest for all the Surveys completed to date. The release of the Survey coincided with the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 National Census and this could have influenced the low response rate. There were also a considerable number of agencies which had either re-located without a forwarding address or had disbanded altogether. Most of these agencies were from remote and regional areas.

The Survey form contained 10 questions, which collected information on:

- ▶ Method of contact;
- ▶ Type of assistance requested;
- ▶ Urgency of request;
- ▶ Type of accommodation required;
- ▶ Household type making request;
- ▶ Age and sex of household members;
- ▶ Type of accommodation used on the previous night
- ▶ Who the household stayed with on the previous night;
- ▶ Combined household income; and
- ▶ The household's cultural background.

Definition of Homelessness

There are several different definitions of homelessness. For the purpose of this Survey, participants were asked to apply the Australian Bureau of Statistic's definition of homelessness. The definition describes 3 levels of homelessness:

- ▶ **Primary homelessness:** people without conventional accommodation;

- ▶ **Secondary homelessness:** people who move frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another; and
- ▶ **Tertiary homelessness:** People who live in boarding houses on a medium to long-term basis.¹

Results: Survey 7

Method Used to Contact Agency

Respondents were asked to identify the method used by households requesting accommodation assistance.

The proportion of households that made contact by telephone, in person or through a third party was evenly distributed at about one in three households for each of these three modes of contact. This represented a change from the previous five Surveys where typically just under half had made contact by phone with around a third presenting at the agency in person.

Type of Housing Required and Support Needs

Respondents were asked to identify the type of housing required. Approximately two in three households requested crisis/short-term accommodation. This figure more or less mirrors the high demand shown for this type of accommodation in the previous six Surveys

Approximately one third of households requested three different tenure arrangements. Those were, medium/long-term accommodation 18%, public housing 9% and private rental 7%.

Respondents were asked to identify the type of service households approached their agency to provide. One in two respondents applied for accommodation plus support services. The high demand for support and accommodation has been a key feature of all the homelessness Surveys to date. One in three applied for accommodation only and one in ten households requested support services only.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999. *Census of Population & Housing: Counting the Homeless, 1999*, Occasional Paper 2041.0, ABS, Canberra.

Urgency of Request for Assistance

Respondents were asked to rate the level of urgency of the request for assistance.

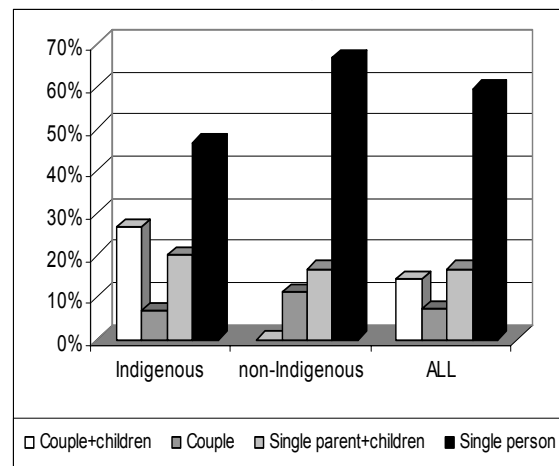
Survey 7 reflected the previous six Surveys with over two thirds of households requiring assistance within 24 hours.

Homeless by Household Type and Size

The number of single Indigenous persons started to show a marked increase in *Profile 6*. This Survey also had a high proportion of single Indigenous households.

Figure 1 reveals that single person household was the most predominate across both cultural groups - amounting to nearly half of the Indigenous homeless population and two thirds of the non-Indigenous homeless population.

Figure 1: Homeless Households by Type, Size and Cultural Background.



Source: Shelter WA, Counting the Homeless Survey (September, 2006)

Survey 7 had a significant drop in the overall proportion of homeless single parents plus children (17%), compared to 33% in Survey 6. Typically homeless single parents with children have comprised one quarter to one third of homeless households in *Profiles 1 to 6*.

Another key feature of *Profile 7* was that one in four Indigenous couples plus children requested assistance. This was significantly higher than last years figure. Conversely, the demand for housing and assistance by

non-Indigenous couples with children was negligible.

The proportion of larger Indigenous families requiring assistance has generally been greater than their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Homeless People by Age

The most comprehensive overview of homelessness in Western Australia is contained in Chamberlain and Mackenzie, *Counting the Homeless 2001: Western Australia*.² A disturbing feature of the report was the age profile of the homeless in WA (i.e. children under 12 years made up 9% (1,040) of the homeless, 12 and 18 year olds (30%) (3,508) and about half were under 25 years).

Clearly Shelter's homelessness Surveys cannot be compared to the Chamberlain and Mackenzie report. They are distinctly smaller samples. But their strength lies in being able to monitor annual homelessness trends and they continue to reveal alarmingly high levels of homelessness amongst children under the age of 14 years.³

Throughout the *Profile* series children have accounted for about a third of the homeless and the findings for Indigenous children are even worse -representing nearly half of all homeless Indigenous persons.⁴

In this Survey, respondents provided details on 91 homeless people (30 Indigenous and 61 non-Indigenous).

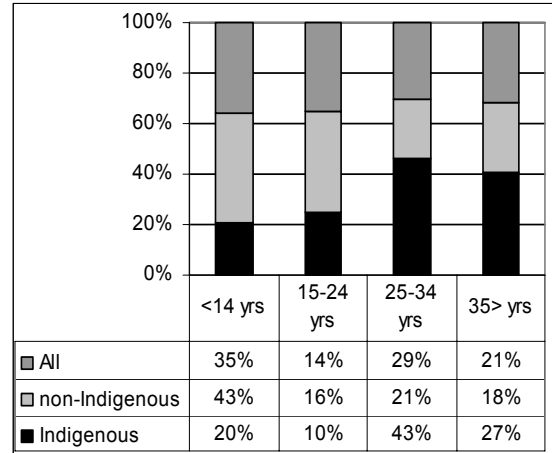
Figure 2 reveals that one in five Indigenous homeless persons were less than 14 years of age. This represents a reduced proportion of homelessness for this age group in comparison to previous Surveys.

In contrast, nearly half (43%) of the non-Indigenous homeless population were under 14 years of age.

Figure 2 highlights that persons aged 25 -34 years represent the largest group of

homeless Indigenous persons (43%). This is a more than double the proportion of homelessness for this age group found in the previous Survey and is not matched in any other *Profile*.

Figure 2: Age Profile of Homeless Persons by Cultural Background, September 2006



Source: Shelter WA, Counting the Homeless Survey (September 2006)

(a) Non-Indigenous did not add up to 100% because a small number of persons did not know cultural background.

Geographic Location of Homelessness

The Chamberlain and Mackenzie report provided a geographical dimension to homelessness in WA.⁵ It found that about half of non-Indigenous homeless are located in Perth, while close to two thirds of Indigenous homeless are located in regional and remote areas.

This Survey also provides an account of homelessness by geographical location and cultural definition and came up with similar findings to the Chamberlain and McKenzie report. Figure 3 below highlights that over two thirds of the Indigenous homeless was based in non-metro areas and about half of the non-Indigenous homeless population were located in Perth.

² See Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 2004, *Counting the Homeless 2001: Western Australia*. Melbourne

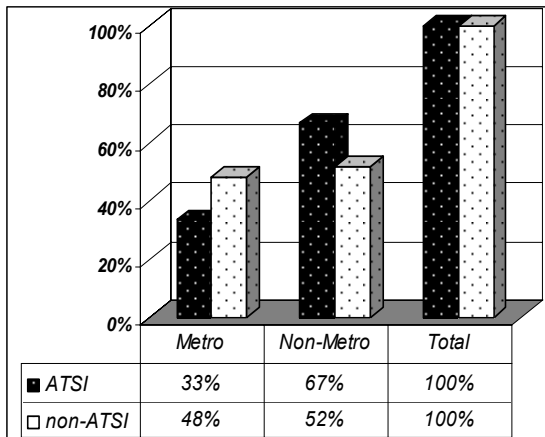
³ See Shelter WA, 2004, No Place Like Home:

Homelessness in Western Australia, www.shelterwa.org.au

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 2004, *Counting the Homeless 2001: Western Australia*, Melbourne.

Figure 3: Geographic Location of Homelessness by Cultural Background
(a)



Source Shelter WA, Counting the Homeless Survey (September 2006)
(a) ATSI refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Degrees of Homelessness

Survey participants were asked to identify the type of accommodation used by the household on the night before the Survey date. In Survey 6, over one third of the respondents registered as primary homeless. This was a higher than average figure and was likely due to the high participation rate from the Kimberley region which has the highest Indigenous population in regional WA.

In contrast *Profile 7* had only one in eight recordings of primary homelessness – and 80% of these were non-Indigenous households.

The majority of households (55%) registered as secondary homelessness (staying in emergency or transitional accommodation) and one in eight qualified for tertiary homelessness (living in a Boarding House on a medium to long term basis). Nearly one in four respondents (21%) did not provide their whereabouts.

Who Did the Homeless Stay With?

Respondents were asked to identify whom the household stayed with on the night prior to the Survey. *Profile 6* found that less than a quarter of households were living

temporarily with friends or relatives and over a third was living alone.

Similarly *Profile 7* found more than one third of respondents living alone, and also one third living with friends or relatives.

However, there were some cultural differences: more than half of Indigenous households stayed with friends or relatives, prior to the night of the Survey, whereas the non-Indigenous proportion amounted to one in four households.

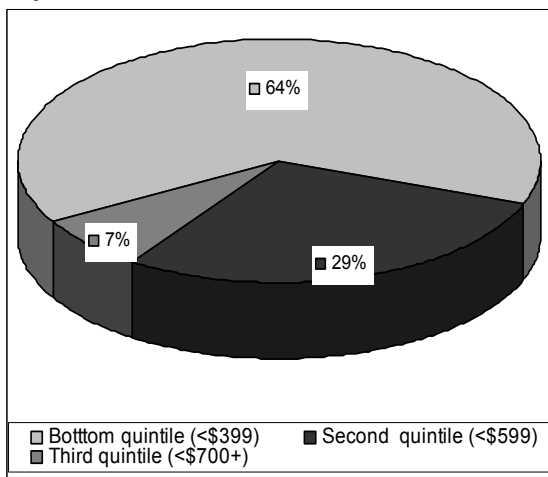
Household Income

Respondents were asked to record the gross weekly income of homeless households requesting assistance. In general, the Surveys have found that approximately 9 out of 10 households fell within the lowest income quintile (household income less than \$399 per week).

Figure 4 reveals the income range of respondents in Survey 7. It shows two thirds of respondents located in the bottom quintile. Compared to other Surveys, this represents a significant reduction in the proportion of bottom quintile respondents.

The *Profile* series has consistently shown about one in ten households in receipt of an income less than \$599. Figure 4 below demonstrates that this income group has increased as a proportion of homeless households, representing more than one in four respondents in Survey 7.

Figure 4: Income of Homeless Households Requesting Assistance, September 2006



Source: Shelter WA, Counting the Homeless Survey (September, 2006)

Access to Private Rental Housing

Perth's median rent has undergone a rapid annual increase (up 27% to the June quarter 2006).⁶ There has also been a significant reduction in private rental vacancy rates, reducing from a ten year high of 4.8% in mid 2003 to a low of 1.8% in September 2006.⁷ These two changes have made access to private rental housing much more difficult for low income household and especially those which are homeless.

Table 1 calculates the rent to income ratio of Survey 7 households. It estimates that those on the lowest quintile would be paying nearly two thirds of their income on the median rent. And those in the second quintile would be paying well over a third of their household income on rent. The third quintile group would also be in housing stress if accessing private rental.⁸

⁶ See Shelter WA, 2006, *The State of Affordable Housing in Western Australia in 2006: Occasional Paper 2006-1*, www.shelterwa.org.au

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ People in housing stress are those with household incomes in the bottom 40% of the distribution of equivalised disposable income, and are paying greater than 30% of their household income on housing costs.

Table 1: Proportion of Household Income Spent on Private Rental in Perth (a)

	Bottom quintile	Second quintile	Third quintile
<i>Income Range</i>	Less than \$399	Less than \$599	Less than \$799+
<i>Median Wkly Private Rent Perth</i>	\$ 250	\$ 250	\$ 250
<i>Rent at 30 % of income</i>	63%	42%	31%

Source: Shelter WA, Counting the Homeless Survey (September, 2006); REIWA Property Market Indicators, September, 2006⁹

(a) Assumes households would be paying the Perth median weekly rent if they were accessing private rental.

Cultural Background

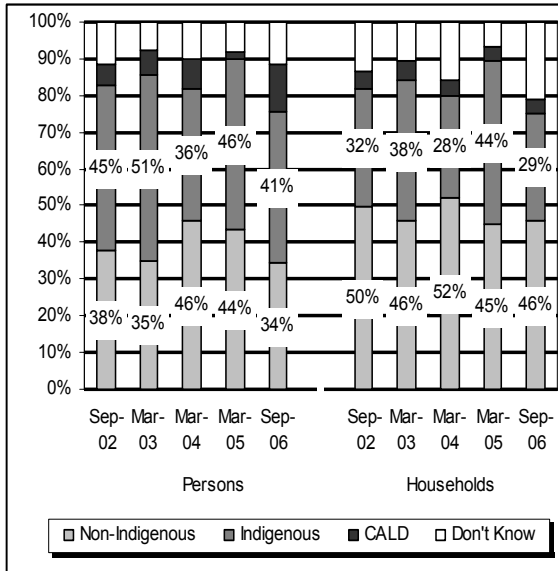
Western Australia's Indigenous population represent 3% of the State's population, yet the Indigenous homeless rate is 170 per 10,000 head of the population, compared to a homeless rate of 60 per 10,000 for the non-Indigenous population.¹⁰ Clearly, Indigenous people are over-represented in the State's homeless population

Figure 5 below reveals the cultural background of the homeless persons and households which responded to this Survey. Since 2001 through to 2006, Indigenous people have accounted for more than a third of homeless persons and more than a quarter of homeless households. The latest results reflect previous trends and highlight once more the chronic problems of homelessness affecting some of the most impoverished households in Western Australia.

⁹ See REIWA, 2006, *Property Market Indicators, September, 2006*, www.reiwa.au

¹⁰ See table 6.1: Estimated number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous homeless people and rate per 10,000 of the population, 2001, (Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 2004).

Figure 5: Cultural Background of Homeless Persons and Households from Sep 2002 to Sep 2006 (a)



Source: Shelter WA, Counting the Homeless Surveys (Sep 2002 March 2003, 2004, 2005 and Sep, 2006).
 (a) CALD refers to Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Key Findings

- ▶ Approximately two in three households requested crisis/short-term accommodation. This figure more or less mirrors the high demand shown for crisis/short term accommodation revealed in the previous six Surveys
- ▶ The number of single Indigenous persons started to show a marked increase in *Profile 6*. Survey 7 also had a high proportion of single Indigenous households.
- ▶ Survey 7 had a significant drop in the overall percentage of homeless single parent plus children (17%), compared to 33% in Survey 6
- ▶ Another key finding of *Profile 7* was that one in four Indigenous couple plus children lodged as homeless. This was significantly more than last year's figure.
- ▶ One in five Indigenous homeless persons was less than 14 years of age. Whereas nearly half (43%) of the non-Indigenous homeless population were under 14 years of age.
- ▶ Persons aged 25 -34 years represented the largest group of homeless Indigenous persons (43%) in Survey 7. This is more than double the proportion of homelessness for this age group found in the previous Survey and is not matched in any other *Profile*.
- ▶ Homelessness *Profile* series, for the first time provided a picture of homelessness in WA by cultural definition and geographical location. It revealed that over two thirds of the Indigenous homeless population was based in non-metro areas, whereas about half of the non-Indigenous homeless population were located in Perth.
- ▶ *Profile 7* had only one in eight recordings of primary homelessness – and 80% of these were non-Indigenous households. The majority of households (55%) registered as secondary homelessness (staying in emergency or transitional accommodation) and one in eight qualified for tertiary homelessness (living in a Boarding Housie on a medium to long term basis)
- ▶ Low income continues to be a principal feature of the homeless population. However, in Survey 7 two thirds of respondents were based in the bottom quintile, whereas in all the previous Surveys around 90% of respondents were situated in the bottom quintile.
- ▶ The Homelessness series has consistently revealed about one in ten households in receipt of an income less than \$599. In Survey 7 this income group increased as a proportion of homeless households to more than one in four respondents.
- ▶ All of Survey 7 respondents would encounter housing stress if accessing private rental in the metropolitan region. Those on the lowest quintile would be paying nearly two thirds of their income on the median rent. And those in the second quintile would be paying well over a third of their household income on rent. The third quintile group would also be in housing stress if accessing private rental
- ▶ In all seven homelessness Surveys, Indigenous people have accounted for more than a third of persons and more than a quarter of households.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In analysing the results of *Profile 7*, it needs to be recognised that the Survey received the lowest responses of all the Surveys in the homelessness series. The response rate was 18% - significantly less than the response rate of 40% in the 2005 survey. The fact that the Survey was conducted about the same time as the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 census could have affected the low response rate.

There were also a considerable number of agencies which had either re-located without a forwarding address or had disbanded altogether. Most of these agencies were from remote and regional areas.

Nonetheless, *Profile 7* has yielded some interesting findings worthy of analysis. This section discusses some of these findings in more detail and makes recommendations that Shelter WA believe, if implemented, will reduce the rate of homelessness in Western Australia.

Housing and Support Needs

Approximately two out of three households requested crisis/short-term accommodation. This figure has remained unchanged throughout the homelessness series.

This high demand for crisis accommodation is also reflected in the findings from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's most recent homelessness Survey.¹¹ The Survey achieved a 93% response rate from recipients of WA's Support Accommodation Assistance Programme (SAAP).¹² The Survey revealed that out of all the States and Territories, Western Australia had the shortest median length support period at 6

¹¹ See Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2006. *Homeless People in SAAP: Annual Report 2004-05*, www.aihw.gov.au

¹² SAAP is jointly funded by the Australian and state and territory governments and is Australia's primary response to homelessness. SAAP aims to assist people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless by providing transitional supported accommodation and a range of related support services. See Department of Families, Communities and Indigenous Affairs, 2006, *Support Accommodation Assistance Programme*, <http://www.facs.gov.au>

days (due to a relatively high proportion of clients in this state who stayed 1 day).

Homeless by Household Type and Size

The number of single Indigenous persons started to show a marked increase in *Profile 6*. The main reason for this increase was due to the involvement of a new agency from the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. This agency registered a significant increase in demand for accommodation and support from single Indigenous households.

Survey 7 also had a high proportion of single Indigenous households, even though it did not match the high response rate from the Kimberley region in *Profile 6*.

Homeless People by Age

The Survey revealed that persons aged 25 - 34 years comprised the largest group of homeless Indigenous persons (43%). This is a more than double the proportion of homelessness for this age group found in the previous Survey and is not matched in any other *Profile*.

The unusually high proportion of older Indigenous homeless persons could be influenced by the significant increase in single Indigenous homelessness shown up in Survey 6 and Survey 7.

Income Range of Homeless Population

One of the more interesting findings of this Survey was the increase in the proportion of homeless households located in the second income quintile (less than \$599 p/w). More than one in four respondents in Survey 7, compared to one in ten households in previous Surveys.

This new finding provides some indications that the rapid increase in rents over the last year (the highest on record), tight vacancy rates and lack of affordable homeownership, are all combining to make access to affordable housing exceedingly difficult for households on very low incomes.

All these factors could be leading to greater housing instability for households further up the income scale.

Cultural Background of Homeless Population

The Indigenous population represent 3% of the State's population. Yet in all seven homelessness Surveys completed, Indigenous people have accounted for more than a third of homeless persons and more than a quarter of homeless households.

The Indigenous population over-representation in the State's homelessness figures is one of most pressing housing issues facing the Western Australia State Government.

Solutions to Homelessness

Western Australia's Indigenous population experience a range of housing problems which are not encountered by the non-Indigenous population. Indigenous households in urban, rural and remote areas are experiencing problems with housing shortages, overcrowding and low quality stock. The unprecedented increases in the costs of private rental and private housing over the last few years have contributed to Indigenous households' greater reliance on social housing.¹³

The fact that some Indigenous households are living in squalid housing conditions, especially those based in regional and remote areas, is proof of the need for an immediate increase in funding aimed at increasing the supply of social housing to Indigenous communities.

This is an opportune time for the State government to provide more funding for Indigenous housing.

Over the last five year period the government has guided the WA economy through a period of sustained economic growth and continues to receive significant royalties from WA's growing resource sector

¹³ Social housing comprises public housing, community housing, regional housing associations and housing co-operatives.

and recently benefited from a Budget surplus of \$2.1 billion dollars.¹⁴

Addressing homelessness requires both the provision of support services and accommodation options. It is clear both require significant increases in Government funding. While it is beyond the scope of *Profile* to produce exact costing, previous work by Shelter WA suggests that there is a shortage of funding in the order of tens of millions of dollars per year for support services, and hundreds of millions of dollars per year to build more social housing and transitional housing.¹⁵

Any new funding needs to consider the current imbalance of SAAP services between metropolitan and regional areas. Out of the total homeless population only 3% of regional homeless persons were able to access SAAP, compared to 13% for metropolitan homeless persons. Western Australia's homeless population receive only a limited supply of SAAP in comparison to national figures (i.e. 8% of homeless persons accessed SAAP accommodation in WA, compared to 14% nationally).¹⁶

Policy Recommendations

The findings of Survey 7 reflect the findings of other Surveys in the *Profile* series and provide further evidence that not enough is being done to address homelessness in WA. There is enough evidence in other Shelter reports which strongly indicate that the only way to seriously address homelessness and the chronic shortage of social rental is to increase government funding for public and community housing. Shelter WA therefore advocates the following key policy recommendations for the State government to consider:

1. Increase the capacity of SAAP by 50% and provide services in areas where the need is located: SAAP to achieve a target of accommodating 12% of the State's homeless population.

¹⁴ See Department of Housing and Works, 2006, *Housing Industry Projections 2005/06 & 2006/07*, www.dhw.wa.gov.au

¹⁵ See Karel Eringa, *The State of Affordable Housing in WA*, Shelter WA Occasional Paper 2003-2, August 2003

¹⁶ See Table 1: Number of persons in different sectors of the homeless population Australia and Western Australia, 2001, (Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 2004).

2. The WA State Housing Authority to increase the market presence of public housing across the State to the 1996 level of 6%. This would mean that 15,909 new dwellings need to be constructed and the current stock needs to be maintained (an increase of nearly one third on the current stock).¹⁷ This would go a long way in providing long term housing security for the homeless population and would also close the gap between supply and demand for households on the public housing waiting list.

¹⁷ The cost of building nearly 16,000 new dwellings would be well over 2.2 billion dollars (this is based on the current cost of building a two-bedroom dwelling) so is clearly a considerable underestimate. This policy would require a long term plan with the development of a public housing renewal fund central to a new public housing expansion project.

