



RAST

**The Royal Agricultural
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25 June 2019

Submission to the House of Assembly Select Committee on Housing Affordability

Dear Committee,

The Royal Agricultural Society of Tasmania (RAST) has been invited to provide a submission to this Select Committee. The RAST is pleased to do so but I have written this from both an organisational and an individual perspective. The experiences we've had were those of the organisation however the perspective, insight and observations included below largely come from my personal perspective and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation that I work for.

Our experience with homelessness relates to the operation of the motor home park at the Hobart Showground. For the period December 2017 to October 2018 we housed many people who would have been classified as homeless. We closed the park for the 2018 Royal Hobart Show and made the decision to cease supporting homeless people upon reopening the park in November 2018.

This decision was not made lightly as we were aware of the lack of alternatives however the impact upon our staff, our resources and our business was dramatic. We determined those impacts to be too severe for our organisation as we received no support from Government during this time to alleviate those impacts.

We had always experienced a level of homeless presentations in the park. They were generally infrequent in nature and stayed for relatively short periods while transitioning to other accommodation or interstate. We noticed a dramatic increase in December 2018 though.

With this increase was a noticeable number of people declaring themselves as homeless who we felt would otherwise have not usually been homeless. By this I mean individuals and families who had steady incomes from work who had previously occupied rental accommodation without issue. On talking to these people some common factors arose such as:

- People moving to Tasmania from interstate lured by the improving economic and job prospects that were caught out by the chronic lack of rental accommodation available.

- Families with several (more than 2) children who had lost previous rental accommodation and were simply not able to secure another property. It was apparent that families with multiple children were not as attractive to landlords in the tight rental market.
- People with other issues and complex needs closely associated with the traditional experience of homelessness such alcohol, drug and mental health problems.
- People with pets who could not bear to leave their pets. A common factor was large dog breeds associated with dangerous dogs such as Bull Mastiffs, Staffordshire crosses and Pit Bulls. In every case we found the dogs to be completely manageable and safe.
- Families who had been in secure rental accommodation for a long term but who could no longer simply afford the rental increases being proposed by landlords. One example was a Father with 2 adult children who were studying who was faced with a \$50 per week increase in rent for a house he had occupied for over 10 years in Lutana. He relocated to the Showground to live in 2 tents and a car. His family later split up with his daughter moving to Melbourne and his son going to live with friends while he completed his studies.
- Young people who had decided for themselves that they could no longer live at home, often due to the rules being imposed upon them but also due to unacceptable situations at home. This group was usually the most isolated and often were under the radar of support services.
- Properties being converted to short term accommodation in time for the busy Christmas period and summer season. This included properties being sold to investors, particularly from interstate.

Disturbingly another factor that became apparent was that school age children were taking steps to conceal their predicament through various measures such as:

- Leaving the showground very early to attend school and avoid detection from their peers.
- Not attending school at all.

Upon engaging with these people on a daily basis it was clear many were finding the system hard to navigate. There were often multiple agencies involved from both the government and not for profit sectors. The lack of stable housing also meant no fixed address which exacerbated the problems in engaging with services and receiving benefits. Some simply had no idea where to start to seek help and others had effectively given up because it was too hard or they didn't have the resources to maintain a consistent effort. Over time these issues often compounded and people simply gave up.

The inadequate level of benefits such as Newstart Allowance as well as waiting periods and penalty regimes were also a common factor.

The RAST was overwhelmed by community support during this period. Individuals, community and religious groups all wanted to do something to help. The Showground became a focal point for that need and subsequently we were inundated with offers of support, food, bedding, camping gear, pet food and goods and the list goes on. Again we were ill equipped and resourced to handle it all but we did what we could.

We noted that those in need reacted very differently to the assistance being provided by the broader community. Some were very grateful and only took what they really needed. Others would help themselves to everything at once only to later discard a lot of it in a wasteful manner. I noted that one particular couple would wait for the regular deliveries that were occurring and would then fill their car with everything they could and return to their campsite. They would then waste or throw away a lot of produce rather than let others enjoy the benefits of it.

I also noted that where we would supply tents, bedding and other camping equipment that some people would simply walk away from it all, leaving it in a soggy heap, after a storm or heavy wind event. They simply placed no value on it because it had been given to them. On the other hand others were very careful to only take what they needed and to try to exchange or return goods that were no longer required.

It became clear that our facilities including the camp kitchen and showers were being utilised by a large number of non-residents who would access these facilities after hours without our knowledge. This cohort was also accessing the donated goods where they could. Others would simply sleep in the stables and the old grandstand without our knowledge.

During the year we started to see referrals from the community sector based agencies. We actually became a key part of the solutions being offered by referral agencies without our knowledge. Many workers in this sector were clearly overwhelmed and faced with a distinct lack of options for their clients so they were putting the showgrounds up as an alternative. Some people arrived with tents and bedding supplied by agencies. Some agencies actually utilised our on-line booking system to book people in without our knowledge.

Late one Friday night a couple arrived with a foam hiking mattress each and nothing else. They had been given the mattresses by a not for profit agency and directed to the showground. They had nothing else. We stayed late that night to secure them bedding, a tent, food and provided them with shower tokens and towels to take a shower.

On another occasion we received a complaint about a gentleman who had been abusive to one of our cleaners. Unbeknown to us he had set up a swag just inside our front gate. Upon investigation we realised he had been booked in on-line by a large and well known charitable organisation without our knowledge. It turned out that we had actually refused that individual due to the complexities of his condition after a phone enquiry from the same agency only to have the case worker then bypass us by booking him in online. He had chronic mental health issues and presented as a danger to others. After a brief discussion with him, again late one evening, I concluded we could not assist him without putting ourselves and others in danger and had to direct him to leave.

Another example relates to a young man with significant mental health issues. His father, having noted the publicity we were receiving, arrived at the Showground one day with his son looking for me. The father went to great lengths to explain to me that his son was often delusional and required full time supervision yet there was nowhere for him to go and he and his wife were at their wits end and simply couldn't cope with him anymore.

They dropped him off into my care with a new tent and all of the essentials he required. They proceeded to keep a close eye on him but they felt he might actually get some attention if he was in our care. The young man responded well to me but he would often just disappear with little clothing in the middle of winter to who knows where. While at the

and level of donations being received this particular group became very comfortable and were subsequently not well motivated to seek better alternatives.

Eventually Housing Connect facilitated an excellent outcome for 2 of this group including the man with all of the dogs. However I understand that only lasted about 6 months as he requested to return to the Showgrounds about 6 months later. I refused the request.

After receiving a disproportionate level of publicity for our role in this social catastrophe Housing Connect established regular communication with us and had staff regularly visit the park to engage with the homeless people. The Minister also succumbed to media pressure and visited on one occasion, providing 20 minutes notice of his arrival. With the support of Housing Connect we were then able to affect better outcomes for most of the people that were prepared to accept help.

The impacts on our business and staff were considerable and included:

- Threats of physical violence and verbal abuse
- Acting as a storage and distribution centre for donated goods
- Generally not receiving any payment for accommodating these people
- Disruption to our normal motor home business and significant reputational damage leading to many cancellations
- Acting as welfare workers and providing referrals for people
- Chasing up various agencies on peoples behalf
- Counselling people
- Dealing with domestic violence including breaking up physical disputes and calling emergency services
- Dealing with other violence, theft, drug abuse, alcoholism and mental health issues
- Arson
- A noticeable increase in vandalism and burglary incidents

All of the people that we engaged with who were dealing with this crisis appeared to be genuine, caring people trying to do their level best. However they were severely overwhelmed and constrained by a significant lack of resources and options. Here we are a year later and in the midst of winter gain and I'm not convinced the situation is any better despite the public announcements and additional funding.

When we publically stated we could no longer accept homeless people we found that we were still turning away approximately 2 per week for the next 6 months. I've noticed that this has gradually declined to the point where we now see hardly any presentations and I assume it's because word has now got around.

Common short term solutions included places like Bethlehem House. These types of places operate under strict rules and a system whereby a percentage of income has to be provided in return for food and board. This is usually about 80%. Unfortunately this model precludes anybody who has existing debts that need to be serviced or is trying to save money for a bond or deposit.

Another short term option involved women's shelters. Unfortunately this meant that families would have to separate from their husbands / fathers to access them. We witnessed 2 families make the decision to do this to provide a better alternative for the wife and kids while the husband stayed in the park.

We witnessed a few go to motel type accommodation and we also noted some didn't last long in that situation for a variety of reasons. I also noted that many refused short term assistance for fear of losing their place on the housing waiting list and decided to rough it out in the hope a place would become available eventually. We also saw a couple of very needy people move into more secure long term housing options thanks to Housing Connect.

There is no doubt that some people choose to be homeless and that others are destined to be so due to their behaviours. Many present as complex cases involving several issues. All of them require individual solutions designed to address their particular needs. Just putting a roof over their head is usually not enough to break the cycle of homelessness. Often they require greater intervention and ongoing support.

There is also no doubt in my mind that the increase in the sharing economy, the appeal of Tasmania to sea-changers, tree-changers as well as investors combined with the lack of supply are all major contributors to this crisis. The increase in student accommodation is also contributing factor. The ultimate solution is to increase supply of all housing including social and affordable housing. We really should have seen this coming many years ago and acted accordingly then.

The best model I have seen for helping the more difficult and complex cases is the Common Ground model where people are encouraged to support and watch over each other with some level of supervision and security, albeit at a distance. Combined with their relevant support services I have personally witnessed the good that this model can do for the most disenfranchised individuals amongst us. It beggars belief that the State has moved away from this ground breaking model. The costs of running it really are insignificant compared to the costs to society of leaving such people to their own devices.

It is imperative that solutions are now expedited and that may mean fast tracking more supply by setting planning and other regulatory provisions aside to enable that to happen. There is no 'one solution fits all' answer. There are many experienced and well equipped organisations in this space but they appear dis-jointed and lack an overarching management and policy framework that can affect real change. For many the current system is an unnavigable maze of referrals, paperwork and interviews that is simply beyond their capacity to negotiate.

We continue to assist some people under the radar but we do actively discourage tents during the cooler and windier months. Our preference is to connect people with services before offering the showground as a solution however we will help in extreme or desperate circumstances. I find now that a call to Housing Connect usually results in a short term solution being offered immediately however I have access to the direct numbers of key personnel whereas most people don't.

Yours sincerely



Scott Gadd
Chief Executive Officer