



Homelessness Commissioning

Lived experiences report

25 May 2022

Communication Link, on behalf of Housing ACT, undertook a series of focus group interviews with people with lived experience of homelessness. These interviews sought to gather peoples' perspectives and experiences of the ACT homelessness services sector as part of the broader commissioning consultation process.

A total of 31 participants were identified across the service sub-sectors of Women, Men, Rough Sleepers, Families, Youth and Food Services and First Nations peoples, resulting in 24 interviews across 12 hours from 24 February to 17 May 2022.

The interviews were facilitated in consultation with Toora Inc, Doris Women's Refuge, Northside Community Services, MARRS Australia Inc, Catholic Care, St Vincent de Paul, Everyman, Blue Door Drop-in Centre, Salvation Army and the Early Morning Centre.

Generally, the participants were well engaged throughout the interviews. Participants were guided through a series of questions to help prompt responses about their experience of the service system.

Questions covered:

- what is missing from service provision
- experience of processes or services
- what best outcomes can look like and comparison of services.

Many participants also provided contextual information about their experiences of homelessness, talked about co-occurring issues and broader topics that impacted on their experiences of homelessness and service provision. Participants were not asked to provide identifying or demographical information about themselves, but did disclose this where it related to their experience of the homelessness services sector.

Below is a summary of the analysis of the participant interview outcomes.

The interviews were used to craft case studies and user journeys presented in the Homelessness Commissioning Partnering Process Cross-sector Workshop on 18 May 2022. Analysis of these interviews also inform the final Insights Report.

What works well

Nearly all participants provided positive feedback on the difference having a case worker through their service provider has made to them, including on the way the participant sees themselves through respectful, responsive support. Case worker support also extends to things like advocacy, navigating systems and processes, support with appointments and liaising with other services (including Centrelink, NDIS, ACT Government, police, medical, dental, health and mental health providers), translator services, and support to access financial assistance.



Participants also spoke about good access to food services and general services both while rough sleeping and in emergency or transitional housing. One participant noted a service outside of the sector being the ANU winter clothing drive as being a great help to people rough sleeping.

What doesn't work well

Participants highlighted difficulties they experienced in their interactions with Onelink and ACT Housing. These experiences included inconsistencies in the level of service provided, unresponsiveness, difficulties liaising with multiple staff, retelling trauma to administrative staff, and liaising with staff not equipped to support people with disability or people experiencing domestic and family violence or First Nations peoples or people with trauma backgrounds.

Some participants proposed training-based solutions to these issues, including training to ensure staff can deliver:

- consistent levels of respectful customer service to vulnerable people
- appropriate support and adjustments to people with disability (including communication support)
- specialised support for people experiencing domestic and family violence
- specialised support (or dedicated team) for First Nations people
- services that have a trauma informed lens.

Other issues highlighted by participants include delays in receiving mental health support in early crisis, moving through multiple accommodations with children, accommodation for men with children, crisis/emergency accommodation with people from different cohorts (DFV, refugees, transitioning from AMC, AOD issues), impact on stability of bottlenecks in system and spending extended periods in emergency/transitional accommodation, emergency accommodation for couples, approaching multiple service providers, cross sector and interstate coordination, thresholds for support when moving into employment and digital barriers.

Better outcomes

Participants talked about what best outcomes might look like for themselves and for other people experiencing homelessness. Consistent with the main themes identified through the interviews, overwhelmingly participants said having timely access to housing and a home was key to better outcomes. For some people their vision included safety, stability for their family, being a member of society, having friends, or having a job. One participant said having a backyard was important to their family. Some participants talked about issues that related to how the service system operates, such as coordinated case management, easy access to information so people know where they can go, flexibility in service offerings to respond to individual need, integrated support and links to cross-sector services like mental health or alcohol or drug support.

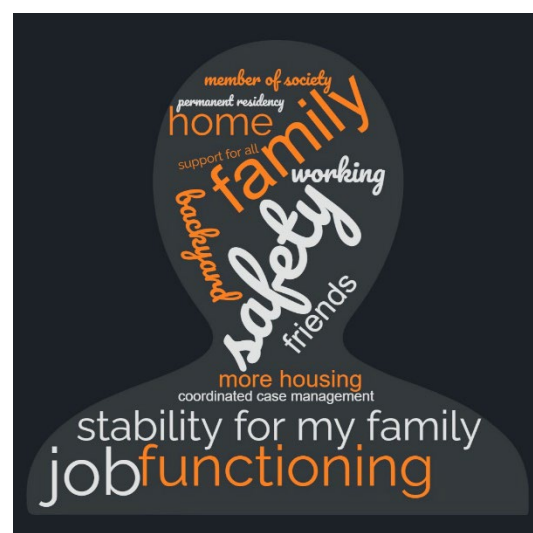


Figure 1. Best outcomes word cloud for those experiencing homelessness, captured during focus group interviews

Measuring feedback



Participant interviews have been analysed against two sets of criteria.

1. ACT Wellbeing Framework - to understand what is important to participants
2. Needs and service gaps – to understand what participants support needs are.

Table 1 shows how participant discussion measures against the ACT Wellbeing Framework domains and outcomes previously identified through Round 1. This draws out the key themes that are most important to participants. The three primary themes are Housing, Safety, and Identity and Belonging. Living standards, Health and Social Connection are also important.

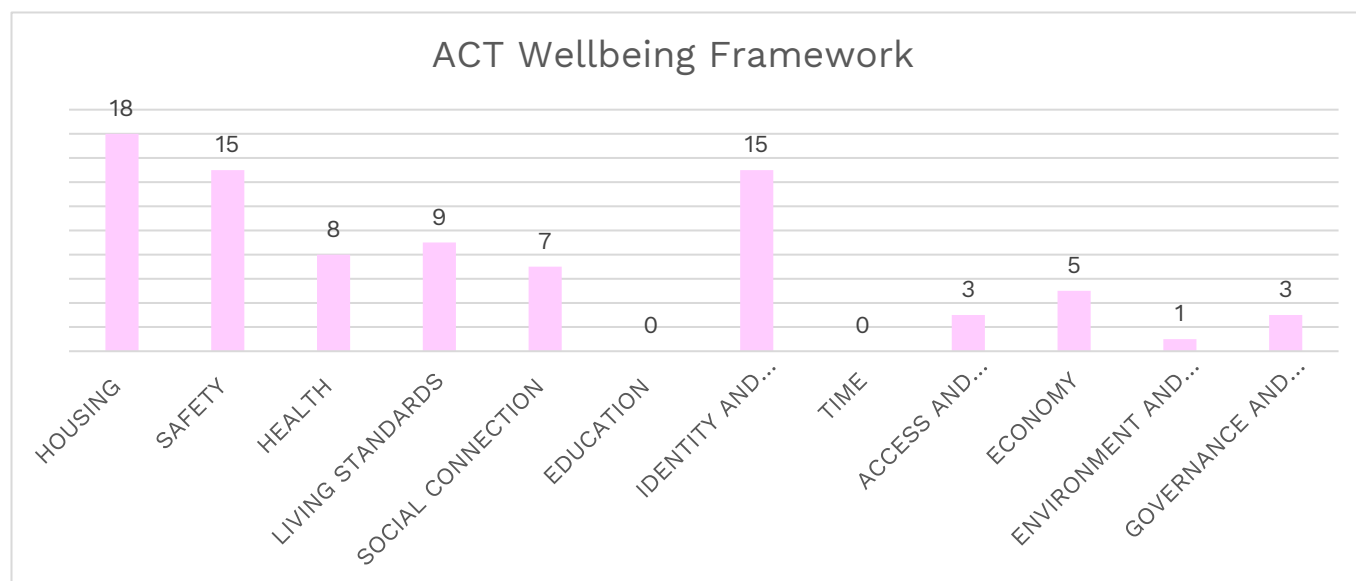


Table 1. Participant discussion data mapped against domains and outcomes in the ACT Wellbeing Framework identified in Round 1 Homelessness Commissioning Partnering Process sub-sector workshops.

Participant discussion was also analysed against the needs and service gaps identified and validated through Round 1. This highlighted where participants **support needs** were consistently identified during the focus group interviews. The top three themes identified were Housing and Accommodation, Pathways out, and Supporting children and families. Cross sector – Complexity, Healthcare, Cross sector – mental health and Domestic and family violence also featured consistently.

A selection of de-identified case studies from the participant interviews is at Attachment A, providing real time narrative people the homelessness system and more detail on their lived experiences.



Homelessness services sector – lived experience stories

Client O

Client O is currently receiving men's homelessness services, including accommodation and support services. Generally, Client O is satisfied with the level of service he receives his service provider.

He is very happy with his accommodation and talked about the importance of getting help as the first step towards being able to be self-sufficient.

Client O made a number of observations about barriers and challenges in the homelessness services sector and talked about things that affect both himself and people experiencing homelessness more broadly.

Access to Housing ACT and the lack of face-to-face contact through COVID restrictions was discussed, including multiple visits without being able to speak to someone in person, and frustration at being unable to talk to someone and waiting for a call back phone call which may not come.

He talked about the difficulty with short term and transitional housing and the impact this has on being able to settle, establish consistency and then build stability.

"Until you get your own house, you know, it's like you're in a holding pattern...trying to build yourself up by doing the things you gotta do to live like a normal human man."

He also talked about his perception of vacant ACT Housing properties and 'empty units everywhere' and questioned why these weren't being fixed up or allocated to people.

Client O's referral pathways to his service provider was through his stay in rehab. He talked about a prior rehab stay where the transition to housing was more seamless, with accommodation organised for someone on completion of rehab, indicating that there is now some service provision delay in the step between rehab and referral to his service provider.

He touched on health issues and discussed an upcoming operation, noting that his preference would be to have this operation while still receiving services as he will need some extra support during recovery, which he is confident he will receive.

Client O also talked about some of the other opportunities and his positive experiences of the homelessness services sector. He mentioned his case worker, how responsive they are, and the impact their positive support has had on his self-esteem and feeling of worth.

When asked what he would ideally like from services in five years' time, Client O said he hope there would be more properties and places for people to live.

Client L

Client L is currently receiving men's homelessness accommodation and other support services.

The key thing missing from services he currently receives is a permanent way out of homelessness and the ability to establish long term stability in his life.

As an asylum seeker, Client L discussed barriers that specifically relate to his experience as someone without permanent residency or citizenship in Australia. The primary issue his being without the right to work. His previous profession was as a lawyer and he is unable to gain employment. This has been very stressful for him.

"I need to have a job here. I need to have a life for the rest of my life."



Client L came to Canberra during the 2019 bushfires and was living in his car. Client L sought help with a serious infection, and through Companion House was able referred to a service provider.

Client L has been happy to receive assistance with food for a number of years, however much of donated food or free meals are starchy and this has caused issues for him as a diabetic. He said he is trying to be hopeful but has also suffered from depression on an ongoing basis.

Client L explained that the thing that has made the most positive impact on his situation was being allocated accommodation through ACT Housing. With a house he now no longer worries about where to live and can focus on other things in his life.

Client L is happy with the support he has received from his service providers, including legal aid services, ongoing access to a GP, dental services and counselling services. He has also been really pleased with the help they have given him in writing a resume and support for looking for work.

Client B

Client B is currently receiving women's homelessness accommodation and support services. She is an Indigenous woman and mother. She has experienced trauma, domestic violence and homelessness.

When asked about what was missing from current services, Client B talked about how valuable it would be to have specialist teams within Housing ACT to support Indigenous clients and those escaping domestic violence. This would ensure someone in the team could provide targeted support, staying in contact with clients and stop people from being left behind and forgotten about.

Client B currently lives in a refuge and talked about the challenges of living with women with complex trauma who have come from different circumstances. In particular, the very different needs of those escaping domestic violence to those who have been released from prison. For example, women escaping domestic violence often have children, and understandably are often hypervigilant when it comes to privacy and personal safety. Often women who have been released from prison are also homeless. These women may have different issues, such as alcohol and drug addiction, and may be lax in their approach to personal safety and visitors to the refuge.

Safety is a key concern for Client B and this was discussed a number of times. She is worried about the refuge location being disclosed by other clients and understands that the location is generally known about in the community. She is concerned about the impact this has on her own safety and that of other women at the refuge who have escaped domestic violence.

With all residents coming in with trauma backgrounds there is often conflict. Clients are different ages can also be problematic with younger, middle-aged, and older women having different kinds of experiences, cultural backgrounds and values. Client B discussed this and suggested more facilities that separate clients based on circumstances and age groups would be useful in best supporting them.

Client B talked about the important role her case worker has played in supporting her. Initially this was helping her into temporary accommodation, but also includes assistance with her Housing ACT interactions and other support.

Client B has also had experiences in other jurisdictions in dealing with care and protection, experiencing domestic violence and in navigating different systems and support services. She discussed the issues with services in different states not able to coordinate or communicate, and the problems this caused for her. Now having a case worker to advocate and support her has helped her to navigate some of these issues.

Client B said that she felt some case workers lacked life experience and were unable to relate to real life experiences of clients. She discussed the barriers to accessing support and how these are compounded when dealing with a case worker without the necessary skills to support a vulnerable person.



“We are usually at the lowest point in life, so we don’t know how to reach out. Personally, I’ve got really, really terrible anxiety and it’s hard to reach out.”

Client B talked about the challenges during COVID of having her children living in another state while she was trying to secure housing in the ACT. She talked about extended delays during COVID to access priority accommodation through ACT Housing. She also talked about the practical issues for women in this situation who have often left behind furniture and household items that they have to try and source again, particularly moving multiple times and using staying in transitional housing. She talked about receiving government funding to assist with this and the positive difference this made.

Now reunited with her children and in an ACT Housing property, Client B says this has given them stability and she is reluctant to have to move again.

“My kids have moved so many times and it’s not good for them. They’re happy where they are, they’ve settled in really well at school. We just fit in really well here.”

Client P

Client P is currently receiving women’s homelessness accommodation and support. She is a person with disability and complex needs. Client P talked about her experiences with homelessness support services, including challenges, and how things could be improved for other clients with similar needs to her own.

She explained that the primary issue in the homelessness sector in Canberra is the long wait times for permanent housing and how people live or cope when they become at risk of homelessness, or experience homelessness, until they get permanent housing.

Client P talked about using One Link and issues with how responsive the service is in a time of crisis. For example, phone calls often go unanswered, and the level of service can be different depending on the level of complex needs of client. Client P discussed the advantage in having a proactive case worker to advocate with OneLink and that they could influence a positive outcome, however people without this were at risk of slipping through the gaps or having services withdrawn. She also mentioned that she received a much lower level of service compared to when her case worker was advocating on her behalf. Having skilled and interested staff is essential for a service like Onelink.

Client P explained that this can be a major contributor to vulnerable people cycling through the system and that if housing stability can be secured early, there is a greater chance of better addressing other co-occurring issues such as substance misuse, mental health issues or justice related issues. However, without housing stability it is much more difficult to address additional issues.

The administrative burden of applying for housing is challenging and the process does not make adjustments or accommodations for people who need it. For example, Client P discusses that an autistic person can find the process overwhelming and stressful, struggling to complete the paperwork at all or be significantly delayed. The system is also difficult for people who do not use computers. She suggested that housing hold regular appointments with clients to support them through the process. Breaking down the process into smaller steps, with clear communication, would better support clients with disability.

Client P talked about how challenging the process was during COVID restrictions and being unable to talk to someone face to face. In the end her housing application was cancelled and she began the process again. Regular check in appointments with Housing ACT would have helped her during this time with the process. She compared this to regular appointments with a job service provider to meet reporting requirements.

“I think Housing should do that as well. You know, and just check with the person and say ‘Hey, would you like some help? Would you like to set up another appointment?’”



She also discusses advice she has been given in pursuing private rental accommodation and that the cost, administrative burden and no rental history make it impossible for her to secure private accommodation.

When talking about better outcomes for clients. Client P said that better communication and appointments would really help. She also thought that staff with consistent knowledge and investment in helping people would make a huge difference to people applying for housing.

Client P is happy with the support service she received from her service provider and their dedication to helping her get her life back, advocating for her and helping her navigate paperwork and processes. While it's not the same as having a permanent home, the temporary housing she is in has helped her the most.

"It's honestly saved my life, just having a roof over my head and being dedicated to my recovery and achieving my goals in life...like you can't move forward with rest of your life until you are happy, and you have a home."

Client V

Client V has experienced homelessness and as a rough sleeper and received support from a number of service providers. He has experienced homelessness for a number of years and have lived as a rough sleeper in different jurisdictions.

As a rough sleeper in Canberra, he experienced many challenges and barriers to his everyday life. He slept in numerous locations in and around the city centre, and regularly used the Early Morning Centre to access bathroom facilities and food. When comparing levels of support across in different jurisdictions, Client V was complimentary of the ACT, in particular the Safe Shelter ACT service in winter, the high quality, healthy, free food provided to those experiencing homelessness, and the ANU winter drive providing warm clothing.

"The ACT is superior in many ways. If you are homeless and sleeping rough there is the Safe Shelter people who in winter literally saves lives."

Client V discussed his difficulties in navigating government processes and paperwork. For example, he had ongoing and numerous interactions with Centrelink in applying for a disability support pension. These included problems arising from having no fixed address, difficulty with forms and on one occasion his application being cancelled. He experienced varying level of customer service but generally felt that he was treated poorly because he was a person experiencing homelessness. It was only after he had a caseworker through Catholic Care advocating on his behalf, that his disability support pension was finally approved – that is 7 years after he started the process.

Everything changed for Client V after he entered a homelessness program with this service provider. Having a case worker to support him made all the difference and he is now living in transitional housing. It took him three months just to get used to living in a house again.

Client V said it was hard to think about what life might look like in the future. When experiencing homelessness, people kind of give up and find themselves existing in a lower level of society. For him, the greatest outcome is to become a productive member of society and try to get away from that level of functioning.

"So the greatest thing for me is to be a member of society. Have some good friends and try and manage my life."

Client N

Client N is currently receiving men's homelessness accommodation and support services, including for his children who are Indigenous. He is happy with the level of services and case management support provided to him by his service provider.



Client N's circumstances changed when he lost his job and was unable to pay his rent. He contacted Onelink and was advised that emergency accommodation would be difficult to secure as a male with children. Through a friend, he was put in contact with Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service, who then referred him to a homelessness service provider.

His family is now in transitional housing, and he is receiving additional family supports, including school support, food and assistance and advocacy with processes including Housing ACT and the NDIS.

"They also helped with a lot of advocacy and if I need any support, they're really good with everything like that."

Client N is looking forward to securing more permanent housing and creating some stability for his family. When asked about better outcomes for people in the homelessness services system, he said that greater availability of housing stock and flexibility to accommodate people's individual circumstances is important.

Client Q

Client Q was living in one room with her four children after moving to the ACT from interstate. She was referred to her service provider through Housing ACT and provided with emergency accommodation.

Client Q resided in this accommodation for more than two years and relocated as the house uninhabitable due to maintenance issues. She is now in another transitional property and waiting for a permanent house.

While she did initially speak with an Aboriginal staff member when applying for housing, she says that having dedicated support or team would help people feel more comfortable and ease language barriers.

"You need more Aboriginal people to be in there, someone who understands Aboriginal culture to feel comfortable."

She also said that better communication in the housing application process could go a long way to helping people who are waiting for housing, even if this is an occasional phone call to let people know their application is slowly progressing and checking in on if their circumstances have changed.

Client Q said she has had a very good experience with her service provider and when talking about what best outcomes can look like, she thought that making information available to people when they are first looking for support services would really help someone in a similar position to hers. She is also looking forward to having permanent accommodation to create stability for her family.

Client J

Client J is currently receiving homelessness accommodation and support services. She had previously experienced homelessness for over three years after leaving foster care and during COVID was referred to her current service provider for support.

She talked about her mental health issues and the difficulties in communicating and liaising with different government and sector organisations. She is happy with the support she currently received from her service provider who in addition to accommodation, provide a case worker who supports and advocates for her and links her into other services for medical support, food and clothing.

"So the meeting was fantastic. I understood how they could help me, where I needed. Like they couldn't help me exactly where I wanted, but they could help me where I needed for the time being, which was fantastic."

When talking about best outcomes, Client J said that greater options for temporary accommodation would help to alleviate homelessness, for example RV campers. She also said that accommodation for couples was important so that people were not forced to separate to access emergency accommodation.



Client E

Client E is receiving food and general services support through a homelessness service provider and has been using this service for a number of years.

He talked about the importance of the service in terms of being a social hub and the positive impact on the people the service helps. In addition to food, he also accesses toiletries, basic first aid and a social worker. Client E has some mobility issues so the weekly access to a doctor has made a real difference to him. He said the service doesn't discriminate and helps a range of people from diverse backgrounds, both from the immediate vicinity and from across Canberra.

"And they're all welcome, you know, that's the beauty of it...people are pretty accepting here."

Client E said that hot meals had been paused during COVID and this was something he was looking forward to recommencing.

Client K

Client K is currently receiving women's homelessness and support services. She initially had contact with ACT Policing after suffering significant injuries inflicted by her husband. She then received services from ACT Health and DVCS before being placed in crisis accommodation. Client K has retold her traumatic story multiple times across service providers.

Client K has received support with emergency accommodation, medical, mental health, food, clothes, legal services, translator and finding employment. She has accessed English classes and is studying. She has a caseworker and ongoing support and advocacy in her dealings with ACT Policing.

For Client K, her hopes for the future centre around her residency status and her worries about being in a vulnerable situation. She looks forward to having stable employment and a permanent home.