

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

25 October 2022

---

### **Housing affordability and homelessness, key issues for Bendigo locals**

Housing affordability and availability, homelessness, inability to access adequate social services, and the impact of domestic and family violence are some of the issues impacting those living and working in Bendigo and surrounding areas. In a recent public forum hosted by Catholic Social Services Victoria (CSSV) at St Matthew's Church in Long Gully, Bendigo, more than 30 locals attended to hear from members of parliament and experts working in social services, to discuss what's important to them leading up to the Victorian state election on 26 November.

The forum, Regional Matters, is the second of three held in Victoria by CSSV, the peak body that represents 43 social services members from across the state. The first was held in Bairnsdale in late September, and the third session will be held in [Horsham](#) on October 20.

Guest speakers at the forum included the Hon. Maree Edwards MP, Member for Bendigo West and Speaker of the Victorian Legislative Assembly; Dr Cate Sinclair, Legislative Council Lead and Greens Candidate for Northern Victorian; the Hon. Wendy Lovell MLC, Member for the Northern Victoria region; Narelle Williams, Manager, Mental Health Wellbeing and Early Years at CatholicCare Victoria; Michael Quinn, State President of the St Vincent de Paul Society; and Terry Westaway, Eaglehawk Conference President of the St Vincent de Paul Society and Chair of the Bendigo Winter Night Shelter.

Mayor of City of Greater Bendigo, Andrea Metcalf was unable to attend, but did send a message to those gathered expressing the City's desire for Greater Bendigo to be a place that 'focuses on wellbeing, equity, and prosperity for all citizens'. According to Ms Metcalf, Greater Bendigo is one of Australia's largest inland cities, supporting a local population of approximately 120,000 and a regional population of close to 250,000. By 2050, Greater Bendigo's population is expected to reach 200,000.

At the forum, Joshua Lourensz, CSSV Executive Director acknowledged the increased costs of living, housing and rent and referenced the [Scarring effects of the pandemic economy](#) report, which highlights the sheer increase in needs across the board. 'The economy has bounced back but the effects of COVID are still being felt,' he said, 'Recovery isn't the story for those on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum nor for casualised workers.' He added that climate change, as seen by the recent floods and fires, continues to affect communities causing additional destruction and strain, and particularly impacts the elderly and those sleeping rough.

Narelle Williams has been working with families throughout the Bendigo region with CatholicCare for 15 years. She said families are experiencing extreme hardships, including huge waiting lists for services, which have been exacerbated by COVID. 'Financial insecurity is common, along with housing insecurity. As a result, children are missing school,' she said.

'In rural towns, transport is limited, and children can't get to medical or other services, or social activities. Rural schools have limited funding and resources to support families. There are some

chaplains, but they are limited with funding for one day a week. It is falling on teachers to provide support.'

Speaking about the social services sector, she said its underfunded, and that practitioners are underpaid, too. 'It is hard to recruit quality workers. There is a lack of qualified workers in regional areas, and there is no housing for them, even if we could get staff.'

Michael Quinn emphasised housing as the biggest problem faced by the community and the ongoing need for wrap around support, such as access to nurses, counsellors, doctors, podiatrists, and dentists. He explained that SVDP is involved in 30 social housing units in Kennington, with 82 additional units being built.

'In Bendigo, the work involves a \$27million investment, \$22million of which is being contributed by Vinnies,' he said. 'This is due to be completed in 2025 [but] we can't do it by ourselves. We need to work together; state and local government, and other faith communities.'

Terry Westaway echoed Michael's sentiments that more affordable housing and wrap around services are needed, adding that SVDPS is seeing more and more people affected by trauma and mental health issues. Winter Night Shelter operates on a budget of \$30,000 annually, but needs \$200,000 seed funding to continue to make a significant difference.

The Hon. Maree Edwards MP acknowledged the work of the organisations represented at the forum working in the region. She said it's 'no surprise that housing affordability is one of the biggest challenges we are facing more broadly. In the 1990s, governments reduced funding for public and social housing [so] we have been behind the eight ball for a number of decades now.'

She emphasised that partnerships are needed, that housing requires support across governments, social services, and developers and noted that the Commonwealth Games athlete's village in Bendigo will be used for social and affordable housing.

She also noted that recommendations from the Mental Health Royal Commission and Family Violence Royal Commission are being rolled out. 'Orange Door is making a real difference and providing wrap around support and in regard to student supports in schools, there are mental health practitioners in every secondary school and there is funding for practitioners in every primary school from next year.'

Dr Cate Sinclair has worked in public health for 30 years. She focussed on the increased pressure on health workers and community health workers and highlighted that families are under a lot of pressure. She said the level of payments for community services is 'not adequate' and there is not enough investment in the wrap around supports, particularly for those who have been through the criminal justice system (prisons).

The Hon. Wendy Lovell said that funding can be given, but the real test is what outcomes are being achieved? 'Housing is the number one issue,' she said, 'Without housing we can't help people get their lives back on track. Wrap around support is very important.'

'The housing wait list has exploded ... Domestic violence has seen a big increase in Bendigo overall since 2014, although a decrease in the last year is good news, and a lot more needs to be done in mental health. Two in five young people currently have mental health issues. We need to do more and we need to do it better.'

Questions and concerns from the floor focussed on housing and homelessness and support for those most in need in the local community. There was discussion around the use of the

Commonwealth Games housing village to help meet needs, and ideas around encouraging more equitable and affordable renting opportunities across the area. 'We need to be reminded, this is not just a government problem, it is a whole of community problem,' said Ms Lovell.

There was consensus in the room that the issues needed to be worked on together, with local, state, and federal government input, and from both government-funded organisations and others, including church groups and sporting groups.

'It's important to have dialogue with current and potential political leaders. Whoever forms the next government, we want to see those on the margins care for,' said Josh.

For more information, [contact Josh Lourensz](#), CSSV Executive **Director**.