



advance to zero

waaeh western australian alliance
to end homelessness

Fact sheet: The role of local government in ending homelessness in WA

Last updated: Dec 9, 2024

Local governments have an important role to play in helping to end homelessness. As the level of government closest to the community and often most directly impacted by homelessness, they are in a unique position to advance a shared community vision to end homelessness.

Local communities drawing on best practice to make homelessness rare, brief and once-off are seeing downward shifts in homelessness. The City of Mandurah in WA is a case study of a local government committed to ending homelessness and working together with their community to prevent and solve homelessness.

Communities preventing and solving homelessness

The Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (WAAEH) recognises that the scale of homelessness in Western Australia is both preventable and solvable, despite the common misconception that homelessness cannot be ended. Through WA Advance to Zero (WA AtoZ), the Alliance is working with five communities in Western Australia to end homelessness.

AtoZ is demonstrating that it is possible to make homelessness rare, brief and once-off, starting with rough sleeping, one community at a time. Partners of AtoZ are working towards this by adopting the AtoZ framework, which comprises a range of proven solutions including real-time by-name list data, the Housing First approach, coordinated systems, prevention, improvement, advocacy and other activities. When combined, these activities ensure local housing and homelessness systems are able to support more people into permanent housing than are coming into the system – not just at a point in time, but over time.

Several communities across Western Australia applying the AtoZ framework have reached significant milestones, including achieving and maintaining downward shifts in rough sleeping homelessness.

The leading role of local government in Advance to Zero collaborations

Local governments are in a unique position to rally support for the ambition to end homelessness and to establish local Zero Projects that lead and support person-centred, place-based, whole-of-community efforts. Local governments can advocate for local solutions and strengthen the collective impact of communities working with people experiencing homelessness. Without local governments playing an active role, we have found that communities often struggle to make progress towards ending homelessness.

The role of local government and homelessness varies greatly and can often be contentious if the problem of homelessness is left unaddressed. In Western Australia, some are taking a leadership role and proactively supporting AtoZ efforts in their community. This includes contributing to and supporting homelessness services to create by-name data, assisting with collaborative coordination of local services, improving the integration of local service systems and providing community education about what it would take to end homelessness in their local government area.

Others are taking a position that homelessness is not their problem and that they don't have a role or want to be involved. Sometimes local governments hinder ending homelessness efforts by moving people experiencing homelessness on to other locations, obstructing local community efforts or supporting initiatives within the community that are misaligned with best practice or sometimes cruel and counterproductive.

Guidelines for local government

The *Guidelines for local government*¹, developed by Leanne Mitchell from her 2019 Churchill Fellowship research, offer a framework for how local governments can play an important role in ending homelessness in their community. The guidelines encourage local government to:

Know their local homelessness situation

- Collect local data
- Listen to the community
- Establish a shared definition of homelessness

Lead the narrative and drive collaboration

- Nurture community alliances
- Embrace lived experience
- Involve all parts of government
- Collaborate to address welfare, safety and amenity
- Communicate and educate for better outcomes

Organise their approach and their workforce

- Build a collaborative strategy
- Lead good giving initiatives
- Structure teams for success
- Involve the mayor and senior management
- Rethink and realign budgets

Act to prevent and end homelessness

- Know what they can do to influence housing supply
- Refocus prevention
- Bring in libraries and other customer service staff
- Know what can be offered in crisis responses.

¹ Leanne Mitchell, 2019, Everybody's Business – What local government can do to end homelessness (2019 Jack Brockhoff Foundation Churchill Fellowship to investigate how councils can respond to rough sleeping while balancing responsibilities to the wider community). Available at: <https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellow/leanne-mitchell-vic-2019/>

Recommendations from the WAAEH for local government

The WAAEH recognises that local government can be among the most effective stakeholders in holding the vision of not just managing homelessness, but ending it. While state governments and homelessness services face various pressures to manage homelessness across broader regions, local governments have the ability – and responsibility – to focus on their local community and its specific needs. This is unique.

However, we have observed that when local governments step up, state-funded systems often pull back, particularly in capital cities. This is an understandable consequence of under-resourced and failing systems, but does not advance efforts to actually solve homelessness.

To support the implementation of strategies to prevent, reduce and end homelessness, the local government sector should:

- **Declare the ambition to end homelessness:** Sometimes the hardest part about being a leader is being willing to go first. The Adelaide City Council in South Australia and Port Phillip Council in Victoria were almost the first to do this in Australia, and local governments were central to this in the communities that have successfully ended homelessness in other jurisdictions. One of the most successful factors in shifting the focus to ending homelessness, as opposed to managing it, is when local councils have led the debate and declared their ambition to support efforts.
- **Focus efforts on ending homelessness:** Local government involvement in crisis responses is needed from time to time, but is largely the responsibility of state governments. Local government should take the longer view and focus on bringing communities together to create local Zero Projects, and financially support the backbone efforts of these initiatives. Wherever possible, local government should avoid being a direct provider of homelessness services, and instead focus on the things that it is uniquely suited to, namely as a:
 - ◆ Convenor (bringing communities together)
 - ◆ Coordinator (service coordination, multi-agency case conferencing)
 - ◆ Improver (supporting improvement in systems integration, prevention, etc.)

- ◆ Advocate (transparency in data and outcomes)
- ◆ Funder of the above, including backbone work.

This approach focuses local accountability, builds whole-of-society buy-in and doesn't pull local government into direct service delivery (often with the crisis or emergency response focus). It also reduces the possibility of cost-shifting from state governments.

- **Develop resources to make it easier:** Agencies like the state-based Local Government Associations, the Australian Local Government Association and the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors (CCCLM) should support the development of tools and resources to make it easier for local governments to engage in and support the work to end homelessness.
- **Establish a capital cities dashboard:** The CCCLM should work with the AAEH and WAAEH to establish a centralised real-time/monthly homelessness public dashboard for capital cities. This dashboard would outline the status of efforts to end homelessness across these cities to support advocacy initiatives.

Case study: The City of Mandurah's role in preventing and solving homelessness

The City of Mandurah (City) is proudly committed to ending homelessness in their community and working with the Advance to Zero movement (known as WA AtoZ in Western Australia). The City is actively working with local community services and groups, state government agencies and local businesses to implement the AtoZ framework². In 2023, Mandurah reached the significant milestone of achieving and maintaining a downward shift in rough sleeping homelessness³. Mandurah's approach, including their alignment with the AtoZ framework, is outlined below, along with reflections on the ingredients for their success and ideas for improvement.

² <https://aaeh.org.au/atoz>

³

<https://www.endhomelessnesswa.com/post/mandurah-becomes-second-australian-community-to-reach-milestone-towards-ending-homelessness>

Vision and leadership

- Enhancing the understanding that the City has a pivotal role towards ending homelessness and will be intentional in its efforts to be a meaningful part of the solution.
- Elected Members and staff throughout the City are unified in their support; underpinned by the City's organisational culture and ensuring relevant staff roles include levels of expertise in homelessness.
- Establishing and implementing the Mandurah Homelessness and Street Presence Strategy 2021-2023 - a shared action plan with a vision to ensure there is “a place for everyone” by implementing initiatives across four key objectives: Accessible accommodation, effective support systems, ensuring safety & security, and meaningful systemic change. The Strategy will be reviewed and updated in 2024.
- The City and other partners understand the AtoZ definition of ending homelessness – that it is rare, brief and once-off, starting with rough sleeping. This definition and aspiration for ending homelessness is actively promoted by the City as part of its leadership to build understanding, compassion and support at all levels.

Knowing the local homelessness situation

- Maintaining strong connections with the sector, local service providers and government and non-government agencies (such as police) to be across emerging trends and issues.
- Accurate, relevant and shared quality by-name list (QBNL) data is captured and regularly updated for Mandurah via local AtoZ service partners. Aggregated data informs the City's policy, planning and advocacy work.
- Rough sleeper counts were undertaken by the City before the QBNL data to provide more current point-in-time data than ABS Census data.

Leading the narrative and driving collaboration

- Actively advocating for homelessness services and supports within the City's boundaries, such as for the new Common Ground facility and extension of state government funding for assertive outreach.
- Supporting local services directly with funding and accommodation, such as a lease for the Peel Community Kitchen to relocate, the Peel Shower Service and more.
- Easing community concerns when they arise, and emphasising how important it is for all of the community to do their bit.

- Facilitating and coordinating opportunities to bring local Mandurah agencies together through the 'Street Present and Homelessness Network' and issue-specific community networks (e.g. networks formed to respond to issues generated by COVID).
- Maintaining a profile for homelessness through sharing information about the issues, initiatives, needs and trends relating to homelessness in Mandurah. This occurs through:
 - ◆ Policy submissions, such as to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the financial administration of homelessness services in Western Australia.
 - ◆ Representation, such as on the Housing First Homelessness Advisory Group.
 - ◆ Consultation, such as hosting a regional session with the Minister for Homelessness.
- Active involvement in industry networks and peak bodies, such as the Western Australian Local Government Association, Local Government Professionals WA and Shelter WA (as an organisational member).
- Participating in regional groups, such as the Binjareb District Leadership Group coordinated by the Peel Development Commission, and former Leadership of the Group of 6 (lead government agencies).
- Providing lived experience workshops and training for the community, sector and staff.
- Active involvement with capacity-building initiatives, such as the online Local Government Homelessness Hub.
- Living the City's values of courage, connected, innovative, integrity and excellence in everyday actions. This ensures high-level strategy is operationalised at the interface. For example, at a recent free community outdoor event, a man sleeping rough in the park thought he would have to move on, however, staff assured the man he was welcome to join the event and that he was an integral part of the community. The man stayed, helped set up the event and expressed his gratefulness at feeling like he was valued and belonged.

Organising the approach and workforce

- Utilising local homelessness data and best practice to make decisions.
- Fostering a strong culture that is compassionate and constructive at all levels and is committed to having integrity to do things differently, such as actively advocating to the state government to locate the new Common Ground initiative in Mandurah.

- Directly supporting key services in the City with resources like financial contribution and/or facilities; such as Peel Community Kitchen, Peel Community Showers and not-for-profit office space.

Acting to prevent and end homelessness

- Advocacy to the state government on matters that align with All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020–2030, for example, continuation of assertive outreach in Mandurah and for the Common Ground.
- Active participation in the AtoZ MKR (Mandurah, Kwinana, Rockingham) Improvement Team that functions regionally.
- Active participation in networks that promote collective approaches, such as the Rough Sleeper Network that functions regionally at an operational level.
- Building capacity of Rangers, outdoor staff, library and customer services staff to respond compassionately to people experiencing homelessness and with knowledge to link people with services.
- Making difficult and sometimes unpopular choices not to support local initiatives that aim to respond to homelessness when it is determined the initiative does not align with best practice.
- Developing an Assertive Homelessness Outreach Program with funding support from WA Police and City. The City advocated for continuation of the assertive outreach service, which has been supported through the Department of Communities through the HEART initiative.
- Actively supporting funding proposals for affordable and supportive housing development and land allocation.

Ingredients for success and improvement

- Recognising that homelessness can't be solved alone, getting involved where possible and working collectively.
- The importance of a unified commitment to end homelessness by elected members, senior staff, operational staff, community services and cross-sector stakeholders.
- Always doing the best possible and seeking ways to improve.
- The importance of community inclusion and enrichment initiatives in fostering a compassionate community and supporting early intervention and prevention.

- Working across housing, planning and homelessness systems to encourage more effective planning and economic development. For example, to increase housing supply and to advocate for development incentives to be extended to the region.
- Finding ways to more effectively work with older people and people with disability who are experiencing homelessness to access available aged care and disability funding and support. This is challenged by a lack of housing options to provide people with a stable place to stay.
- Encouraging more support services to the region to help people on their journey, such as mental health and alcohol and other drug services.

Strengthening local government practice and partnerships

At a national level, the AAEH provides a range of support for local governments to be clear and strategic regarding their role in efforts to end homelessness. The national AtoZ Improvement Community of Practice supports communities across Australia to build their practice and learn from each other. This includes support to local governments to help build their understanding and involvement in AtoZ, and provide links with others. We invite you to contact info@aaeh.org.au for more information.

Shelter WA, the WA Local Government Association and LG Professionals worked together to establish a Local Government Homelessness Knowledge Hub. The Hub is a place for local governments to share information and to inform evidence-based homelessness solutions that respond to local community needs. It includes homelessness knowledge training for frontline and office-based staff. In response to high demand, Shelter WA and the WAAEH are also looking at developing further training for local government staff.

Strengthened practice and partnerships could be achieved by:

- Learning from and documenting the practices of communities that are building momentum in ending homelessness, locally and across Australia.
- A project to support local governments to increase their knowledge, capacity and practice towards ending homelessness. This could include training for local government representatives at all levels, from elected officials down to frontline staff.

- Increased resourcing to enable further engagement from local governments, such as responding to calls to reactivate the Western Australian Local Government Homelessness Partnership Fund for Homelessness as an enabler of local partnership initiatives.

For more information about local government involvement in WA, please contact info@waaeh.org.au.