

2020-21 ACT Budget Consultation: Joint submission from MyHome and St James Uniting Church

Housing for People with Enduring Mental Illness

This joint submission from MyHome in Canberra Inc (MyHome) and St James Uniting Church in Curtin (St James) is in response to the Chief Minister's invitation to suggest new services which we believe are most important for the ACT and which would help ACT Government deliver current services more efficiently and productively and to better meet the needs of Canberrans. Our suggested priority is supported accommodation for people with enduring and serious mental illness built on Uniting Church land in Curtin (block 1 section 15 on the corner of Theodore and Carruthers Streets).

In recent rounds of annual budget consultations, both MyHome and St James have separately put forward proposals for housing for people with mental illness on the church's land in Curtin. A number of factors have contributed over the past 12 months to an evolution in our thinking about the best way forward. First, Housing ACT is currently selecting a consultant to review long-term supported accommodation models for people with enduring mental illness with special reference to MyHome and to the church land in Curtin. Secondly, the past 12 months have seen the release of the final Curtin Group Centre Master Plan¹ and the Cohort Study² both of which bear on our proposal.

In view of these developments we are now jointly proposing that the next step, subject to the outcome of the review, should be full design of a housing complex for people with enduring mental illness on the Curtin land and, when plans are approved, tendering for its construction. We understand initial design work could commence this financial year with funds available for this purpose. Additional funding would however be required to complete the design work and it is our recommendation that enough funds for these next steps be provided in the 2021 Budget. The remainder of this paper gives background and supporting argument to our joint proposal.

Background

MyHome is a local community organisation which is seeking to establish in Canberra a safe, supportive and caring home for people with enduring mental illness who are homeless, at risk of homelessness or who live in unsuitable accommodation. MyHome has developed its own detailed Model of Care, based on HOME in Queanbeyan but adapted to suit the needs of people in Canberra and ACT Mental Health legislative requirements. MyHome has prepared professionally, preliminary concept sketch plans and costings (overall cost in current prices around \$8 million) for a 20 unit residential complex plus common facilities.³ The 2016 Parliamentary Agreement between ACT Labor and the ACT Greens commits these parties in government to work with community and business partners to construct purpose-built accommodation for people experiencing mental health concerns and housing difficulties utilising the MyHome project plan.

¹ *Curtin Group Centre Master Plan*, Nov 2018.

² *Support Requirements and Accommodation Options for People in the ACT with High and Complex Needs [The Cohort Study]*, Institute for Social Science Research, University of Queensland. August 2018.

³ For more information about MyHome see <https://myhomeincanberra.org.au>

MyHome first approached St James about use of its land in Curtin for a housing complex in 2012. The land in question is a large block of land ideally located, in terms of proximity to local shops and services and public transport, for a supported housing project such as MyHome. Under an agreement (revised in Dec 2016) with the NSW/ACT Synod of the Uniting Church (Uniting Church), MyHome may use part of the land subject to it raising sufficient capital funds to complete the project and being able to demonstrate that the project would be viable as a going concern. Also in Dec 2016, St James proposed to the Government that MyHome should be one element in a mixed housing development, and that the whole block should be developed in an integrated way so that the community can take full advantage of the land's potential. This approach also offers potential to strengthen the ongoing viability of the supported accommodation element of the project.

Curtin Group Centre Master Plan (Nov 2018)

The Master Plan gives some attention to Block 1/15 noting proximity to public transport, shops and other services and encourages community uses of the land such as supportive or community housing.⁴ While the plan suggests that part of the site be investigated for affordable housing it does not advert to zoning changes which would be needed if a housing project incorporating affordable housing were to be built on the site. The Uniting Church has not ruled out pursuit of this option but it would involve time, costs and risk. Accordingly, this submission assumes MyHome would proceed as a stand-alone development on part of the site but with the expectation that within a few years the remainder of the site will also be developed.

The need for more investment in housing for people with mental illness

MyHome's 2019 budget submission highlighted the need for additional investment. In particular it noted that according to the 2016 Census there were an estimated 1,738 homeless people in the ACT and that a large proportion of these people would likely have mental illness.⁵ This need remains as indicated by the following.

The Cohort Study: commissioned by the ACT Government last year, this study focusses on a relatively small group from within the total population of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The study indicates that over the 6 years up to and including 2016-17 there were on average 200 homeless people in the ACT with high and complex service needs (HCSN); and 184 people at risk of homelessness with HCSN. A high proportion of people in these two HCSN groups had mental health and/or alcohol and drug support needs. While demand for these services seems to have been met in a majority of (although by no means all) cases, demand for accommodation - especially longer term accommodation - was largely unmet. More generally, and in part stemming from problems associated with the implementation of the NDIS, people with psycho-social disabilities are experiencing great difficulty in accessing supported accommodation.

A clear and strong conclusion of the study is that that ACT has insufficient permanent and affordable housing, with linked support services, for people with HCSNs.

⁴ Curtin Group Centre Master Plan, p67.

⁵ In 2016 people with mental illness made up about 41% of the 4,585 people who presented to specialist homelessness services in the ACT. *Specialist homeless services 2016-17: ACT*, AIHW Canberra, 2018.

Survey of Carers: in December last year Carers ACT surveyed from its membership, carers or family of people with mental illness about housing needs and the MyHome proposal.⁶ The persons identified in the survey for whom care was being provided had housing and so represent a different group from the HCSN group mentioned above. However, for almost half, the current housing was considered unsuitable while for others there was worry for the future when aging parents could no longer provide care. There was a very strong desire for living independently. There was also a recognition by almost all that help would be needed in maintaining the home and in socialisation; and that for the majority, help with budgeting, on site security, 24/7 support, and assistance with medications would also be needed. Housing affordability is a major issue but about a third of respondents said they would be willing to contribute financially in addition to rental payments by the resident.

Prisoners: about 2 in 5 entrants to Australian prisons report a previous diagnosis of a mental health condition, including alcohol and other drug use disorders.⁷ The cost of keeping a person in gaol in the ACT is about \$130,000 per annum so keeping people out of prison can provide substantial financial return as well as other benefits. Corrective Services in the ACT aims to reduce recidivism by better training and other in-gaol programs and, on release, by helping with employment and community housing and with individually tailored programs including mental health and drug rehab.⁸ It is clear to us that supported accommodation like MyHome has a role in such a strategy, helping to keep people with enduring mental illness out of the criminal justice system, for their benefit and for society generally.

MyHome – a form of permanent supported housing

As noted above, the suitability of the MyHome model will be examined by the consultancy which ACT Housing is currently selecting. The question is also considered by the Cohort Study in respect of people with HCSN. That study concludes that a suite of permanent supported housing (PSH) models is needed in the ACT including PSH models that include congregate buildings, where support providers are located on site, as well as scattered-site housing, where support is linked but provided through outreach. The MyHome model is conclusively a congregate PSH, being aligned with each of the 8 Key Features of a Congregate PSH as set down in the Study⁹ and therefore we believe a suitable model of supported housing to meet the needs of people with HCSN.

The Cohort Study expresses some reservations about aspects of the HOME (and to the extent to which it is replicated) the MyHome model. First it suggests that HOME may lack social mixing as all of the 20 units are occupied by people with HCSNs. This would be true in the sense that all residents would have enduring mental illness (though presumably come from many different backgrounds etc). The comment ignores the fact that residents would be part of a community which included volunteers – something less easily achieved in scattered accommodation - and live within a strong

⁶ *MyHome in Canberra: Survey of Housing for People with Mental Illness*; Carers ACT Dec 2018. There were 44 respondents to the survey.

⁷ *The Health of Australia's Prisoners*, 2018, AIHW May 2019.

⁸ Figures cited by John Peach, Executive Director at ACT Corrective Services, in an address to Woden Rotary Club, October 2019.

⁹ See Housing Model table at p73 of the Final Report. With respect to one of these features (no formal separation between tenancy management and support provision) the report (p67) is unclear about its application within MyHome. In fact separation of these functions is intended for MyHome.

suburban community with organisations from which volunteer support could be expected. In our view its community focus is a strength of the HOME/MyHome model.

Secondly, the study asks whether HOME is accessible to people with the most challenging and complex needs. The question arises because in selecting new residents HOME considers the likely compatibility of a person with the model of supported accommodation and with other residents; and because new residents must first enter into 3 month trial tenancy. We expect MyHome would adopt similar arrangements because of the importance of a well-functioning community to the health and recovery of residents. Like HOME, however, the first criterion in tenancy selection would be need.

MyHome and Uniting Church Participation in the Review

Both MyHome and the Uniting Church, at the local and Synod levels, contributed to the development of the SOR for the tender, are key stakeholders in the review, and will participate in its oversight. The Uniting Church reaffirms its December 2016 offer of use of the land. It very much wishes to support MyHome in providing much needed accommodation for people with mental illness but like government it has a strong interest in identifying an operational and business model which is sustainable. To that end the Uniting Church, as with MyHome, is open to advice from the review regarding variations to the model of care, appropriate governance structures and revenue options that could assist in securing operational and business sustainability.

Suggested way forward

Provided that the review commissioned by the ACT Government can identify a sustainable operational and business model, we believe the next steps, guided by recommendations of the review, should be full design of a complex on part of the Curtin site and when plans are approved tendering for its construction. We therefore propose that enough funds for these purposes be provided in the 2021 Budget.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the ACT Government budget development process for 2020-21.

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