



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS**

(Reference: [Inquiry into Auditor-General's report No 4 of 2013:  
National partnership agreement on homelessness](#))

**Members:**

**MR B SMYTH (Chair)**  
**MS M PORTER (Deputy Chair)**  
**MS N LAWDER**  
**MS Y BERRY**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**THURSDAY, 6 NOVEMBER 2014**

**Secretary to the committee:**  
**Dr A Cullen (Ph: 620 50142)**

**By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory**

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

**WITNESSES**

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## **Privilege statement**

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*Amended 20 May 2013*

**The committee met at 10.47 am.**

**HELYAR, MS SUSAN**, Director, ACT Council of Social Service Inc

**THE CHAIR:** Good morning and welcome to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts inquiry into Auditor-General's report No 4 of 2013, *National partnership agreement on homelessness*. I welcome you all here and declare the public hearing open.

In accordance with the committee's resolution of appointment, all reports of the Auditor-General stand referred to the public accounts committee for presentation, inquiry and report. The public accounts committee has established procedures for its examination of referred Auditor-General's reports. The committee considered Auditor-General's report No 4 of 2013 in accordance with these procedures and resolved to inquire further into the audit report.

The terms of reference are the information contained within the audit report. While the terms of reference are the information contained, we will focus on three primary areas: measuring the success and effectiveness of policies and programs targeting homelessness, progress on implementation of audit report recommendations as agreed by the government, and any other relevant matter.

On behalf of the committee I would like to welcome Susan Helyar, the Director of the ACT Council of Social Service. Thank you for attending today. The public hearing will be conducted for about half an hour and will conclude at approximately 20 past 11.

Can I remind the witness of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the pink coloured card and ask if you could confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement.

**Ms Helyar:** I do understand them, thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Can I also remind you that proceedings are being recorded by Hansard for transcription purposes as well as being webstreamed and broadcast live. Would you like to make an opening statement?

**Ms Helyar:** I would. There are just two things that I wanted to highlight from our submission for consideration by the committee. First of all, there are issues around data, data collection, data quality and the capacity to analyse and use data for making good decisions, and the second thing is around the need for us to have a plan into the future around how we respond to the needs of people who are homeless but also how we reduce the risk of homelessness through both service responses and supply of affordable housing.

The Auditor-General's report did speak a little about data issues. This has come up in other analysis of housing, and it has certainly been part of the commonwealth's discourse around their decision on whether they will or will not continue the national partnership agreement on housing because they have seen some problems in terms of the measures of success, the indicators of progress and the quality of the data that is

collected. I guess I wanted to just flag that.

We recognise that there are problems with data collection but that would not be a reason not to continue provision of these vital services and funding of these services. It ought to be an impetus for us to do some work locally on improving our data literacy in service provision and data literacy in funding bodies but also to make better use of the data we do collect. Time is spent on data entry, and I think we need some more work on making sure that that data is actually analysed and aggregated back to the sector so that it can make some decisions based on that but also to analyse within government to make decisions on what are good approaches to responding to homelessness.

In terms of a long-term plan, we have articulated a plan in our submission to this inquiry and we have also articulated that in a number of other submissions. We think the critical factors in that are that we need to have a better sense of what needs to be done into the future to deliver on what was an agreed approach to developing a service system in the ACT around housing and homelessness. That is articulated. There is a copy of the ACT Housing support services map that was developed in consultation by government and the community sector jointly.

What I am really concerned about is that the funding through the national partnership money has been used to start to build in some of the critical components of the service system and that they are under threat with this funding not potentially continuing long term. But we do not have a plan at the moment about which parts of that service system we see as most critical or most useful in terms of delivering outcomes for people who find themselves homeless. And we do not have an agreed approach going forward around what we need to fund as a priority and what we need to continue to develop our capacity and resources around long term.

**THE CHAIR:** Thanks for that. In regard to the long-term plan that you speak of, is homelessness getting worse in the ACT or is the situation improving? And what would be needed in a long-term plan to address the situation as it is and prevent it deteriorating?

**Ms Helyar:** There is a bit of debate about whether it is getting worse or better. Certainly the data that came through the ABS process has found an increased number of people who are homeless. It may have actually captured people who are homeless that were not captured in previous data collections, and that is a good thing.

I guess the other thing that we are noticing is the introduction of the central intake system through the First Point process. I think what has been most useful about that process is that it has brought together a better understanding of known demand. We had a lot of unknown demand across the system—and we still have issues around unknown demand—but the central intake system through First Point has started to build a stronger picture of what we know is unmet demand out there at the moment. Both the data out of First Point and the data out of the ABS surveys have found that we certainly do not have reducing homelessness.

The fundamental cause is affordability. Some people become homeless because they cannot afford somewhere to live. That is not everybody, but that is some people,

particularly people coming out of relationships. So when a dual-income household becomes a single-income household through whatever reason, that can be one of the causes. People's circumstances change. They lose their job or they have got to buy a new car and suddenly they cannot afford both a car and rental or mortgage payments. So there is that cause.

But the other cause is around violence, family violence and domestic violence. That is a cause for women and their children primarily, but also single dads. There is also the issue around young people, young people having limited access to affordable housing options and also when they are either needing to leave home or ready to leave home, they are not having the supports around them to sustain good housing outcomes.

The other issue is around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families around overcrowding. That was one of the things that got picked up in the ABS stats that had not been well picked up before. The issue around overcrowding for large families in general but particularly in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is an enormous issue.

**THE CHAIR:** Just a final question: when you say a long-term plan, what are you talking about? Is it five years, 10, 20?

**Ms Helyar:** I think we need a 10-year plan that includes both housing supply as well as homelessness service provision.

**MS PORTER:** I have a supplementary first and then a substantive question. The supplementary is around the subject of family violence that you talked about just now. Do you think that we have got enough services there for all? Obviously, probably not. But how can we respond more adequately to that particular issue? I was listening to some commentary yesterday as I was travelling up to the memorial service about soldiers coming back from Afghanistan and how their families are often ending up in a situation where either the partners with the children or they are becoming homeless because of the trauma of the post-traumatic stress that they have and that is working its way into their relationships and how they handle their relationships when they come back. That is an example of that.

It seems to me that we need some broader responses. What would your comment be about how we are responding to that particular issue? It appears to me that that is a fairly significant issue in causing homelessness.

**Ms Helyar:** I think there has been recognition across a number of policy agendas of the impact of trauma that can come from either childhood trauma associated with abuse and neglect, trauma associated with life circumstances like having been in war or having experienced an assault or that kind of long-term trauma associated with abusive relationships. So there is a growing recognition of the impact of trauma on relationships and family violence particularly but also on people's responses to that and how they respond to that. That is a major issue that we think needs addressing—to look at the link between histories of trauma and the most effective ways to support people in the homelessness system.

We think there needs to be more effort on therapeutic work around trauma, and

certainly there is a lot of unmet demand around therapeutic work on trauma. I think with greater recognition of trauma as an issue—people coming forward seeking help—the challenge is that we do not have the capacity and the helping services to respond to that growing demand. Both the Domestic Violence Crisis Service and the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre have had an escalation in demand in the last couple of years, much faster than it has been in previous years. We are not sure whether that means there is more violence being perpetrated, but it is probably at least partly associated with more awareness and more help-seeking, which we welcome, but then there is the challenge in terms of a capacity to respond.

The other issue around violence is that there is a new plan being developed around the status of women. We have put a strong focus on the need for the status of women agenda to be not just about government and services that work with women but about making sure that the status of women work is about the whole of the community. It is about engaging the media, employers, the business sector and academia in understanding what is going on around violence towards women. That is one of the key issues around the status of women and it is about all contributing to reducing that in our community.

At the moment we recognise violence as a problem. We fund violence response services and then wonder why it is not getting better. It is because it is not the job of violence response services to stop violence; it is the job of a whole lot of parts of the community to make that happen. That is the other way that we could be doing something that would, over time, reduce this issue around violence and trauma driving homelessness.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for that. My substantive question was around the data that you were talking about. What are your experiences, being the CEO of the peak body, in dealing with all the different groups out there in the community about their data collection? How much of this inaccurate data collection or lack of data collection, or whatever it might be, is created by them finding it hard to actually express what they are experiencing in terms of what they are being asked to report—if that makes sense?

**Ms Helyar:** Whether there is a mismatch between the data fields and then the content that they want to put in?

**MS PORTER:** That is right, and whether or not there is a degree of frustration about “I have all of this information here but nowhere to put it”—some of it, of course, being qualitative, not quantitative. How do you express that? I wanted some general feedback from you about that.

**Ms Helyar:** There are two things that I would like to say about that. The first is that there is a problem with data literacy in our community overall. None of us are that good at reading statistical tables or doing data work. It is a specialist skill. Certainly in the community sector we do not have a lot of capability around data literacy, and it is not built into our education and training as a course skill. One thing that we need to do is to build the data literacy. We need to put some resources into building the data literacy of our workforce and the workforce of the funding managers because I think both need work. Given that we are in a university town you would think we could get some decent expertise around that in our workforce development programs. But that

will take resources.

The other thing I would say is that there is room for both quantitative and qualitative data to be delivered. Certainly I know the funding programs have worked really hard on providing an opportunity for both. There has been some really constructive work around building the data fields so they genuinely better capture what people need to put in. That has been worth while. There is ongoing work on improving those data sets. That is a collaborative process and that is valued.

The issue is that, whatever we put in, we are not seeing that there are enough resources put into analysing it and then sending it back out to the organisations that contribute that data to give them a sense of what this data means, what it tells us about demand, responses or gaps.

**MS PORTER:** Do you think that has an effect, that when people are not getting that feedback they think, “Why am I doing this?” and lose enthusiasm for doing it?

**Ms Helyar:** It can contribute to reducing the quality of data because people think, “Does it matter what I put in if I never get anything back?” Absolutely that is a concern. But if we can build the data literacy of the people contributing the data then they can start to lead their own analysis and be less reliant on what is happening back in funding bodies.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Ms Lawder.

**MS LAWDER:** Thanks. In your submission you have talked about your recommendations regarding changes to funding and indexation.

**Ms Helyar:** Yes.

**MS LAWDER:** You said you are awaiting a decision. What is the impact on organisations in the community sector of these types of decisions—changes in funding and changes in indexation—and the people that they support?

**Ms Helyar:** The issue that we were raising there was that there is a misalignment sometimes of funding decisions, governance decisions, that have to be made in organisations. An example this year was when there was a small change to indexation. It was not substantial in the scheme of things, and it was announced after the end of the financial year. Organisations who prior to the end of the financial year have to set their budgets for the new year and have that approved through their governing bodies were working on the wrong information in the end. There was a sense in the funding bodies that it was not going to have a substantial impact, but the point was the misalignment—so organisations having to make governance decisions without accurate information. That is a critical concern.

We have worked with the directorate on dealing with that. We have asked that there be some more learning and development and training work for government bodies around the critical times in the decision-making cycle for NGOs that they need to be



aware of to ensure that they are not inadvertently putting people in a position where they are making governance decisions on the wrong information. The impact is that if there is a change then you need to change your service model or you need to change the level of service that you can offer. That then has an impact on responding to the expectations of the people who access your services.

**MS LAWDER:** Is there a compact in place between the community sector and the ACT government?

**Ms Helyar:** Yes.

**MS LAWDER:** Does that cover those types of issues?

**Ms Helyar:** Yes. It is through that kind of mechanism that we were able to raise this and have it dealt with.

**MS LAWDER:** But you have not had a commitment from the government that in future they will make those decisions in a time frame that may be more useful to the sector?

**Ms Helyar:** We have had a commitment. More recently we have had dialogue with them and they have said, “Yes, we understand that.” The issue is not whether the senior decision-makers understand it; it is whether all the people down through the organisation that manage funding arrangements have that training. We are looking for that to be delivered in the long term.

**MS LAWDER:** I think in the sector there has recently been a bit of a change from one-year to three-year funding agreements, which I guess you would see as a positive.

**Ms Helyar:** Yes, that is really welcome. The other issue is around the length of funding. The Productivity Commission recommended in their review of the not-for-profit sector that there should be 10-year agreements, given the trajectory for change is over 10 years rather than a much shorter time. There has been talk in ACT government about moving to that kind of agreement, and how to manage the risks around organisations not being able to deliver over that long period of time.

But certainly the move to three-year funding agreements is very welcome, and also the move to arrangements where we are simplifying the administrative requirements around funding agreements so that for organisations that get relatively little amounts of money for relatively simple forms of provision, there is a commensurate level of administrative reporting required of them.

The other thing is the cross-jurisdiction issue. Housing funding between the states and territories and the commonwealth has been currently rolled over for two years. It is like there is this constant uncertainty around what will be the long-term funding arrangements across jurisdictions. That is a key concern for us.

**THE CHAIR:** Ms Berry.

**MS BERRY:** Thank you, chair. On the last pages of your submission you talk about

the recommendation in the Auditor-General's report about long-term cross-portfolio investment and long-term procurement strategy. You acknowledge that some work has been done in that area. You mentioned the human services blueprint. One of the concerns that people have raised around homelessness and public housing and community housing is that people are being pushed away—vulnerable people are living in the outer suburbs where they might not be able to have access to services. It is more than human services; it is things like public transport and access to doctors. The human services blueprint is being piloted in west Belconnen, which has the highest number of low income families in the ACT. Can you tell us a bit about how you think that might address some of the issues of vulnerable people living on the edge, rather than having them more centralised where they can access services more easily?

**Ms Helyar:** The value of the human services blueprint is that there can be a very localised approach to that cross-portfolio holistic approach. It creates a framework and a mechanism through which services that are located in that place can understand what each other is doing and understand better where the gaps are for that community.

The other thing that I think is really important about the human services blueprint—and it is relevant to people living in homelessness—is around building the strength of communities; using place-based approaches to build community strength so that you actually reduce risks and vulnerability for people in those communities. The issue for people who are homeless is that of repeat homelessness. Very few people are homeless once and get back on their feet and are okay for evermore. The biggest issue is around people having repeat homelessness. Some of that is associated with unresolved trauma, but some of it is also associated with systems that do not align and do not work and do not reduce people's risks and vulnerabilities long term. I think the human services blueprint has the opportunity to look both at how the service model works and how you create a strong community in which people's risks and vulnerabilities are reduced over time.

It is also important to note the issues around infrastructure. Some communities have less access to resources than others because we have made infrastructure decisions that actually lock people out of public amenity. That is actually a critical part of the picture that is not currently in the human services blueprint, in that it is very much about service provision, but it needs to be part of the conversation, particularly around transport.

**THE CHAIR:** Can you give an example of a bad infrastructure decision?

**Ms Helyar:** We know that things like local swimming pools are a great piece of infrastructure. They create a place for people to come together and are a relatively low-cost environment for building social capital and social interaction. Where you place that kind of infrastructure makes a difference to the strength, resilience and amenity of a community. I know through the human services blueprint conversation that one of the things people have asked for is a pool, and they talk about it in south Tuggeranong as well. It is seen as a piece of infrastructure that really works for communities.

**THE CHAIR:** So public things like pools, libraries and town halls.

**Ms Helyar:** And transport particularly.

**THE CHAIR:** And transport.

**Ms Helyar:** Yes. Things that create places where people can come together and interact and build their social connectedness make a difference to long-term risk and vulnerability.

**MS BERRY:** I think it is important to note the information that you have provided as to the development of the blueprint. From organisations like yours, the feedback from the community is about what they want, not what other people tell them they need.

**Ms Helyar:** Yes, absolutely. And homelessness services lead the way in some of this. If you look at things like the Early Morning Centre and the Roadhouse, they offer people hospitality. People come as a guest; they are given hospitality. On that foundation, people who have never been to a doctor in 15 years, who have not had a long-term housing arrangement, who do not have a job, who did not finish school or access education resources after school—those people are given hospitality, are treated as a guest and can start to pace a relationship that allows them to have some choice and control about the next step in terms of dealing with the risks and vulnerabilities they see as most important.

They have really led the way in the way of working with people who are very marginalised and very vulnerable. They are not saying to them: “Have we got something for you? Come on in and get it.” They just say: “Come here. We’ll offer you a safe, friendly place to be, and you can start to pace the relationship and pace the access to services.” That underpins the values of the human services blueprint, and I think the housing support services have really led the way on how you do that in practice.

**MS BERRY:** Thanks.

**THE CHAIR:** I will defer my question to Ms Lawder.

**MS LAWDER:** Thanks. In your submission you talk about the national partnership agreement on homelessness, which was a time-limited package of funding from the federal government based on population. I think the ACT was 1.6 per cent or something of the funding. There have been two one-year extensions to the NPAH. The Auditor-General’s report from the ACT and reports from other auditors-general throughout Australia have found that there was very much a lack of meaningful output and outcome measures. Your submission talks about the impact of some of that as well. If, in a worst-case scenario, there was no further NPAH funding, the current national affordable housing agreement includes a portion for spending on homelessness. But services funded under the NPAH were all new services. What would be your thinking? Would all of those new services have to finish and we would go back to the other services funded under the NAHA, or should there be some kind of realignment? Do you have any thoughts on that?

**Ms Helyar:** My view is that we should be guided by this services map that was

developed about 18 months ago, which basically outlines what the community and government have agreed needs to be available to the ACT community to prevent problems, intervene early, respond to crises, help to stabilise people's circumstances and maintain affordable and appropriate housing long term.

My view is that if the funding stops from the commonwealth, if we just stop the services that were funded through that, that would be incredibly unwise. That is why I think it is deeply urgent that we come up with a plan around what we want for the next 10 years for this community. In the absence of a plan, the biggest risk is that we have a completely unsophisticated approach to funding decisions and we say, "We'll just cut the things that were funded through that mechanism and we'll keep the things funded through this one." I think that would be the worst outcome for our community.

**MS LAWDER:** Your recommendation was about establishing a cross-portfolio committee to look at all of those. Has there been any progress?

**Ms Helyar:** There has been some progress—for example, through the blueprint. That has had a focus on that. But we are looking for something that is particularly housing focused and gets us to the point where we can have a 10-year plan that we can all agree will make a difference. We have talked about it in more detail in our budget submission this year.

**THE CHAIR:** We are going to continue to approximately half past 11, if you can stay.

**Ms Helyar:** That would be all right.

**THE CHAIR:** Fantastic. A new substantive question from Ms Porter.

**MS PORTER:** In your submission you talk about the fact that you think the ACT government needs to communicate more collaboratively with the sector, that it needs to improve. Am I reading that correctly? Perhaps you would like to talk about that—how you see it could improve, what you would change—and also talk about communication between yourselves and your member organisations and between each other. You may not recall, but some years ago we did an inquiry into homelessness or housing suitability for people living in the community with episodic mental illness et cetera. One of the issues that came forward at that time was that it was not just communication between the ACT government and organisations but also internal communication within agencies which was an issue. Would you talk about both those things, please?

**Ms Helyar:** I think there are two issues there. The first issue is the communication between government on things that are administratively important, like the example I gave of the timing of communication mattering in terms of governance decisions. The other issue is around the timing of the communication to inform substantial decisions, so making sure that the communication is early enough so that the government gets the right information to inform its decisions. There are several mechanisms for that. There is the Joint Pathways Group, which meets quarterly; that provides a mechanism for government and non-government people to meet and to talk. There are also the individual meetings that the government has.

The issue around communication within the sector is a hoary old chestnut, and I think you are right to raise it. There are some mechanisms that have been developed. In particular, as with First Point now, they put out information and they are the one point for information around where services are available or not. That is certainly one improvement. Sometimes we get caught up in issues around privacy and risk around communication. There has been work on trying to help people think through what are the critical privacy and risk issues versus the value for people in things like communicating with one another.

The other issue is also around the communication between systems, so within the housing sector but also with people like the health sector or with the education sector. There are real barriers there around people's sense of confidentiality and privacy. I think it needs to be a work in progress around people starting to feel comfortable with where there is a confidentiality issue or where there is a service alignment issue or a coordination issue that can be dealt with. Groups like the Supportive Tenancy Service have been doing some good work in that space, working with people to keep their tenancy going and liaising with the relevant organisations that will support someone keeping their tenancy going. So I think there has been some improvement.

**MS PORTER:** What other mechanisms can you think of to break down that kind of feeling of distrust that can occur under those circumstances so we have better outcomes for people who are homeless or in danger of becoming homeless?

**Ms Helyar:** I think the critical thing is people's skills and confidence around navigating the confidentiality issues. That is actually really critical. Mostly, people are not communicating not because they are being obnoxious but because they are concerned about maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of the people they work with. Having a good, sophisticated understanding across the workforce of how you can work with confidentiality—how to respect confidentiality but also not undermine collaboration—would be an important mechanism.

**MS PORTER:** Has the communication improved since the social compact?

**Ms Helyar:** I think it has. The compact has set a set of principles from which you can say: "Hey; you know what? We're not complying with that." It gives you a basis for a conversation.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** There is enough time for a quick question from Ms Lawder and Ms Berry.

**MS LAWDER:** The Auditor-General's report, when they looked at those three programs, said that it was not possible to determine the actual overall effect of the programs because homelessness in the ACT "is influenced by a range of factors including, for example, housing affordability". I think you spoke about that a bit, too. You might call it churn: people are receiving a service but they are not exiting from homelessness. You have spoken about your budget submission and the importance of housing. Can you speak to us a bit about your views on housing affordability in the

ACT and the impact that has on people's ability to leave the homelessness service system?

**Ms Helyar:** It is a major issue around the lack of exit points that are sustainable for people financially. We have been working with a housing policy consortium led by Shelter ACT and including the Youth Coalition and the Women's Centre for Health Matters, looking at a number of issues. Our current project is looking at the relationship between people's labour market status and their housing status, trying to understand a bit more about that link between people in relatively low wage jobs and accessing housing, and also what might be some of the housing options that people would consider that are not currently available in the ACT—things like micro-housing, a form of housing being used in some parts of the US and Canada. Also, it is looking at the option of co-housing and more congregate housing models—whether they would meet the needs of people, whether people would be interested in living in them. They are the questions that we have and that we need to explore further.

**THE CHAIR:** Ms Berry, to close.

**MS BERRY:** I have a question about evictions in public housing. I understand that that number is increasing. Do you see the work that you are doing with exit strategies, getting out of homelessness and into affordable housing, as something that you would be working on as well—providing support for people who might not be evicted if they were somehow supported through whatever crisis they are going through?

**Ms Helyar:** Yes. Helping people to sustain their tenancies is a really critical part of responding to homelessness. Often people have not had a history of sustaining their tenancies. They may have issues around the way they relate to others that make it hard for them to be good neighbours. They may not be good at managing conflicts with landlords. All of those skill sets need to be developed if we are going to cut the cycle of homelessness. Organisations that run things like the Supportive Tenancy Service are absolutely critical to that, and that is one of the services that potentially will not have funding long term. That is what I mean about the fact that we cannot just cut the funding to the services that happen to have developed under a particular funding stream: some of them are absolutely critical to the long-term reduction of homelessness.

**THE CHAIR:** We might have to leave it there. Thank you very much for staying with us, Ms Helyar, and answering all those questions. You have not taken any questions on notice; that is fine. We will provide a proof transcript, when it is available, for you to check and offer any corrections as you see fit. Members, if you have any additional questions once you have got the transcript, could you get them in within a couple of days and we will get them across to ACTCOSS and take it from there. Thank you very much for your attendance today.

**The committee adjourned at 11.27 am.**