Why We Need a National Housing and Ending Homelessness Plan

David Pearson, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Alliance to End Homelessness

Ending homelessness is possible, I know this because I recently had the opportunity — through a Churchill Fellowship — to meet with and visit some of the communities that have done it. In fact one of the most telling conversations I had was with the outgoing head of the United States (US) National Alliance to End Homelessness who told me *'I know homelessness is solvable because when I started my career, there was none, not like this, not the mass poverty we have on our streets today'*.

It doesn't need to be this way. In Australia we have become accustomed to thinking about homelessness as somehow normal, often the fault of the individual, or some inevitability as a consequence of the housing market.

We have become desensitised to it, but there is a better way — there are more and more communities who have either demonstrated that ending homelessness is possible or are seeking to.

Finland — the only country in the world — has ended one type of homelessness. In the US there are 14 communities that have ended particular types of homelessness and in Canada there are now two communities that have ended it. All have used a Housing First approach, with the US and Canada adopting the concept of functional zero to measure if their communities have solved homelessness for a particular group.

Ending homelessness needs to be the policy ambition of the new National Housing and Homelessness Plan. In fact, it needs to be a national housing and ending homelessness plan. It is currently not conceived that way, and is unlikely to change unless there is a more joined up and consistent approach to our advocacy.

In particular what we mean by ending homelessness needs to be better understood and agreed.

Defining 'Ending Homelessness'

The Advance to Zero Campaign, that the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH) leads, has adopted the definition of rare, brief and a one-time thing.

Rare in that there is very little homelessness, brief when it does occur, so that we are able to rapidly re-house people and a one-time thing — that is we are able to break the cycle of people moving in and out of homelessness.

This is the standard we think that ought to be met — and it's a standard that more and more communities are achieving.

This is what we at the AAEH mean by an end to homelessness and it is what we believe should be the ambition of all Australian governments, Federal, State and Local.

If we need to be clearer on how we define an end to homelessness we I also need to be clear on how we measure it.

Measurement

Again the Advance to Zero Campaign has sought to answer this by adopting the functional zero measure which indicates if fewer people are experiencing homelessness than are routinely exiting homelessness at any given time. It helps us understand if our efforts are getting us closer to or further away from ending homelessness.

Understanding how functional zero is calculated is no doubt complicated, but our response to homelessness needs to match the complexity of the challenge that ending homelessness presents. Functional zero helps us measure the desired outcome we seek in a dynamic/over time way, rather than a static or point in time way. This is what differentiates functional zero from absolute zero — which in the short term at least can only ever be achieved at a point in time.

Functional zero is not a one time achievement, but a sustained reality.

Ending Homelessness and a National Plan

So what does all of this have to do with a national plan to end homelessness? Policy consideration and advocacy regarding national approaches to homelessness have not, to date, grappled with this first order question — what are we seeking to do? — or the follow-on definitional and measurement questions.

Too often discussion and advocacy do not progress much beyond describing the problem and calling for more housing

and more Housing First. Both of course are needed, but confuse process with outcome.

If the policy outcome is genuinely to end homelessness — then it becomes apparent pretty quickly that more housing alone won't get us there. We call it homelessness, not houselessness for a reason. This is why Housing First approaches are needed, to ensure that housing comes with support, to make sure that people don't cycle back in and out of homelessness.

But again, Housing First alone won't get us to the outcome we seek — an end to homelessness. This is because it doesn't speak to prevention, or inflow (in the functional zero context) and because you can do Housing First and not end homelessness, but you can't end homelessness and not do housing first. Housing First is for a specific type of person experiencing homelessness and needs to target those people that need that response the most.

If we are to end homelessness, not just for individuals, but for whole communities, then we will require more than proven Housing First programs that whilst effective operate in broken systems.

Never before have we had the policy ambition in Australia that is clear and unambiguous that ending homelessness should be the goal of our collective efforts. But it could be. The highwater mark to date in national homelessness policy was the Rudd Labor Government's *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*.

The new Labor Government has committed to develop a new National Housing and Homelessness Plan, and with a unified voice from the sector (something that to date has been elusive) we could make ending homelessness the policy ambition of our nation.

A Shared Vision			
To end all homelessness in Australia, starting with rough sleeping, by ensuring that when it does occur it is rare, brief one-time			
Four Approaches to Ending Homelessness			
Housing First	Person-Centered & Strengths Based	Systems Change	Place-Based Collaboration
Eight Agreed Activities (each applying the four approaches)			
Assertive Outreach		Continuous Improvement	
Common Assessment		Data-Driven Prevention	
A Real-Time By-Name List		Data-Informed System Advocacy	
Coordinated Systems		More of the Right Housing & Support	

The Advance to Zero Methodology, Australian Alliance to End Homelessness, October 2022

This would require a shared or commonly understood definition of ending homelessness, as well as a way to measure this, but it will also require a range of other actions too — including a greater focus on:

• improving the integration of other service systems — corrections, health, mental health, etc.

• prevention and going upstream — to stop homelessness from occurring in the first place.

• the type of housing that ends long term recurring homelessness — permanent supportive housing

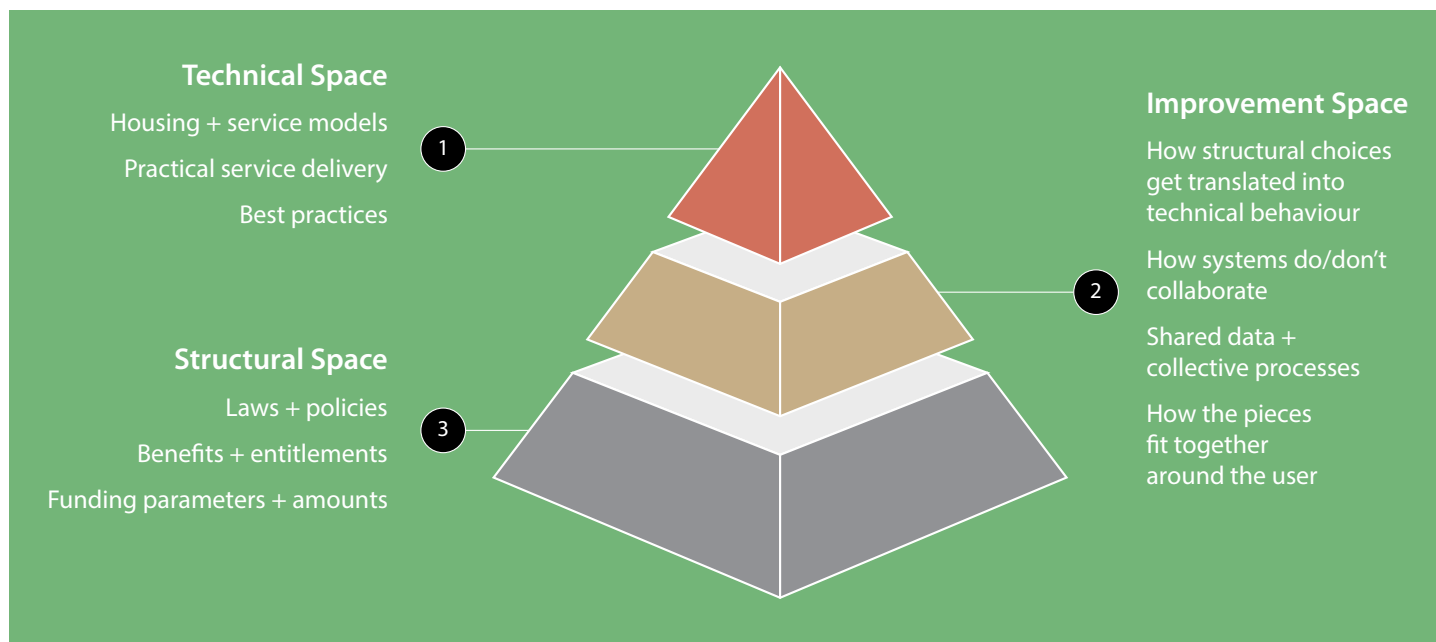• and much more.

Advance to Zero and a National Plan

Again, the Advance to Zero Campaign has sought to consider these issues through the development of the Advance to Zero Methodology. When people hear about the Advance to Zero methodology they think about by-name lists and functional zero, but there is much more to it than that. The Methodology has been developed to help guide efforts to end homelessness in Australia, based on what we know is working around the world and what we've learned from over 26 communities in Australia. It continues to evolve as we continue to learn.

In terms of what we have learned through the development of the Advance to Zero Methodology that is relevant to the development of a National Housing and Homelessness Plan, I wish to highlight a few things.

First, *we need to make the problem smaller, not bigger*. If we want to solve a big, complicated problem like homelessness, we need to avoid the approach that is often central to our advocacy which is to make the problem bigger. A National Plan needs to be able to create the space to have a focus on cohorts, to focus in place and to learn from that to drive change.

Second, and related, *we need to resist the urge to see a focus on one group as a zero sum game* where for one group to make progress, that this is somehow at the expense of another. This just isn't the case, by making improvements to the way local systems integrate (homelessness, health, housing, corrections etc), we can free up resources and thereby 'grow the pie'. This

Technical Space

Housing + service models

Practical service delivery

Best practices

1

Improvement Space

How structural choices
get translated into
technical behaviour

How systems do/don't
collaborate

2

Shared data +
collective processes

How the pieces
fit together
around the user

Structural Space

Laws + policies

Benefits + entitlements

3

Funding parameters + amounts

The Implementation Space, Australian Alliance to End Homelessness & Community Solutions, October 2022

is less so about what needs to be in the Plan, and more so about the fragmentation of our advocacy in relation to a national homelessness policy.

Third, the Plan *needs a focus on using real time data to drive improvement* (or close to real time). Continuous Improvement, or Improvement Science is a major, if little understood, focus of the Advance to Zero methodology and it sits in the space between technical and structural efforts to end homelessness. The technical space seeks to improve practice, outreach, case management, or Housing First approaches. The structural space requires greater investment in social housing, increased income support payments, greater access to health care and a range of other things are required. But there is also a third 'improvement space', this brings the other two levels together and is best thought of as the confluence of the things that matter and the things that local communities can influence on their own at the system level — without the need for broad structural change.

The health system has learned the benefits of improvement work, and building the capacity of the sector, systems, organisations and the workforce to undertake this work. The health sector has learned this

lesson the hard way, usually as a consequence of failure. Deaths represent the ultimate failure of the homelessness system. Rather than have a royal commission into the estimated 424, but ultimately unknown, number of people who died whilst experiencing homelessness last year, the National Plan should invest in building the capacity of communities seeking to end homelessness to undertake this improvement work.

Finally, we should not look solely to one National Housing and Homelessness Plan to solve this complex problem. *Ultimately, no single national plan or document will end homelessness*, it is unlikely to happen without it of course. But we have to be realistic about what a document like this can do.

Homelessness is complex and constantly changing, what matters most isn't how great a strategy we come up with at a point in time, or providing great services, or just building more housing. It's how fast we can respond to changing information.

Zaid Hassan, from Change Labs in the US, says that to understand complex social challenges like homelessness we need to imagine the difference between throwing a rock and throwing a live bird. When you throw a rock,

you can predict exactly where it will land — if you measure things like height, angle and the speed of your release. The bird is different, it's alive.

Ending homelessness is a lot more like throwing a bird than it is throwing a rock. It's a problem that isn't always predictable and we need to be able to respond to it in real time, something a fixed, point in time plan is conceptually incapable of doing. As important, timely and as necessary as the development of that plan is.

The communities seeking to end homelessness, using real time data, need greater support and the National Housing and Homelessness Plan should support these efforts. However the most important thing this plan should do is to unify our efforts around the common goal of ending homelessness.

No single building, pill, program, strategy, plan, agency or government will end homelessness. Homelessness is about people, the lives they have lived and the lives they could live.

Ending homelessness is difficult, but it is possible, if we are willing to share, learn and work together. A National Housing and Homelessness Plan needs to enable these things, but first and foremost it needs to be a plan to END homelessness.