

# Responding to homelessness encampments

A rights-focused guide for local government



Leanne Mitchell<sup>1</sup>

[www.ltmitchell.com.au](http://www.ltmitchell.com.au)

# INTRODUCTION



A number of recent media reports have highlighted the challenges that Australian local government and communities can face as they respond to homelessness in public spaces.

Encampments—in parks, reserves, or other public locations—are some of the most visible manifestations of homelessness and are often the point where councils enter into a homelessness response.

It is often in situations of crisis like these where local government may feel the most pressure to 'do something' about homelessness. It is also the space where councils can receive a lot of criticism for doing whatever that 'something' might be.

Encampment closure responses, undertaken without clear long-term solutions for the people affected, underscore the complexities in balancing public amenity with the rights and needs of people experiencing homelessness.

Media reports can evoke strong reactions—often for good reason—but it's also important to recognise the difficult position local governments face. They manage some public spaces and respond to diverse community needs yet have little influence over the broader situation or solutions.

In these cases, local government often relies on police for law and order, while state and federal governments control housing and homelessness services.

## A personal reflection on a deep conundrum

I have lived through the impossible situation that local government can find itself in when these kinds of situations play out. Homelessness is a wicked problem after all, and finding the right thing to do can often seem impossible, when use of public space is contended and there is little or no housing, or other support options in sight.

The reality is that often situations will get to a point where something has to be done, and local governments – whether they want to or not – have to get involved. In these circumstances, a council can just go in and move a 'problem' elsewhere or decide to take considered action.

These actions can often be part of a collaborative homelessness response - with councils fulfilling their public space responsibilities while also supporting other organisations and government bodies to fulfil their roles as well.

Best-practice responses—grounded in human rights, cross-sector collaboration, and evidence-based interventions—can help councils to engage effectively and ethically when an encampment response is needed.

This guide, drawn from my 2022 [Churchill Fellowship Report](#) and experience working with Councils across Australia offers a list of actions that can be established in advance and rolled out in communities when needed.

Here are some ideas to guide what you might do to prepare and respond to encampments.

## 1. Understand your Landscape

Your first critical step as a Council is to recognise your roles and responsibilities in responding to encampments. Typically, these can include managing public spaces, keeping locations clean, enforcing local laws, and facilitating activities delivered by state agencies and services.

While Councils are not homelessness service providers and rarely control housing supply, you can still play a key role in driving and influencing collaborative efforts—regardless of concerns about cost shifting or undefined responsibilities. This should be done with a strong focus on human rights.

Most Councils are well positioned to take on this role. A clear understanding of local homelessness, service availability, and housing pathways is essential. Mapping out and building relationships with key stakeholders—including housing providers, outreach services, police, health agencies, and community organisations—can further strengthen coordination and impact.

**See:** [Wyndham Health Housing and Homelessness \(H3\) Alliance](#)

## 2. Adopt a human rights framework

A rights-based approach ensures that any response to encampments is compassionate, ethical, and legally sound. The United Nations recognises adequate housing as a human right, and forced evictions that do not provide alternative housing solutions can constitute human rights violations.

Individual councils can embed principles of dignity, participation, and non-discrimination in their approach. This means that local responses engage directly with and seek to understand the situations, needs and wishes of people living in encampments, ensuring they have a say in decisions that affect them, and avoiding enforcement actions that criminalise homelessness.

**See:** [City of Launceston's Homelessness Statement of Commitment](#)

## 3. Choose who will lead council efforts and allocate budget to enable it

A rough sleeping response will often involve many parts of a council, each with distinct roles to play and diverse measures of success. Ensuring that every person involved is aware of each other's roles, aligned and equipped to work collaboratively can be more difficult than you expect.

Early planning, education, training and agreed way of working will definitely make the job easier. A designated lead, or connector role to coordinate cross-organisational activities and to report across and, importantly, up the organisation is essential. As is the right budget allocation to enable adequate outcomes.

I have noticed along the way that most council officers whose jobs interact with homelessness don't even have that word in their position descriptions or work plans. As a result, homelessness can take up a lot of someone's time but not be seen as a core activity. This approach just gets in the way of good response.

A proactive cross-organisational examination of homelessness touch points, by whom, when and to what end can help councils understand what in fact they face and help allocate time and budget to support activities. A training program to help staff build their understanding of the causes and impacts of homelessness can challenge beliefs and reduce any stigma – resulting in a more compassionate response.

Responding to homelessness at crisis point is never easy, but a well thought out approach and plan will equip and prepare staff. It will also help in lightening the load – and the inevitable stress – that staff could feel when involved in an encampment response.

See: [WA Rangers Information Guide: Homelessness](#)

City of Port Phillip's [Protocol for assisting people who sleep rough](#)

#### 4. Engage early and build trust in your community

Similarly, early engagement with your external partners will also set you up for success. Councils can support and (if they are in the position) facilitate outreach services to connect with people experiencing homelessness, assess their needs, and build trust.

Outreach should be led by trained homelessness and health professionals rather than compliance officers or law enforcement. A number of councils are engaging Public Space Liaison Officers who straddle a dual social services and compliance role. This approach does very well if it's set up right and is worth exploring.

Inviting in and listening to people who are experiencing, or have been homeless in the past, is a very good way to understand your local situation and to think about what you can do. A number of councils do this by establishing lived experience engagement programs, setting up homelessness advisory committees or taking up informal opportunities to meet and learn from community.

This knowledge can help improve your crisis responses and longer term homelessness programs. You can also use this information to educate your staff and community and advocate for improved support in your local area.

See: [City of Parramatta management of public spaces](#)

Sunshine Coast Council lived experience program [Street Up](#)

#### 5. Establish a Cross-Sector Response

No single agency can effectively respond to encampments alone. Councils can support the establishment, and be part, of multi-agency teams that bring together housing providers, health services, police, state /territory governments and community groups.

These teams should meet regularly to share information, coordinate responses, and ensure that people in encampments and sleeping rough are supported through a case management approach. A number of councils have established regular 'Hotspots' meetings, that bring together a selection of services, focusing on collaborative location responses.

By name lists provide a way of getting to know who is living within an encampment and makes connection through services easier. A number of councils around the country are taking on important 'backbone' roles in service coordination efforts, utilising one of local government's strengths in partnership facilitation. Advance to Zero provides a model to implement this approach.

See: [Canadian Alliance to end Homelessness: Ending homelessness for people living in encampments in Canada \(guideline\)](#)

## 6. Develop Clear and Transparent Protocols, especially with police

Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) and clear protocols between councils and partner agencies, like Police, can define organisational positions, help clarify roles, align efforts and enable collaborative problem-solving in encampment response. Agreements with Police might need to be escalated to your executive to ensure a consistent and agreed way of working. A protocol might include:

- **A commitment to non-enforcement-first approaches** – being clear about the steps that will be followed and establishing compliance as a last resort, not the default response.
- **Clear referral pathways** – ensuring outreach teams have direct access to housing and support services and know how to set them up.
- **Knowing when a situation requires a safety-led response** – sometimes situations escalate, and locations become unsafe. In these situations, knowing when to call it and having a plan in place to work with police is key.
- **Procedural fairness** – if relocation is necessary, processes to ensure that impacted people have adequate notice, information on alternative options, and assistance with moving belongings.
- **Communication strategies** – Keeping the broader community informed to reduce stigma and promote understanding.

See: [City of Melbourne and Victoria Police homelessness protocol \(2018\)](#).

## 7. Be ready to communicate

Honest and transparent communication with your community can reduce stigma and foster understanding. Starting the conversation early and reinforcing your commitment and approach could also help build knowledge and confidence in your council's commitment to ending homelessness.

Remember also to be careful with the language you use to talk about people experiencing homelessness and your local homelessness situation. The wrong word choice can say a lot! And if your council's homelessness situation or response is running in the media? Think twice about running the other way. A proactive human-centred response, good key messages and a well-briefed spokesperson will make sure you are on the front foot.

I have not seen a better resource than what UK organisation, Crisis, released a few years ago about how to frame messages about homelessness.

See: [Crisis UK Talking about homelessness: introduction to framing](#)

## 8. Advocate for Housing and Systemic Change

Frontline responses aside, one of local government's most powerful tools in addressing homelessness is advocacy. While councils do not control housing supply, they can influence state and federal policy through strategic lobbying and partnerships.

This might include advocating for:

- Increased investment in social and affordable housing.
- Permanent supportive and Housing First models.
- Improved funding for homelessness outreach and mental health services.

Local governments can also play a role in facilitating housing solutions, such as using council-owned land for affordable housing developments, streamlining planning approvals for social housing, or incentivising landlords to rent to people exiting homelessness.

See: [Eastern Affordable Housing Alliance \(Melbourne\)](#)



## 9. Monitor, Evaluate, and Adapt

Any homelessness response, including encampment focused activities should be regularly reviewed to assess effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. This includes gathering feedback from people with lived experience of homelessness, tracking housing outcomes, and assessing community impacts. Data collection and analysis can help councils refine approaches, secure funding, and demonstrate the effectiveness of housing-led solutions over punitive measures.

Undertaking an audit to properly understand the cost of your homelessness crisis response activities can also help guide realistic future planning and budgeting.

See: [South Australian Alliance to End Homelessness – AZP Ending Homelessness Dashboard](#)

### A final word – it is our responsibility, even if it's not defined

Local government might not have a defined role in Australia's homelessness response efforts, but that does not mean we can't take action. In fact, we often have no choice.

Responding to homelessness encampments can be an extremely trying activity for councils and the communities they serve – and it is important to remember that rough sleeping and encampments are a symptom of a broader housing crisis, and not a problem that councils alone can solve.

While local government might not have a defined role in responding to Australia's homelessness crisis, we can lead the way in fostering compassionate, evidence-based, and rights-focused responses.

By prioritising engagement over enforcement, strengthening cross-sector collaboration, and advocating for long-term housing solutions, councils can ensure that their responses to homelessness encampments see better outcomes and uphold the dignity and rights of all members of a community.

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### About Leanne Mitchell

I am an Australian local government worker, writer and anthropologist convinced that we can make the world a fairer place. With three decades of experience in government, the non-profit sector and at the United Nations, I have worked on homelessness in many different forms, from working with people displaced because of natural disaster or large-scale development projects to those without shelter in inner city locations.



Local government management roles in Melbourne highlighted for me the challenges our sector faces in addressing homelessness. In 2022, I undertook a [Churchill Fellowship](#) to investigating how councils can address homelessness while balancing broader community responsibilities. My report, "Everybody's Business: What local government can do to end homelessness" emphasises prevention and cross-community collaboration.

I now work with councils around Australia helping cross-organisational teams to better understand their role, plan their approaches and take practical action to end homelessness.

Learn more about my work and how I can help you: [www.ltmitchell.com.au](http://www.ltmitchell.com.au)

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