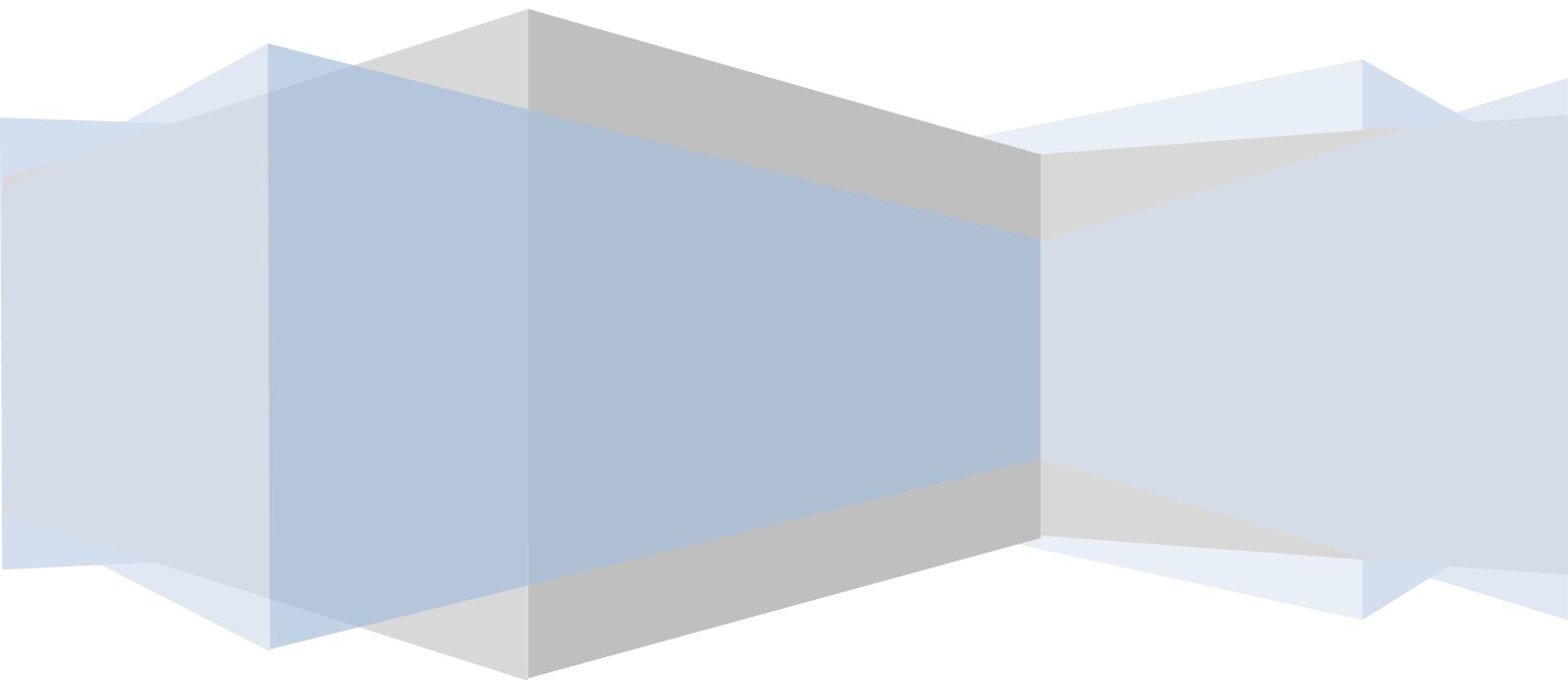


BSWHN

# Submission to the Housing Establishment Fund Project

Barwon South-West Homelessness Network

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This submission has been produced in response to the call by the Department of Human Services, regarding the Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) project, by the Barwon South West Homelessness Network, with input from the Opening Doors agencies across the region.

## The Barwon South-West Region

The Barwon South West region covers towns including Geelong; the largest regional city in Victoria, through to Colac, Warrnambool, Portland and Hamilton. Throughout the region crisis accommodation options are primarily provided by a small number of privately run businesses. In Geelong these comprise of 2-3 motels, 1-2 caravan parks (off peak) and 1-2 privately run, unlisted rooming houses.

### Private Rental

When possible, HEF funding is being used to assist with securing private rental properties. However statistics provided by the Office of Housing in the quarterly publication of the *Rental Report* confirms that in the BSW region, private rental properties are becoming more difficult for low income earning people to access. The report contains information on current rents (median rents), rental availability (new lettings) and rental market affordability. Compared to other areas in Regional Victoria, over the September quarter of 2010 the BSW Region recorded:

- the highest median rent (\$265/week);
- the lowest availability of affordable rentals; and
- the second most significant falls in new lettings compared to September 2009 (-92 or -4.2%).

(DHS Rental Report – September Quarter 2010)

This increasing difficulty in accessing private rental properties is having the effect of increasing the demand on homeless services and in turn crisis accommodation.

## Public Housing

The *Summary of housing assistance programs 2007-08* (Victorian Government DHS, 2009) reports the following Director-owned units (including leases) by number of bedrooms available in BSW:

- bedsits x 14
- one-bedroom properties x 1,177
- two-bedroom properties x 1,577
- three-bedroom properties x 2,581
- four-bedroom properties x 221
- five-bedroom properties x 11
- six-bedroom properties x 5

At this time there was a total of 1,042 applications for public housing across the BSW Region and 590 allocations. The following information regarding wait lists in BSW is provided by the Office of Housing.

### Total Number of Applicants on the Public Housing Waiting List as at September 2010

|                  | Early Housing | Wait Turn    | Total        |
|------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| Geelong          | 421           | 2,049        | 2,470        |
| Portland         | 19            | 82           | 106          |
| Warrnambool      | 149           | 519          | 668          |
| <b>Total BSW</b> | <b>594</b>    | <b>2,650</b> | <b>3,244</b> |

- Source: [www.housing.vic.gov.au/applying-for-housing/waiting-times](http://www.housing.vic.gov.au/applying-for-housing/waiting-times). Retrieved 18/01/2011.

## Who is HEF assisting?

HEF is being used in the Barwon South West predominately to provide emergency and crisis accommodation to people finding themselves homeless and with no immediate identifiable accommodation options. HEF is most widely dispersed by the Opening Doors Entry Points, of which the Barwon South West has 7, two of which are exclusively for young persons.

The Youth Entry Point in Geelong report that they have occasionally been able to utilise HEF to assist with the establishment of a new tenancy, by assisting with the purchase of whitegoods or similar. This however is now a rare occurrence. It is believed that there is more flexibility when providing assistance with youth, as they are not as dependent on the emergency service system as are adults and families. Young People are more likely to “couch surf” and not formally identify themselves as strictly homeless.

|  | <b>Total Assists</b> | <b>% Total Assists</b> |
|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| <b>Short term emergency Accom</b>              | 132                  | 39.64%                 |
| <b>Private Rent in Advance</b>                 | 128                  | 38.44%                 |
| <b>Private Rental in Arrears</b>               | 45                   | 13.51%                 |
| <b>Private Rental Bonds</b>                    | 3                    | 0.90%                  |
| <b>Retrival/Storage of personal belongings</b> | 9                    | 2.70%                  |
| <b>Furniture/ whitegoods</b>                   | 16                   | 4.80%                  |
| <b>Transport</b>                               |                      | 0.00%                  |
| <b>Private Rental Brokerage</b>                |                      | 0.00%                  |
| <b>Other</b>                                   |                      | 0.00%                  |
| <b>Total HEF Clients</b>                       | <b>333</b>           | <b>100.00%</b>         |

Table 1: HEF usage for Jan to June 2010 & July to Dec 2010  
This is for youth clients covering all of Barwon South-West

## Identified issues / concerns.

As with most other concerns relating to homelessness services, the majority of the concerns regarding HEF can be traced back to the lack of exit points or long-term housing within the area.

Problems encountered by the local HEF providers include:

- Local homeless agencies have limited options with crisis accommodation within the region. Agencies and clientele are at the mercy of 2 or 3 motels, 1 or 2 privately run unlisted rooming houses, and 1 or 2 caravan parks during the off season. These privately run businesses can discriminate between clientele, and can charge according to demand.
- Real estates are in the practice of directing all applicants to agencies to utilise HEF funding, and therefore prioritising need can be very difficult.
- One-bedroom flats tend to be in short supply in most areas across the region and are often not affordable to low-income households even in areas where there is some supply of the stock type. (BSWHN Data & Research Report - December 2009)
- HEF money can be distributed widely among agencies that can have different uses and definitions for the use of the funds. Agencies have varying policies of accountability for these funds. There can also be varying use of discretionary funds that produce confusion amongst workers / clientele.
- The amount of HEF available to clientele is not sufficient to provide or assist with secure long-term housing security in most cases. Youth Entry Points have been more successful in providing 2 weeks rent in advance to applicants. The Adult Entry Point in Geelong report that due to demand on the service, and lack of viable crisis accommodation options, they are restricted to providing only 1 week advance on rent, which is often inadequate to effectively secure the property.

- Considerable amount of HEF dollars are utilised accommodating people that have been formally offered a crisis or transitional property, but are unable to move into the property until the sign-up is officially completed or the mandatory safety checks are done. Given the limited amount of crisis accommodation options, and the short term nature of this type of accommodation, any reduction of the time that the property remains vacant will have significant effect to how much HEF money is used to support potential tenants.
- The restricted amount of HEF that can be made available to each applicant means that if crisis accommodation needs to be purchased, there are no funds to assist with establishment of any future tenancy or follow-up support.
- The part-time nature of the homeless support workforce often means that sign-ups to properties can extend over several days. HEF is being used to support tenants during this time.
- The more remote rural areas are experiencing considerably longer waits for maintenance to do the required safety checks on crisis properties. Currently the policy is that these checks need to be conducted within 14 days, thus potentially leaving crisis properties unoccupied 50% of the time.
- Discrepancies between regions as to who is responsible for providing HEF to tenants wishing to move between regions. This often means that the region where the applicant applied for housing support is required to utilise local HEF, even if the applicant is wishing to move to another region. Guidelines stipulate that the region that is where the applicant is wishing to reside is responsible for providing financial support; however there is confusion regarding this guideline. Similarly people leaving prison within the region are being forced to utilise local HEF funding, even when returning to another region.

## What's working and some proposed avenues of improvement.

Agencies will continue to support the needs of the homeless in our community, however with fewer exit properties and a lack of affordable accommodation the homelessness services are increasingly requiring funding sources to secure short term crisis and emergency accommodation.

To be able to do this more effectively there needs to be a recognition that unless more support is offered to secure and establish tenancies, people will continue to become dependent on crisis accommodation and related payment requirements.

To assist in the effective use of HEF it is proposed that:

- Prison IAP workers be provided with their own HEF funds to assist prisoners relocate. This will ensure that exiting prisoners are given appropriate support to assist them re-establish themselves into society.
- The tightening of availability criteria and definitions for use of HEF would provide a more consistent understanding of the uses and responsibilities of HEF use. These definitions should be made centrally.
- These changes would assist agencies prioritise use of the HEF money to those in most need, as well as ensure that each region is able to better manage the resource efficiently.
- Similarly, tightening timelines around maintenance checks and sign-up times would reduce the amount of HEF being used unnecessarily. Particularly in more remote areas of the region, a 14 day turnaround timeline for safety checks regrading crisis accommodation, means that agencies are left crippled to assist the homeless while properties remain vacant.

It should be noted that since the last HEF review it has been observed that the reduction of percentage guidelines in the use of HEF, has worked well within the region by allowing for flexibility to assess each applicant individually.

## Conclusion.

The homeless support services in the Barwon South-West region are committed to assisting people at or at risk of homelessness find long-term stable accommodation. Although housing resources around the region are insufficient to meet the need, housing support workers and services recognise HEF as a vital tool in being able to assist people during periods of homelessness and therefore providing support while endeavouring to secure more long term accommodation.

Each of the participants providing input into this submission have recognised this HEF review as a timely and valuable opportunity to ensure that HEF money is provided at an appropriate level and is being utilised fully by all parties involved. It was unanimously recognised that the current allocation of HEF was insufficient to meet the increasing demand and to ensure that each applicant had appropriate support.

### Disclaimer:

Although considerable input was provided by BSW access points into this submission, the relatively short timelines provided to prepare this report, compounded by many staff being unavailable over the Christmas period meant many key parties were unavailable for comment.

This submission therefore provides an overview of the regions use and concerns about HEF, but in no means should distract from any individual submissions made from individual agencies.