

Stable One report

A report by Ald Damon Thomas on professional development undertaken investigating the applicability of the Victorian Stable one project model to Hobart and greater Hobart

Preface

It is intended that this report be presented to a forthcoming Community culture and events committee meeting. In the event that a workshop can be held prior to that meeting it is hoped that a teleconference with Ms Jenny Willets the convener of the Stable one project can be facilitated, The Bishop of Tasmania or his representative, Mr Don McCrae representing the Salvation Army and representatives from the Hobart City Mission would be invited to attend to comment on whether this successful Victorian model does have a wider application to our city.

The Professional Development

The request to complete this professional development came as a result of considering the homelessness issue in greater Hobart both in my role as an Alderman and as co-chair of the Housing with Dignity reference group.

The professional development has involved a relationship with Stable one the Anglican diocese of Victoria sponsored project operating in a number of municipalities in Victoria and has involved discussions with the Diocese in Tasmania as to whether a similar project has merit in our city.

Accordingly the professional development has been completed over a longer period and has determined the timing of this report back.

The initial visit which was undertaken as part of my professional development requirement also aligned with my chairmanship of the housing with dignity reference group.

Greater Melbourne and homelessness

Various religious and charity organisations have banded together voluntarily in Melbourne, to try and provide emergency shelter for homeless people. These activities have been operating in the City of Melbourne now for many years but the official homeless statistics have been steadily growing. In recent times the providers have focussed and attempted to broaden their activities throughout the broader Melbourne metropolitan region and to regional centres such as Bendigo.

The Professional Development Plan

Proposed originally as a day and night visit to watch the Stable one model in operation turned into a special process in which I was able to assist the organisation as a third-party observer as it encountered problems with its operation due to town planning considerations and the decision of one municipal organisation to shut the project down

Although as explained following the actual operation was not able to be observed in a physical sense in the Melbourne meetings I learnt a significant amount about the origins of the project, what is required to strengthen it and to expanded in operation and as a result the potential

for this low-cost, community assistance model to be adopted in the greater Hobart municipality.

I was also privileged to work alongside Tim Costello AO, the projects legal advisers, the Victorian Building Authority and the initiator of the project, Jenny Willets.

The Model

Stable One's Winter Night Shelter model is based on research into tried and tested projects around the world. By sharing that knowledge, shelters are now successfully operating in a growing number of churches in Australia.

They offer 'more than a place to stay' by providing community, care and compassion and the opportunity to journey with people towards a more stable future.

The Winter Night Shelter is a partnership between Stable One and local churches in the Yarra Valley who work together to open their doors and provide hospitality to up to 12 men and women experiencing homelessness per night. During June, July and August, seven churches take it in turns to host one night per week with around 200 trained and vetted volunteers staffing evening, overnight and breakfast shifts. An eighth church opens its doors Monday-Friday afternoons offering lunch, shower facilities, lockers, lounge and recreational spaces as well as an opportunity for connection, support and referrals to other agencies.

The critical shortage of crisis, transitional and long-term housing across Australia means that in every town and city there are people without a place to call home. Stable One, a grassroots organisation, was formed in 2017 to initially support local churches who wished to make a difference in this space and offer practical help to those doing it the toughest during the coldest months of the year.

Modelled on similar projects in the UK (over 85 of them) and other countries, the program over the last three winters years 2017 – 2019 has provided close to 100 different men and women the opportunity to come in from the cold for rest and refreshment and connection with a community that cares. They have stayed an average of 2-3 weeks and 78% of guests in 2018 were able to move on to more suitable accommodation. Stable One works closely with the local Opening Doors housing agency (Anchor Inc), police, hospitals, legal aid, CATT and other services.

Since the end of its pilot project in 2017, Stable One has developed a 'toolkit' to share the Winter Night Shelter model with churches in other areas as well as offering consultation as they start up their own projects.

In 2018 the Maroondah Winter Shelter opened its doors, with Bendigo and Sunbury, Wangaratta and Knox commencing programmes this year. There is great potential for expansion although the pandemic has temporarily halted operations.

There is also much interest from other groups outside of Victoria and huge potential for more great community projects like this one to make a

real difference for people such as Courtney Herron, the 25 year old woman of 'no fixed address' who was murdered earlier in 2019 in Parkville.

Since the onset of lockdowns due to the pandemic the Stable one project in Victoria has been suspended.

Regrettably this coincides with an unprecedented demand for family violence services in Victoria and one assumes elsewhere in Australia.

However a substitute one district only project HAS been commenced and is detailed at the end of this report.

The day

What was planned?

The plan was to meet at the Daytime Support Centre (Mount Evelyn Presbyterian Church Hall, 30-36 Birmingham Road, and Mount Evelyn) at 4.00 pm to see how things work there and then go to the evening venue when the volunteers arrive at 5.30 to start setting up. Then to eat dinner with the guests and volunteers and stay until the end of the shift (10pm).

Then to go back in the morning for the breakfast shift and pack and then meet together to talk in more detail about the project and how it might work in and around Hobart.

But what happened! Town Planning queries were raised by one Council and everything turned upside down the very week of my visit

On the Tuesday of the week of my visit Stable One was ordered to cease operation on the basis of an alleged breach of their current occupancy permit.

The issue is included in this report because of its similarity to the Salvation Army and Hobart city Mission shelter which is conducted on council property in Hobart.

The Issue explored

The success and expansion of the model across multiple local government areas created some confusion amongst building practitioners as to what scale of building permit approvals would be required and has in fact prevented the wide scale implementation of the winter accommodation program in 2019.

Some municipal building surveyors, including the Yarra Ranges, had expressed a view that churches must obtain a new occupancy permit to change the use of their buildings to include 'accommodation'. Stable One believed this incorrectly characterised the program and inflated the perceived risk.

It argued that although guests are given the opportunity to sleep on a camp bed, it is in no way a kind of private lodging. Volunteers remain awake overnight to ensure the safety of everyone. Policies and procedures around admissions and health and safety also mitigate risk. The primary function and use of the program is to provide those experiencing homelessness a place to seek '*protection or sanctuary from hostile conditions*' (Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'Shelter').

Actual data from the few pilot programs that successfully operate in Victoria in winter 2019, showed that the actual usage of the buildings in each case, is very low, (somewhere in the order of 8-9 total nights per building over the three month winter period.) This is because multiple buildings have been volunteered in each case. As well it is a fairly onerous task for the organisers because they are providing volunteers to act as caretakers each night, for each venue.

The project maintained that the limited scope, scale and duration of the program (13 nights in each church per year) precludes any inconsistency between the use of the church and its classification as an 'assembly building' and that Stable One had gone above and beyond in terms of health and safety measures.

Participating churches have emergency management plans, annual essential safety measures reports and have installed new or extra smoke detectors. They have also had a Health and Safety Consultant from RLink complete risk assessments for all buildings and provide specific training to venue coordinators.

The Resolution for Victoria

To resolve the issue of town planning considerations following the meeting to which I was an observer the Victorian planning commission agreed to develop ministerial guidelines to provide guidance to practitioners and building owners in relation to determining classifications and approving crisis accommodation (primarily

focussed on Homeless people), in non-residentially classified, public and private buildings.

Primarily the buildings under consideration are owned by religious institutions and welfare agencies and as such are generally multi use buildings, catering for a broad range of activities, including but not limited to, religious gatherings, social activities, youth group activities , health and welfare provision , food share distribution, counselling services and crisis intervention assistance.

The Outcome

- The Victorian Building Authority sent a formal written response and draft of the practice note to the Ombudsman for comment. This included their thoughts on a ministerial guideline.
- VBA believe that a change to the building code is probably in order. This will take some time but **will apply nationally**. Submissions would probably be made by September 2020
- There is a belief that the Practice Note by the VBA will serve as a good interim solution.

Following legal advice, Stable One's Winter Night Shelter went ahead in winter 2019.

Notwithstanding the suspension of the regular project a pandemic holding model is adopted by this organisation for one region and is operating currently. The early signs of success are already apparent .It comprises the following

Yarra Valley Winter Shelter 2020

A community response to homelessness

Over the last three winters Stable One has partnered with local churches to open up their premises to provide shelter to some of the Yarra Valley's most vulnerable community members. The organisation has also developed a Winter Shelter Network which resources and supports other churches to replicate the model. 2020 was to see eight shelters operating in Victoria, one in New South Wales and one in Queensland. In March it became clear that the COVID-19 pandemic would make these large-scale community projects, which traditionally engage around 200 volunteers, impossible to operate safely.

Rather than throw in the towel, Stable One set about finding an alternative that would work for their local project in the Yarra Valley. A supportive owner of a conference centre agreed to rent his facility to Stable One, local and federal government approval was gained, an Advisory Committee was formed and a new vision was born *for a community that cares, connects and empowers people experiencing homelessness.*

Care – a welcoming, inclusive, safe and restoring community

Connect – building healthy relationships and collaborating with support services

Empower – journeying together, supporting and encouraging growth

A busy three months of planning and preparation took place. Volunteers were recruited and trained. The pantry was stocked and other donations collected via an online gift registry which churches, local businesses and

community members signed up for. Grade 10 students from a local trade school helped prepare the property – moving beds, sorting donations, tidying up the grounds etc. Stable One’s managing director, Jenny Willetts and her husband John relocated as live-in managers. Local churches signed up to provide cooks and evening meals one night each week for three months.

On 1 July, the new-look Yarra Valley Winter Shelter opened its doors. People experiencing homelessness who met the admissions criteria and were keen to engage with and contribute to the community and its programs were invited to stay for up to three months. Lodgers have their own room (many with stunning views across the valley). There are common spaces for lounging, watching TV, dining room, laundry and many acres of property to roam. The location is fairly remote but a partnership with Eastern Volunteers provided a very low-cost minibus hire to enable transport to and from town, bus stops, appointments etc. Lodgers contribute to the program by paying heavily subsidised board and lodging as well as sharing in the care and operation of the property.

Each lodger is allocated a volunteer who is trained to be their ‘Alongsider’. This person is not a professional mentor, social worker or counsellor but someone who will walk with and encourage them. They might go to appointments to offer support and care, check in regularly to see how they are going and can also stay connected beyond their stay at the shelter.

The latest COVID restrictions have suppressed many of the planned ‘empowering’ activities. However, lodgers have still been supported to

do a variety of things: cooking, wood-chopping, enrolling in further education studies, job searching, private rental applications and viewings, social skills sessions, 'Tobacco Free' course with Eastern Health, tai chi, geo-caching, painting, mosaics, walking and running. In addition there have been many connections with professional supports – doctors, mental health services, Centrelink social workers, legal support etc.

This program is being treated as a pilot and will run until the end of September. A period of evaluation will then take place and once COVID restrictions are lifted, it is hoped that the shelter will reopen and run year-round.

Applicability for Hobart?

The comment and professional opinion of the director of planning Mr Noye would be valuable as the issue clearly has some potential application to the current Salvation Army in Hobart city Mission night shelter. Note the potential for national code amendments.

Part 1 of the Toolkit (newly revised) is available for interested elected officials.

Due to the groundswell of interest in the model, the desire to support and encourage churches to start new projects as well as the need for ongoing sustainability, Stable one is in the process of developing and

costing a resource package which will be available soon. This will include:

- Toolkit (Part 2) - Policies, Procedures, Forms, Role Descriptions etc.
- Support and Consultancy
- Coordinator Training
- Volunteer Training (including Handbook)
- Stable One Winter Night Shelter Network membership (quarterly newsletters, annual conference, online Coordinators Forum)

I've have attached the evaluation from last year's project which gives some good insight into what Stable One was able to achieve.

What can the City of Hobart do?

Through both the housing with dignity reference group, the greater Hobart reference group of mayors and advisors and facilitating events such as homelessness week the city is doing a lot in the space. Hobart was of course the capital city which put homelessness on the agenda for the council of capital cities group in 2012 notwithstanding that the right to housing and the dignity of having shelter whilst the responsibility of all levels of government and the community is primarily responsibility of the State government.

I suggest that the Council consider investigating its support for a similar project to operate in winter 2021 in Hobart and potentially in conjunction

with the current Hobart city Mission and Salvation Army emergency shelter project.

The Bishop of Tasmania is personally supportive of a thorough investigation of the initiative and his backing would be well regarded and possibly crucial to success.

The practice and procedure material which would be provided by stable one at no cost to any auspicing body would be of great assistance.

Stable One would be happy to visit Hobart when travel is possible and safe to take place if there was interest amongst the churches there in running one or more shelters. Its founder and coordinator Jenny Willetts comments that Stable One exists to primarily support the church to do something practical to support people who are homeless. Stable One believes that is it is called to do this work as Christians and also that the Church is uniquely placed to act because it has both buildings and people. In her words "we provide 'more than a place to stay'. It is love in action and we know that the care and connection we provide is as valuable as the physical safety, warmth and comfort'.

Jenny Willetts

Managing Director

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It is NOT intended that council provide financial support at this time.

Recommended for consideration of council.

Alderman Damon Thomas