



Submission to Ten Year Affordable Housing Strategy

Cultural Diversity Reference Group, Housing for the Aged Action Group

<https://engage.vic.gov.au/ten-year-social-and-affordable-housing-strategy-victoria>

About HAAG

Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG) is a community based organisation specialising in the housing needs of low-income older people. The organisation was formed over 30 years ago and today has over 500 members that actively campaign for housing justice.

Our Home at Last Service is a specialist housing information and support service for people aged 50 years and older. We assist over 1,000 people a year with information and referrals. 60% are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

About the Cultural Diversity Reference Group

The Cultural Diversity Reference Group is a working group of HAAG comprising culturally diverse older people who have experienced housing stress or work with people who have experienced homelessness or housing stress. The group helps to build awareness of HAAG in the community, reports on and advocates for community needs and contributes to relevant HAAG policies and practices. The group meets monthly and has been doing so since 2016.

HAAG's track record in working with culturally and linguistically diverse older people has been demonstrated via two significant projects: the [*Preventing Homelessness in Older CALD communities project*](#), a partnership with the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, which resulted in a 300% increase in housing referrals from our target communities; and, the [*Homes for Diversity*](#) project, a partnership with the Centre for Ethnicity and Health, which offers specific recommendations for homelessness services to improve their engagement with CALD communities. Some of this work informs our submission.

Quotes in our submission are from the above referenced reports and from two consultation meetings with HAAG's Cultural Diversity Reference Group, held in March 2021.

PATHWAYS

Providing information and support to people to access the housing they need, sustain their tenancy and to move to sustainable housing.

What actions will enable people to access social housing, sustain their tenancies, and move between different housing options as their needs change?

“We need to make the information that we give simple because sometimes it can be too much, and it can be confusing. We need to keep repeating in different ways to make sure the message is very clear. We need to use case studies. Some people are too stressed to take in the information.”

The HAAG Home at Last service is a model proven to work for older CALD people. This service should be expanded through additional funding so that it can provide services in more areas of Victoria.

Home at Last should be funded to deliver community education, to overcome cultural stigma and barriers to access and to encourage migrant and refugee families to actively access housing with and for elderly family members.

All housing and homelessness services that work with culturally and linguistically diverse clients should receive training on how to work in a culturally responsive manner.

The application process should be simplified, use Plain English and provide face-to-face support and bilingual workers to assist older people who are unable to access online application forms and information. Step-by-step information should be provided, at each stage of the process, including understanding a tenancy agreement once the application is accepted.

What are the most important features of affordable housing? (e.g. price, location, security of tenure, access to transport or daily amenities, connection to support services etc.)

“You set people up to fail when you remove them from their community and supports”

Social housing that is far from the older person’s community, away from familiar areas and services, family and friends is not appropriate, and it leads to mental health problems. There must be appropriate and varied housing options. Ethno-specific housing estates have positive

and negative aspects, but the preferred option is to have mixed multicultural groups that allow more immersion into the Australian culture.

Security of tenure is a must for public, community and affordable housing.

What actions will support people to find and obtain an affordable home?

“People need to know what to expect when they contact a service. Like how long will it be before they get help, 1 week, 6 months or a year? We need to be honest or people won’t trust us.”

The Centrelink Special Benefit should be made accessible for those who are experiencing family conflict, overcrowding, unsuitable housing, financial hardship or elder abuse. In the case of family conflict or elder abuse for people on visas requiring an assurance of support, the assurer of support should not be contacted by Centrelink until the older person is safe. The benefit should be granted, and the debt waived in these instances. The debt should not be taken into account when granting the benefit.

The Department should allocate adequate resources for housing/homelessness services to provide early intervention services, not just crisis.

The Department should recognise and allow for the challenges in working with interpreters: assessments take longer (adding to the need for more simplified intakes and application processes); and, older people from smaller communities face challenges of interpreters being known to the family. which impacts confidentiality and capacity to share personal information.

Tips for service providers (from our “Home for Diversity” report):

- Take the time to build trust
- Make sure a private space is provided
- Speak clearly and simply: when a client speaks with limited English, workers should speak clearly, not use acronyms or jargon and be aware of not speaking quickly. The Reference Group advised that workers should not use long complicated sentences when speaking to someone with limited English. Instead they can ask simple questions like, “interpreter?” “Language?” or “name?”. The group also noted the importance of tone of voice; that even through a person may not understand you, they will be able to tell if you are angry, frustrated or compassionate towards them
- Be aware of dialects when asking for an interpreter
- Be clear in communicating housing related information. The Reference Group noted that new migrants are often unsure of how the housing system works. Workers should explain things in a simple way and be clear about what makes them eligible or ineligible

for housing. The Reference Group noted that when people don't know the eligibility criteria, they may avoid telling part of their story as they fear it may disadvantage them.

Communities:

What actions will strengthen social and affordable housing communities?

Better maintenance of properties is needed – when properties aren't maintained they have poor appearance, and this adds to the stigma people in social housing experience. Public housing properties should not be distinguishable from private housing.

Growth:

What actions will enable and deliver growth in social housing?

Providing more social housing options in specific areas – such as increasing supply in Hume and Moreland councils for the Arabic community.

What do we need to do to ensure housing supply meets the needs of people with specific support and housing needs?

Older people need privacy and independent living options. Accessibility is important – all housing should be built to universal housing design standards. There needs to be a range of options according to people's needs as they age, with supports in the home to allow people to stay where they are in places they know, and not be moved into residential care prematurely.

What do we need to do to enable a well-functioning affordable housing system that provides rental and home ownership opportunities for those that need them?

The government must invest in more public housing.

Partnerships:

How do we strengthen our partnership approach to build a stronger and more effective social and affordable housing system?

Partner with ethno-specific organisations for culturally specific information, not necessarily housing – there are organisations who already have that knowledge and should be respected as equal partners.

Speak with community leaders and hold consultation sessions with culturally diverse communities.

Engagement:

How can we engage with you as we develop new initiatives over the course of this strategy?

The government should speak with organisations that have connections with the community, housing organisations and people who have lived in social housing for a long time, because these people understand the issues. Housing for the Aged Action Group has strong links with culturally diverse communities and older people from all “walks of life” and should be included.