

Everyone has a **right** to a place to call **home**

## Local Government Homelessness Knowledge Hub Case Study



Submitted by **Shire of Augusta Margaret River**

Case Study **Shire of Augusta-Margaret River approach to affordable housing and homelessness**

## Background

In 2014, the Shire of Augusta-Margaret River set about the process of developing an affordable housing strategy.

As is typical for any project carried out at the Shire, a high degree of public and stakeholder consultation was planned and consultation with the broader community was intended to occur after finalisation of the working draft. After a literature review and meeting with various experts and state government agencies, a draft was developed. The following, taken from the introduction of the strategy, neatly outlines the problem:

The Margaret River region boasts an enviable mix of scenic coastline, Mediterranean climate, majestic forests and productive agricultural lands. It's attractiveness as a place to live and visit has shaped the 'Margaret River brand' which espouses *"top-notch wining and dining, boutique shopping and artisan experiences galore"* and promises a place where *"sophistication and country charm are perfect partners"*.

To most, the perception is that Margaret River is a wealthy, vibrant, thriving place and not one which would need assistance with affordable housing. However, closer inspection reveals that there are significant contradictions between perception and reality. Indeed it could be said that there is a proportion of the permanent population whose assets, education and personal income descriptors convey a picture of disadvantage.

## Challenges

Upon commencing a process of community engagement, a flaw in the consultation process quickly came to light.

The community, including members who had a lived experience of homelessness, sought not only to critique the Shire's strategy, but to assist with its development and implementation.

## Solutions

After taking a step back, the process was reorientated towards the development of a grass roots strategy together with the community. This in turn led to the formation of local community group 'Just Home' <https://www.justhome.org/> who the Shire subsequently agreed to fund in order to provide a referral service for those experiencing homelessness.

A Strategy was written and endorsed through this process. The Strategy contains thirteen recommendations with most to be implemented through the Shire's town planning functions.

Examples include:

- Discouraging estate covenants which require a minimum size of house.
- Improving the sustainability of dwellings to reduce heating and cooling costs.
- Providing density bonuses for small housing which are purpose built for 'aged and dependant' persons.
- Include affordable housing in Shire development projects.

In 2015 the Shire developed a homelessness policy to guide all Shire operations in terms of the way homelessness can be addressed or homeless people supported.

<http://www.amrshire.wa.gov.au/council/publications/download/375/>

In 2018 a review of the Shire's Short-Stay policy resulted in a tightening of the rules governing where holiday homes can be located. The policy excludes holiday homes from housing types and locations wherein the majority of affordable housing can be found.

<http://www.amrshire.wa.gov.au/council/publications/download/149/>

In 2019 the Shire and Just Home worked with multinational consultancy firm Arup to prepare a document entitled "Addressing the Margaret River housing crisis – a collaborative review and assessment of housing needs in Augusta-Margaret River". The document includes recommendations regarding land the Shire may have the potential to provide for social housing projects.

The onset of COVID-19 in 2020, created new and unforeseen challenges for housing affordability and life in general. Ways in which the Shire responded as they relate to housing include:

- A freeze on rates.
- Waiving of some Shire fees and charges.
- Providing broader scope for tourism businesses to accommodate 'long-stayers' which included critical workers.

The latest (2022) threat to housing affordability comes from a statewide (draft) policy that would see holiday homes allowed without the need for approval in areas and housing types (ancillary dwellings) which the Shire currently exclude. In particular, ancillary dwellings provide an excellent source of low-cost rental accommodation given that the size of these homes are limited to 70m<sup>2</sup>. The Shire together with Shelter WA and the Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) have made submissions to this effect to the Western Australian Planning Commission (WAPC) and we await that outcome.

### **Things to consider**

- Homelessness and housing affordability are complex problems and necessarily require a multi-faceted response across different levels of government/organisations and community.
- Formulating agreed approaches is complicated by the fact that 'affordable housing' and 'homelessness' mean different things to different people. For example:

Is housing affordability about the length of time taken to save for a deposit for a first home; or the lack of social housing causing low-income earners to have to rent unaffordable private homes? How do we define homelessness, is homelessness rough sleeping; or those with no other option but to rent unaffordable homes on short-terms leases with the constant threat the lease will be terminated?

- These divergent viewpoints plus a multitude in between make conversations amongst policy makers, practitioners and the community difficult and mean that solutions to one problem are unrealistically expected to solve another.