Shaping Housing First Implementation in NSW

Homelessness NSW Conference

↘

Workshop March 2026

Acknowledgement
Of Country

Homelessness
NSW

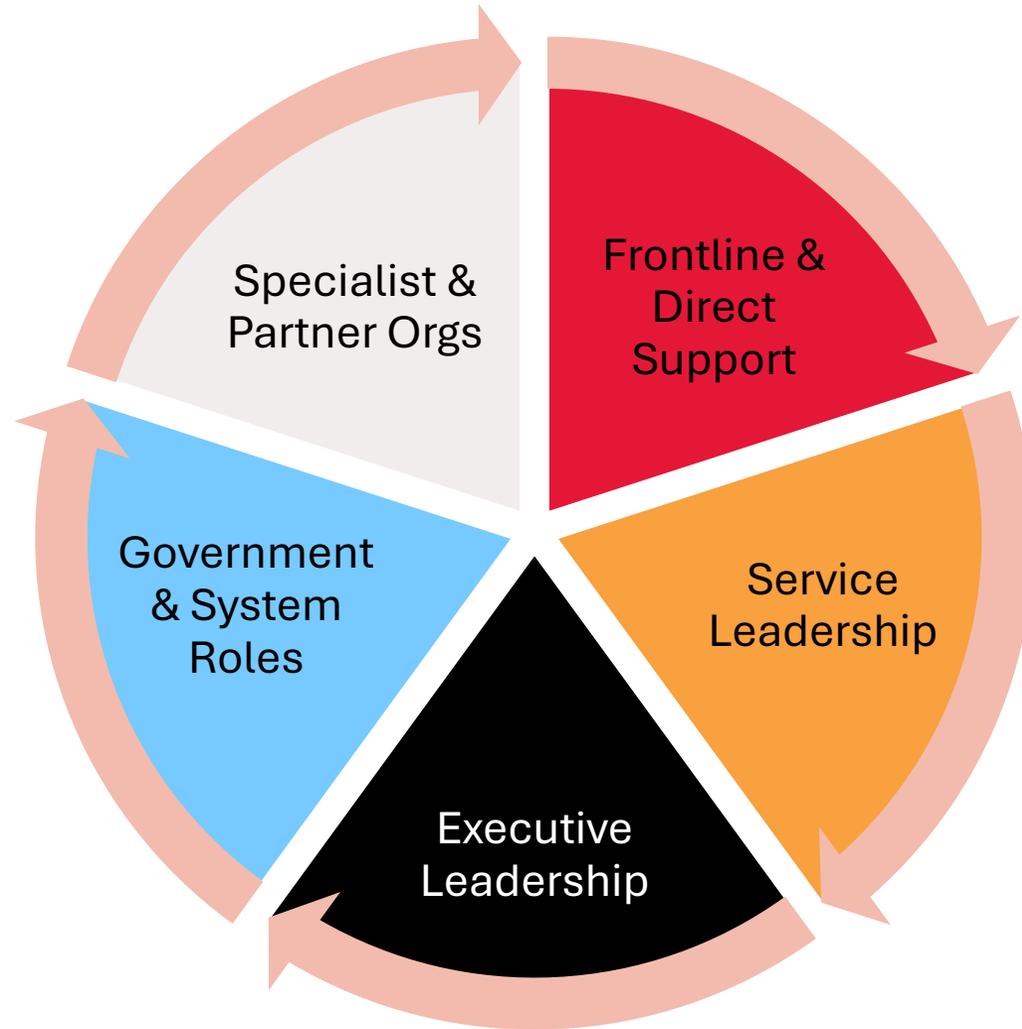# Facilitator Introductions

Jessica O'Brien
Project Officer – Together
Home/Housing First

Tess McGregor
Senior Project Officer – Learning &
Development

Who's in the Room Today

Learning Objectives

Understand the Australian Housing First principles. Not just what they are, but why they matter at a system and service level.

Explore what implementation looks like in practice, including the key challenges and constraints we face in NSW.

Reflect on your own role, whether it's in leadership, governance, frontline, policy or advocacy and identify practical levers you can influence.

Workshop Agenda

- Welcome & Introductions

- Objectives & Agenda

- Icebreaker – Housing First True or False?

- Housing First Principles for Australia

- Housing First in NSW – Context, Challenges & What's Changing

- Understanding Challenges Through a Systems Lens

- Principle Deep Dive: People have a Right to a home & Iceberg Activity

- **Afternoon Tea 2:30 – 2:50**

- Finding Your Influence: From Awareness to Action

- Principle Deep Dive: Active Engagement Without Coercion & Activity

- Group Reflection & Key Learnings

- Close & Next Steps

Housekeeping

Restrooms & Emergency Exits

In case of an emergency, please follow Homelessness NSW and conference staff instructions

Movement During Activity

This is an interactive session but please feel free to stand and stretch if necessary and do whatever supports your comfort and focus

Choice & Control

Participation is **always optional**

You may pass on any question or activity. Share only what feels comfortable for you

Parking Lot

We will use a 'parking lot' system to address any questions that pop up outside of the agenda scope.

They will be answered at the end of followed up by an email.

Workbook

The workbook is yours to use and support today's session

Write, reflect, or simply listen
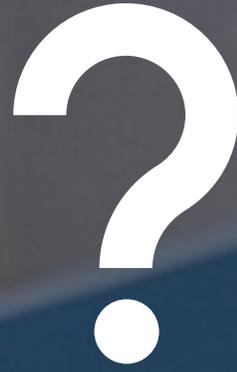
Take it with you as a future resource

Homelessness NSW

Icebreaker – Table Introductions

At your table please share:

- Name

- Role & Organisation

- One word to *describe* your day so far

Q&A

Housing First – True or False

Homelessness NSW

Question 1 – True or False

"Housing First means 'housing only' - no support is provided."

False

Question 2 – True or False

"People need to be 'housing ready' before entering Housing First."

False

Homelessness
NSW

Question 3 – True or False

"Housing First has strong evidence behind it internationally."

True

Question 4 – True or False

"Housing First means people can keep their housing even if they miss appointments or relapse."

True

What is Housing First & Why is it Effective?

HOUSING AS A HUMAN RIGHT

Australian Housing First Principles

- PEOPLE HAVE A RIGHT TO A HOME
- HOUSING AND SUPPORT ARE SEPARATED
- FLEXIBLE SUPPORT FOR AS LONG AS IT IS NEEDED
- CHOICE AND SELF-DETERMINATION
- ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITHOUT COERCION
- SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION
- RECOVERY ORIENTATED PRACTICE
- HARM REDUCTION APPROACH

Homelessness NSW

People have a right to a home

- ✓ Housing is a human right
- ✓ Immediate access
- ✓ No treatment or behavioural preconditions

Housing and support are separated

- ✓ Housing and support are functionally separate
- ✓ No requirement to participate in support to maintain tenancy
- ✓ Support continues if tenancy changes or fails

16

Choice and self-determination

- ✓ Choice of housing type and location
- ✓ Person-centered planning
- ✓ Strengths-based approach

Active engagement without coercion

- ✓ Support workers take responsibility to maintain relationships
- ✓ Persistent, respectful offers of support
- ✓ Build trust through transparency, reliability, and trauma-informed practice

Recovery orientated practice

✓ Recovery focuses on regaining a sense of self and community

✓ Strengths and resilience focus

✓ Culturally and developmentally safe practice

Harm reduction approach

✓ Proactively reduce risks from substance use, gambling, self-harm, or other high-risk behaviors

✓ Provide factual, non-judgmental information for informed choices

✓ Support guided by individual choice

Flexible support for as long as it is needed

✓ Wrap around support for as long as needed

✓ Holistic and person-directed

✓ Easy re-engagement without reassessment

Social and community inclusion

✓ Belonging and social connection

✓ Rebuild relationships with family, culture, and community

✓ Participation in education, employment, volunteering, and recreational activities

Questions?

Housing First In NSW

↘

Context, Challenges & What's Changing
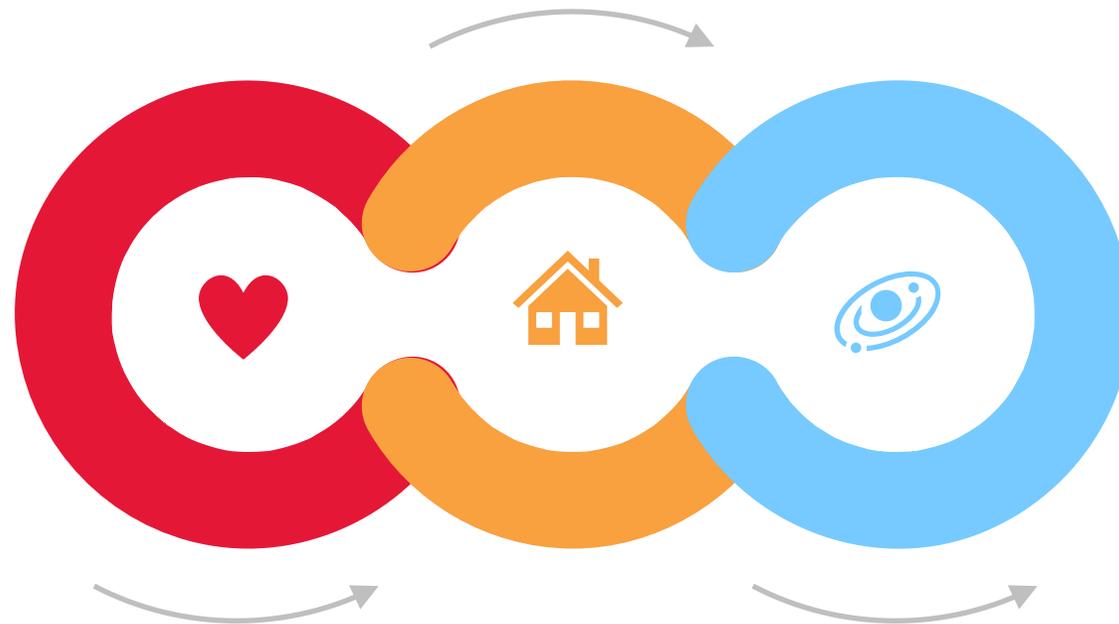
Which Housing First Are We Talking About?

Housing First Model/Program

Addition of a Housing First service model into existing system which comes with funded housing places and provides low caseloads and flexible timeframes

Housing First Practice

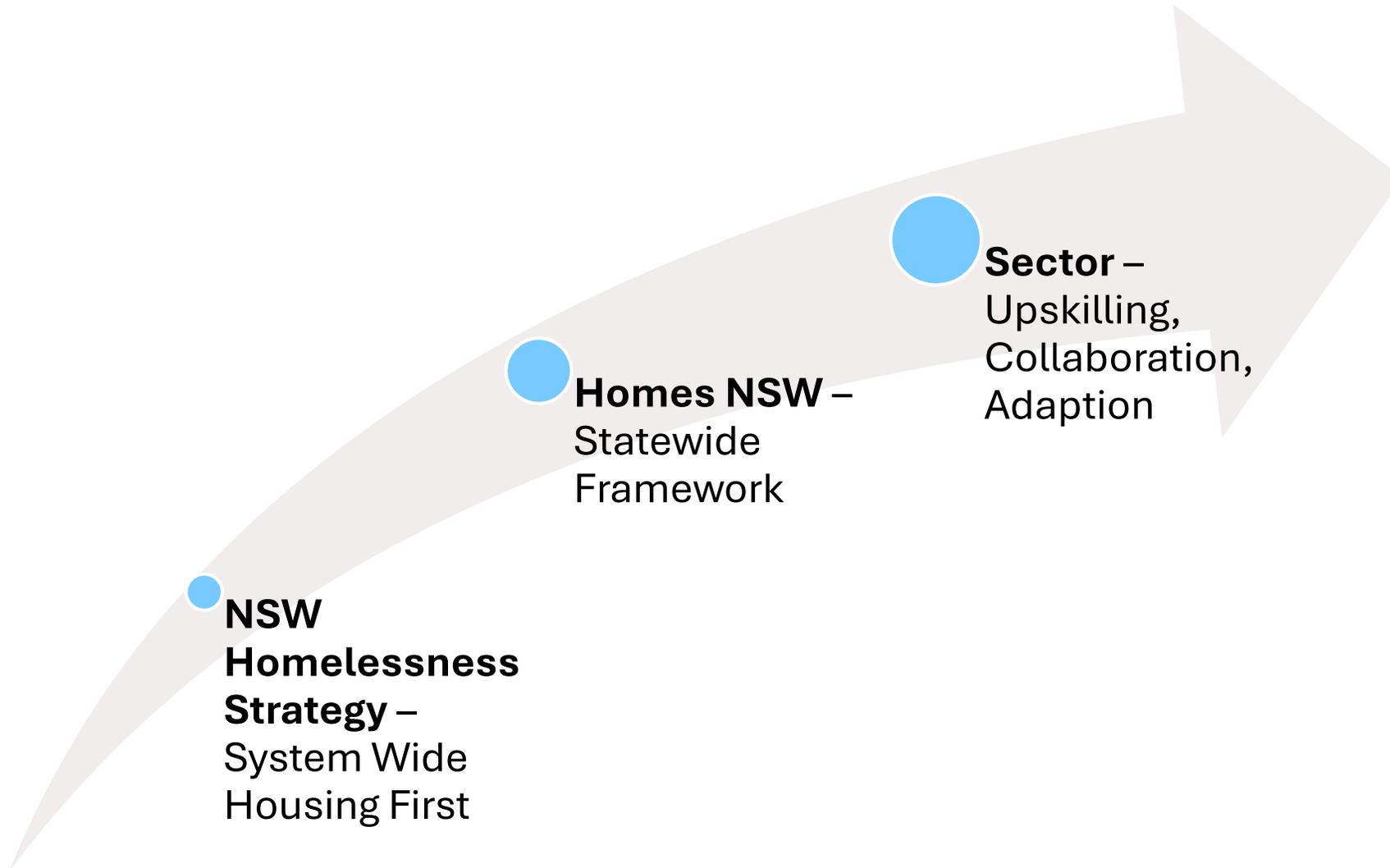Embedding the 8 principles into day-to-day practice

Housing First System

A whole-system approach: quickly house people and deliver the support they need

Homelessness NSW

The NSW Moment: What's Changing

Sector – Upskilling, Collaboration, Adaption

Homes NSW – Statewide Framework

NSW Homelessness Strategy – System Wide Housing First

Homelessness NSW

Addressing the Challenges

- Housing, funding, and risk are the realities we navigate in our system

- Whilst acknowledging the challenges, today we focus on:

What's driving these challenges

Where does influence sit

How small actions across roles can move NSW toward a Housing First system
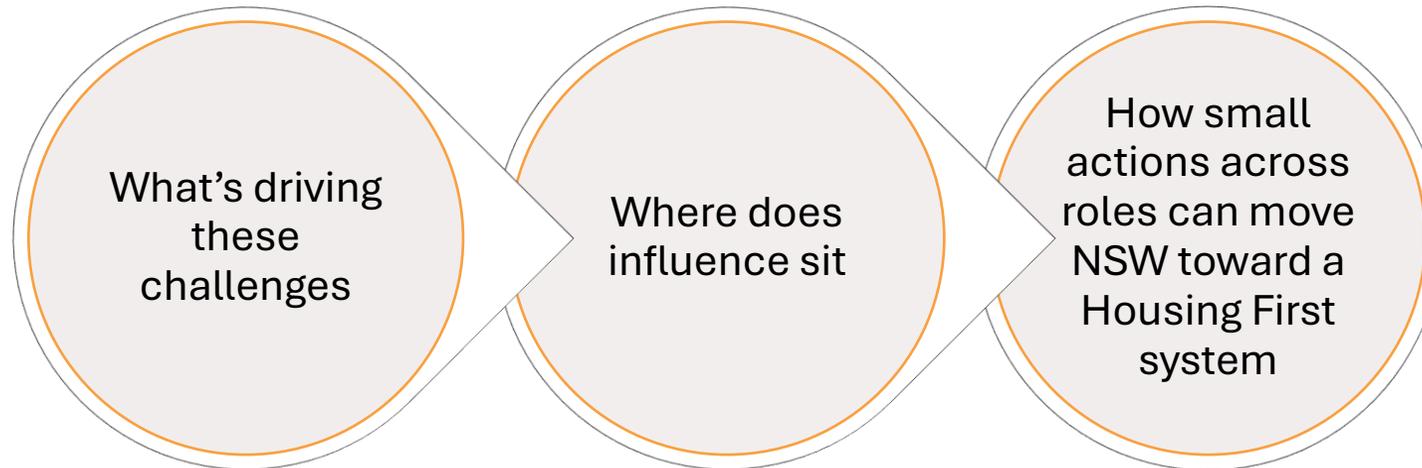
Homelessness NSW

Break

5 minutes

Understanding Challenges Through A Systems Change Lens

You're Already Doing Systems Change

Have you ever tried to improve the Homelessness sector?

- Contacted an MP
- Given policy feedback
- Advocated for a client
- Supported a pre-budget submission
- Built cross-sector relationships

What is Systems Change?

Systems change = action from *inside* the system to shift how it works

"Programs help people beat the odds. Systems change helps change the odds."

Homelessness NSW Systems Change Report 2023.

By bringing this perspective to our work, we can:

- Better understand where challenges sit in the sector

- See where we have influence - what can we actually change

- Set clear aspirations for what we want to be different, and organise our efforts to make change more likely
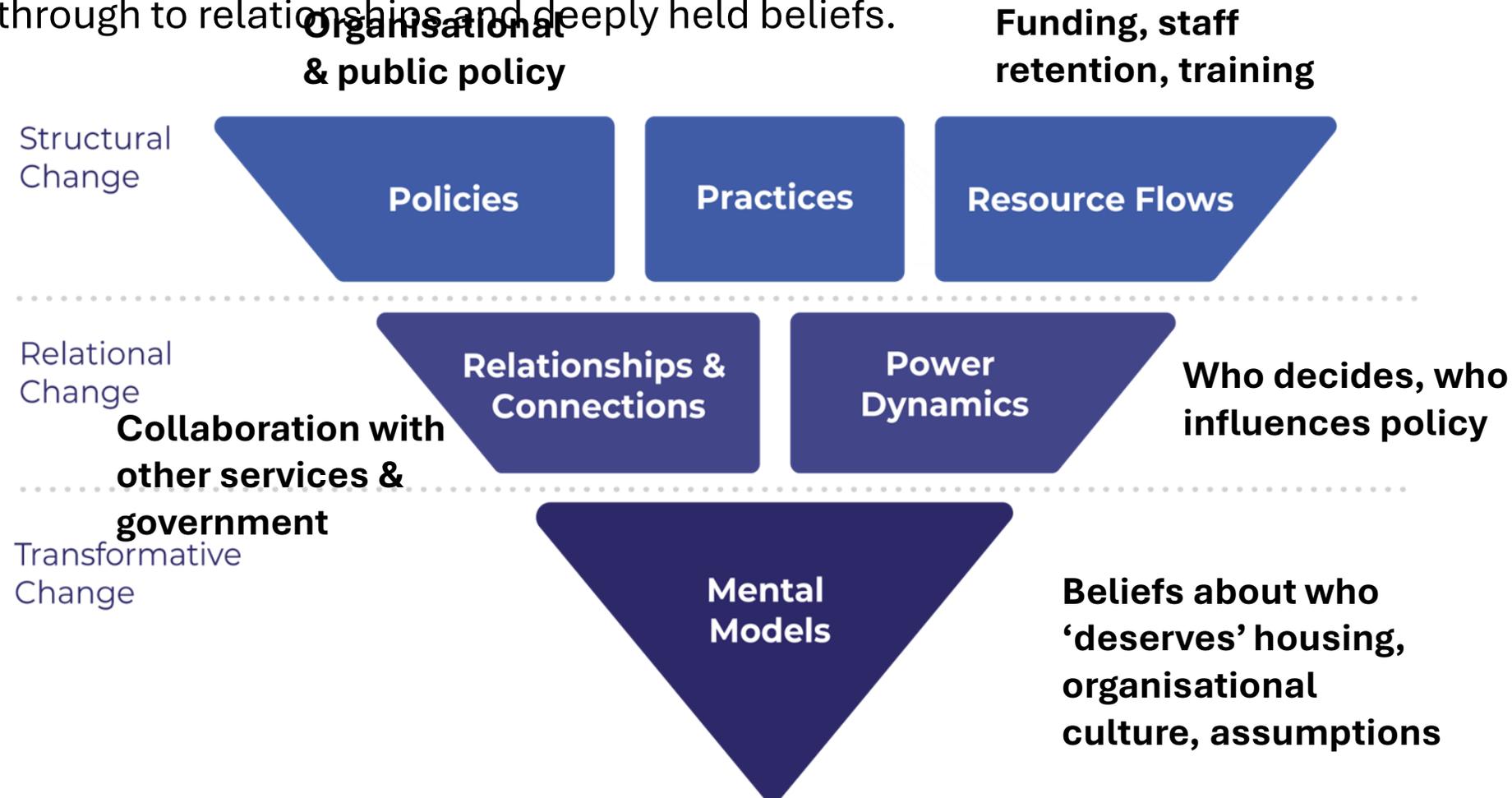
Why Systems Change Matters for Housing First in NSW

- A systems change approach to Housing First is an alignment of a whole system to prioritise housing people quickly and providing support as needed

- Moves initiatives from pilot → statewide practice

- Supports cross-sector collaboration

- Helps address structural barriers in the system

Homelessness NSW

Six Conditions of Systems Change

What actually needs to change in our Homelessness system?
The conditions give us a way to see the layers of change required from policies and funding, through to relationships and deeply held beliefs.

Organisational & public policy

Funding, staff retention, training

Structural Change

Policies

Practices

Resource Flows

Relational Change

Relationships & Connections

Power Dynamics

Who decides, who influences policy

Collaboration with other services & government

Transformative Change

Mental Models

Beliefs about who 'deserves' housing, organisational culture, assumptions

Homelessness NSW

Based on what you've learnt so far.

Think about a challenge you face in implementing Housing First in NSW.
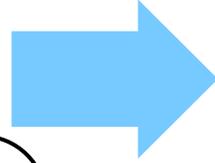

Which of the six conditions does it sit in?

1. Policies
2. Practices
3. Resource flows
4. Relationships & connections
5. Power dynamics
6. Mental models

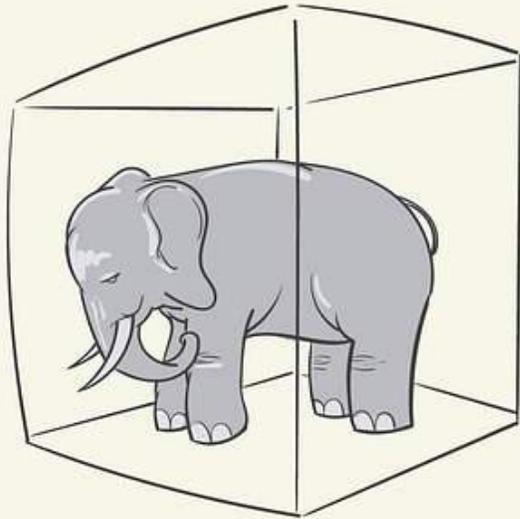# Applying Systems Change to Housing First in NSW

What we've done

- Explored what System Change is
- Considered why Systems Change is essential for shaping Housing First in NSW
- Unpacked the Six Conditions of Systems Change

What we're doing next

- Apply Systems Change in Practice
- Deep Dive: 'People Have a Right to a Home'
- Explore the visible challenges and deeper drivers
- Identify where we can act and influence Housing First implementation

Homelessness NSW

Principle Deep Dive: 'People Have a Right to a Home'

ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Rights base

Forget 'housing readiness'

Rapid housing

Maintain tenancy during periods of leave

Self - contained

Safe & suitable

Standard rental conditions

Full tenancy rights

Maximise capacity to live independently

PEOPLE HAVE A RIGHT TO A HOME

Access – Immediate access to a permanent, self-contained home which meets people's cultural and social needs.

Eligibility – No treatment or behavioural eligibility pre-conditions.

Tenancy – People enjoy full tenancy rights and standard rental conditions with security of tenure.

Suitability – Location, affordability, access to services and quality of property meets the specific needs of the individual or family that are housed. Considerations include safety and community connections, and for people with physical disability - maximising their capacity to live independently.

Sustainability – People are able to keep their homes if they have absences for family, cultural or other reasons (eg. hospital or prison stays) and are assisted to quickly find a new home if a tenancy fails.

Safety – The housing provided must be safe and secure.

Housing First Vs The Staircase Model (Micah Project, 2017)
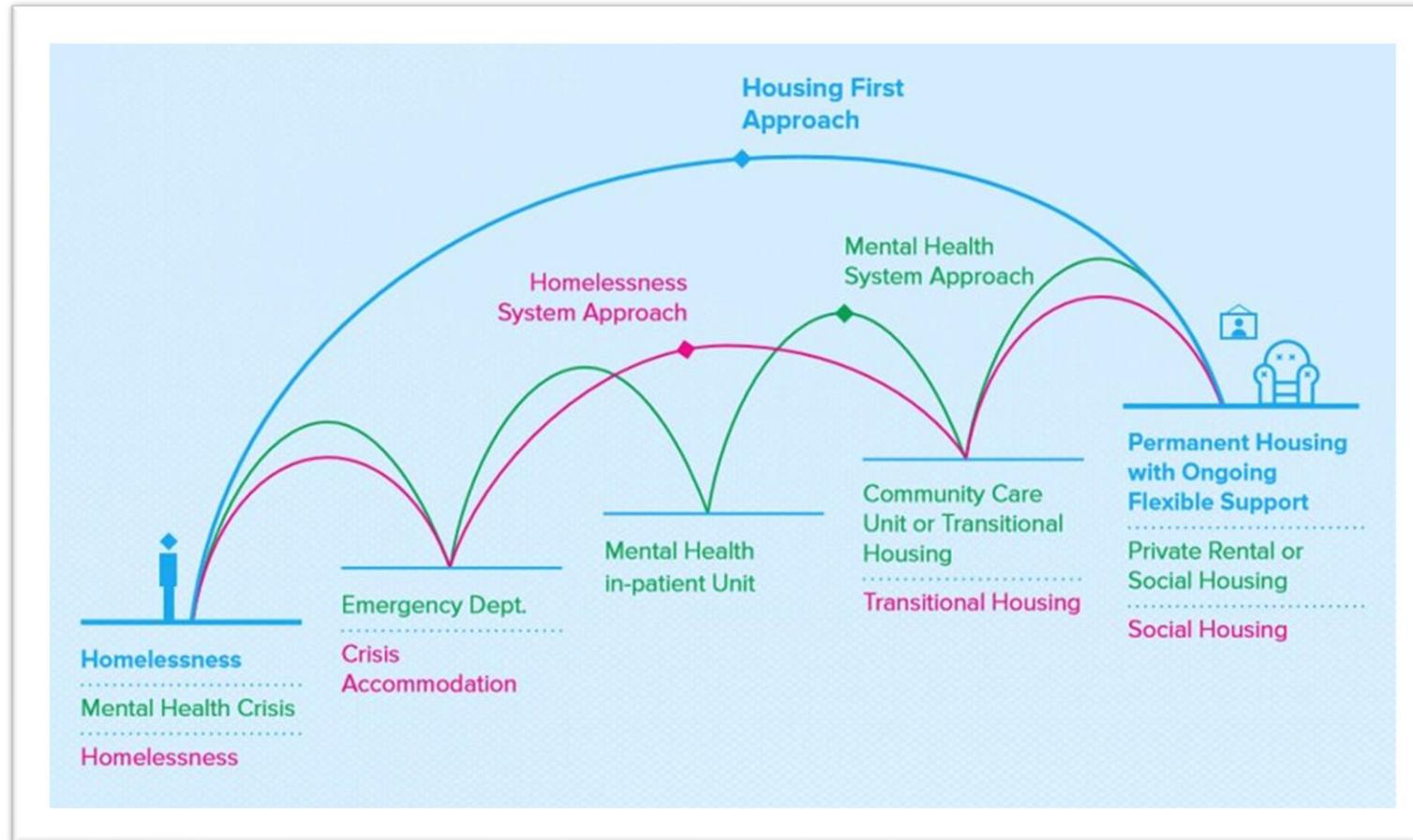
Upholding 'People Have a Right To a Home'- Advocating for Housing Rights

No more 'housing readiness' mindset. Housing is not something that should be earned

Advocate at the levels we can influence

Name structural issues openly

Reduce harm and provide appropriate supports while housing is delayed

Exploring 'People Have a Right to a Home' - Iceberg Activity

Step 1: What is a visible challenge? 'People Have a Right to a Home'

What is something we experience day-to-day that prevents us from implementing this principle?

Limited access to immediate, non-conditional housing

Homelessness NSW

Step 2. What are the deeper drivers?

Limited access to immediate, non-conditional housing

The 6 systems change conditions can help us identify some of the drivers

In your workbook: note down what is causing this challenge

CHP and SHS having different practice approaches

Leases are insecure & time-limited

Policies

Practices

Resource Flows

Long waitlists for social housing

Relationships & Connections

Organisational advocacy power varies by size / location

Power Dynamics

Housing should be earned

Mental Models (Beliefs & Assumptions)

What We'll Do Next

After the break:

- Share 1 insight from each table
- Turn barriers into actions
- Identify where your influence sits

Homelessness NSW

Step 2. What are the deeper drivers?

Limited access to immediate, non-conditional housing

The 6 systems change conditions can help us identify some of the drivers

In your workbook: note down what is causing this challenge

CHP and SHS having different practice approaches

Leases are insecure & time-limited

Staircase approach

Defunding of programs

Long waitlists for social housing

Housing is recognised as a human right in Australia but not fully guaranteed by law

Organisational advocacy power varies by size / location

CHP / Gov manage housing supply, not SHS

Housing should be earned

Some people 'choose' to be homeless

Policies

Practices

Resource Flows

Relationships & Connections

Power Dynamics

Mental Models (Beliefs & Assumptions)

42

Break

20 minutes

Please return by 2:50pm

Step 2. What are the deeper drivers?

Limited access to immediate, non-conditional housing

The 6 systems change conditions can help us identify some of the drivers

In your workbook: note down what is causing this challenge

CHP and SHS having different practice approaches

Leases are insecure & time-limited

Staircase approach

Defunding of programs

Long waitlists for social housing

Housing is recognised as a human right in Australia but not fully guaranteed by law

Organisational advocacy power varies by size / location

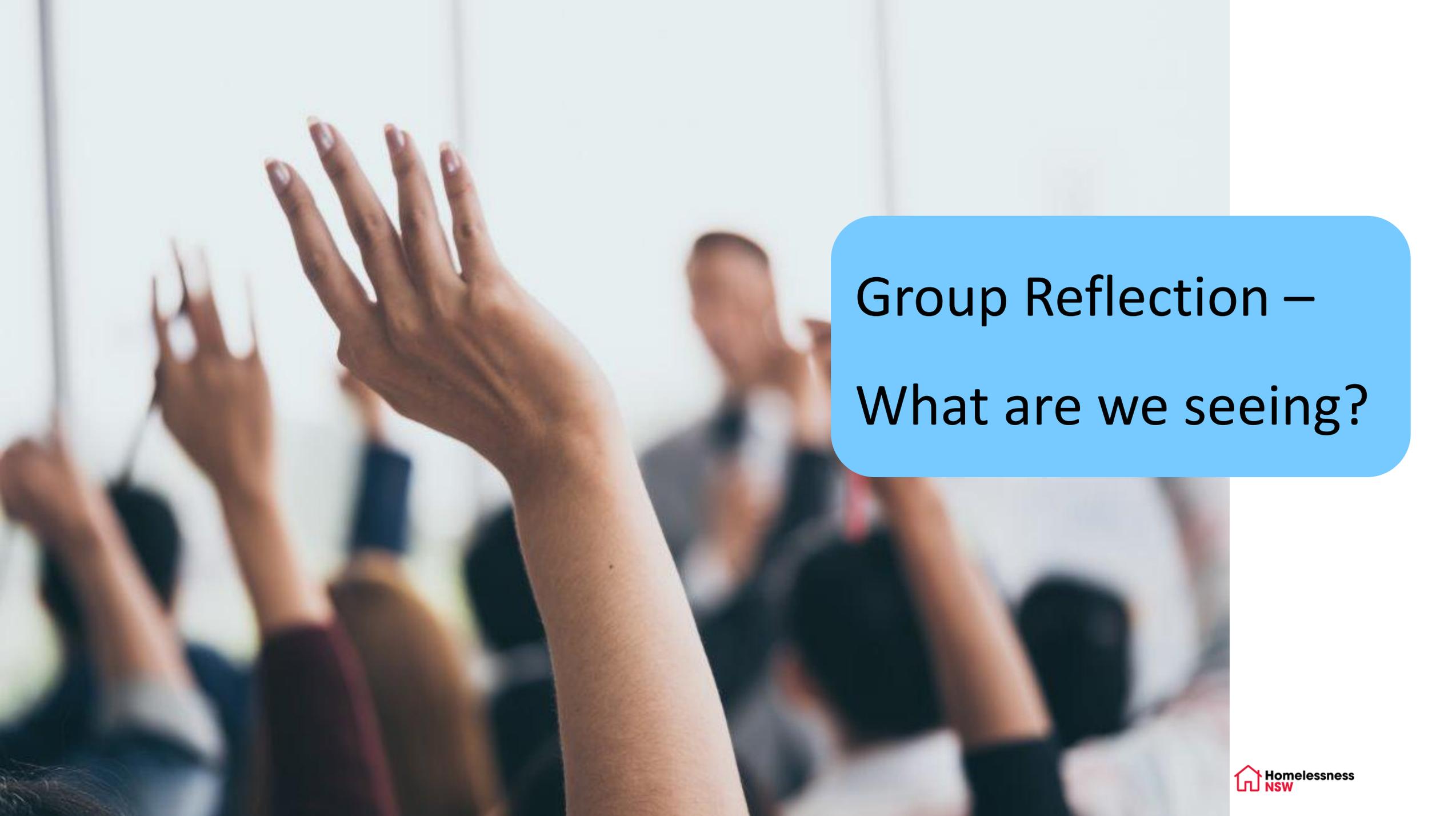CHP / Gov manage housing supply, not SHS

Housing should be earned

Some people 'choose' to be homeless

Policies

Practices

Resource Flows

Relationships & Connections

Power Dynamics

Mental Models (Beliefs & Assumptions)

44

Group Reflection –

What are we seeing?

Homelessness NSW

Finding Your Influence: From Awareness To Action

Based on the Challenges and Deeper Drivers Identified...

1 action **I** can take...

1 action my **organisation** can take....

1**system** level change....

Step 1: Write down 1 action per sticky note, using the challenges and drivers from the Iceberg

Step 2: Once finished stick it on the butchers paper provided

Limited Access To Immediate And Non-conditional Housing

1 action I can take….	**1 action my organisation can take….**	**1system level action….**
Become a housing advocate	*Embed Housing First in policy and partnerships*	*Advocate for expanded access to immediate, non-conditional housing supply*
Example: Strengthen referrals and housing applications. Maintain a housing plan over 'treatment plan'	Example: Review internal policies to remove conditional language	Example: Reform allocation systems to prioritise immediate access

Homelessness NSW

Your Zone of Influence

I can influence this directly

My **organisation** can influence this

I have the ability to influence this at a **system level**

Step 1: Based on the actions you identified, move to the sign in the room that best reflects where you think your strongest influence is

Step 2: Share with the person next to you why you chose this zone

Homelessness NSW

Principle Deep Dive: 'Active Engagement without Coercion'

Onus is on the worker

Use established rapport

'Not giving up'

Establish & maintain trust

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITHOUT COERCION

Responsibility – The onus is on workers to maintain the relationship and employ creative and imaginative approaches to ensure their work is engaging rather than blaming people for "disengaging".

Persistence – While individuals and families can refuse support, staff persist without intruding and use their relationship to make ongoing and regular offers in ways that show care and respect for people.

Compassion – A deep understanding of people, means that support is designed to fit the individual rather than the individual being required to fit the service.

Availability – Caseloads are small and support is available outside normal working hours. This allows workers to be persistent and proactive in their approach, doing "whatever it takes" and not giving up and closing when engagement is low.

Trust – Because of people's past experiences of trauma, extended homelessness and exclusion, it is critical that services build trust and have a strong commitment to "doing what they say", so they are experienced as trauma and gender informed, reliable and transparent.

Continued attempts & re-evaluating approach

Deep listening & curiosity

Support fits the individual

Follow through

Homelessness NSW

Unpacking How Coercion Accidentally Seeps Into Practice

- Professional boundaries that can be understood as a power imbalance in practice
- Using language that perceives a threat 'you have to engage' or 'you need to engage'
- Avoid the C words... 'client', 'customer', consumer'
- Conditions that are tied to housing
- Withdrawal of support due to disengagement
- Risk logic overpowering autonomy
- Illusion of choice

Homelessness NSW

'Active Engagement Without Coercion': In Practice

Adapting Engagement and Swapping Language: Activity

Focus on practical ways to adapt engagement so it feels safe, supportive and person-led. Focus on ways to adapt language to foster trust, reduce stigma and empower clients.

Part 1 – Adapting engagement
How could you creatively meet them where they are?
What small gestures, flexible approaches or environment changes could make them feel safe, supported and in control?

Part 2 – Language swap
How could you reframe the language to support choice and autonomy? Tip here is to use your language cheat sheet in your workbook for reference.

Homelessness NSW

Group Reflection & Key Learnings

Reflection Prompts

- *An insight that stayed with me*

- *An action I want to test*

- *A shift I feel empowered to make*

- *Anything else you'd like to share*

Homelessness NSW

Close & Next Steps

Next Steps

1. Complete the Feedback Survey

2. Join the NSW Housing First Network

3. Foundations of Housing First eLearning coming soon

4. Post-Session Summary & Resources Email

Thank you!

References

Homelessness NSW. (2023). Rare, brief and nonrecurring: A system wide approach to ending homelessness together. Available at https://homelessnessnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Rare-brief-and-non-recurring-HNSW-2023-PRINT-version-EMBARGOED-until-7-August-23-1.pdf

Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). The water of systems change. FSG. Available at https://philea.issuelab.org/resource/the-water-of-systems-change.html

Dodd, R., Rodrigues, N., Sequeira, T., & Watkins, L. (2020). Housing First Principles for Australia. Homelessness Australia. Available at https://homelessnessaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Housing-First-Principles.pdf-1.pdf

Golden Key Bristol. (2021). A practical guide to system change. Available at https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/A-practical-guide-to-system-change-2021.pdf?mtime=20220606162323&focal=none

The Water of Systems Change, Kania, Kramer and Senge, https://www.fsg.org/publications/water_of_systems_change