

Enhancing SHS Access Equity for People with Complex Needs: Creating and Sustaining Lasting Systems Change

Homelessness NSW Conference 2026 Panel Presentation

Yvette Doyle | Manager | Homes NSW

Rebecca Mawad | Program Officer | Homes NSW

Courtney | StreetCare, Justice Equity Centre

Suzanne Naden | Bungree Aboriginal Association

Lynda Townsend | SORA Community Services

Charmaine Jones | Justice Equity Centre

12 March 2026



Acknowledgement of Country

I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands of the Dharawal people where we are meeting here today. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of NSW.

I also acknowledge and pay my respects to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues joining us today.

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Setting the scene

What was the issue?

What was the response?

Anna's* Story

When Anna* first approached the NSW Ombudsman, she was in her teens, with significant disabilities, behavioural problems, and a history of involvement in the child protection system. Anna was repeatedly declined services, evicted by some SHS because of aggression or violence, and then later denied access by other SHS because of her past behaviour and/or their apprehension about her possible future behaviour.

In the same period, Anna lost her entitlement temporary accommodation that is available to homeless people, because she allegedly breached the access rules.

At times, Anna slept on the streets. Sometimes, the only available bed was in hospital, where discharge was delayed because no other accommodation could be found.

Despite the efforts of some individual homelessness providers, the system that aims to provide person-centred, integrated supports was unable to give Anna the assistance that she needed.

*Not her real name

Source: <https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/reports/report-to-parliament/specialist-homelessness-services-helping-people-with-high-or-complex-needs>

DCJ responses to NSW Ombudsman Report

2022 Findings

More explicit commitment across system for person-centred wraparound support and a 'No Wrong Door' approach.



Rules on exclusions are fragmented and limited – providers set their own rules on exclusion.



DCJ excludes people experiencing homelessness from Temporary Accommodation (TA) programs.



Systems limitations affect access to SHS.



More monitoring and public information needed.



2026 Status

Commitments **sustained and strengthened** in the *SHS Access, Eviction and Withdrawal of Services Policy* and reiterated in the 2026 SHS Program Specifications.

The *SHS A, E & W Policy* provides **detailed and explicit guidance** on unacceptable and discriminatory exclusion practices and clear advice on temporary service withdrawal.

Updates made to TA policy and procedure to remove exclusion and enhance access and **further work is underway** to improve TA.

Addressed in part through the HIF and NHIF-CC to increase crisis accommodation. Additional support-specific funding required.

AIHW publishes state & territory level data on Unassisted Persons **annually**. Data for **internal** monitoring of SHS refusals is available **quarterly**.

Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS)
Access, Eviction and Withdrawal of Services
Policy

Published date: December 2024



SHS Access, Eviction & Withdrawal of Services Policy

The policy supports SHS providers in making **fair, transparent, and accountable decisions** when delivering services to clients – including situations where services may need to be withdrawn. It promotes a **strengths-based** and **trauma-informed** approach to service provision.

The policy acknowledges that services may sometimes need to be temporarily withdrawn, or that certain risks cannot be safely managed. In such cases, it provides **clear guidance and procedural support** to help providers maintain ethical and inclusive service delivery **whilst navigating complex or challenging situations.**

Source: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2025-03/SHS-Access%2C-Eviction-and-Withdrawal-of-Services-Policy.pdf>

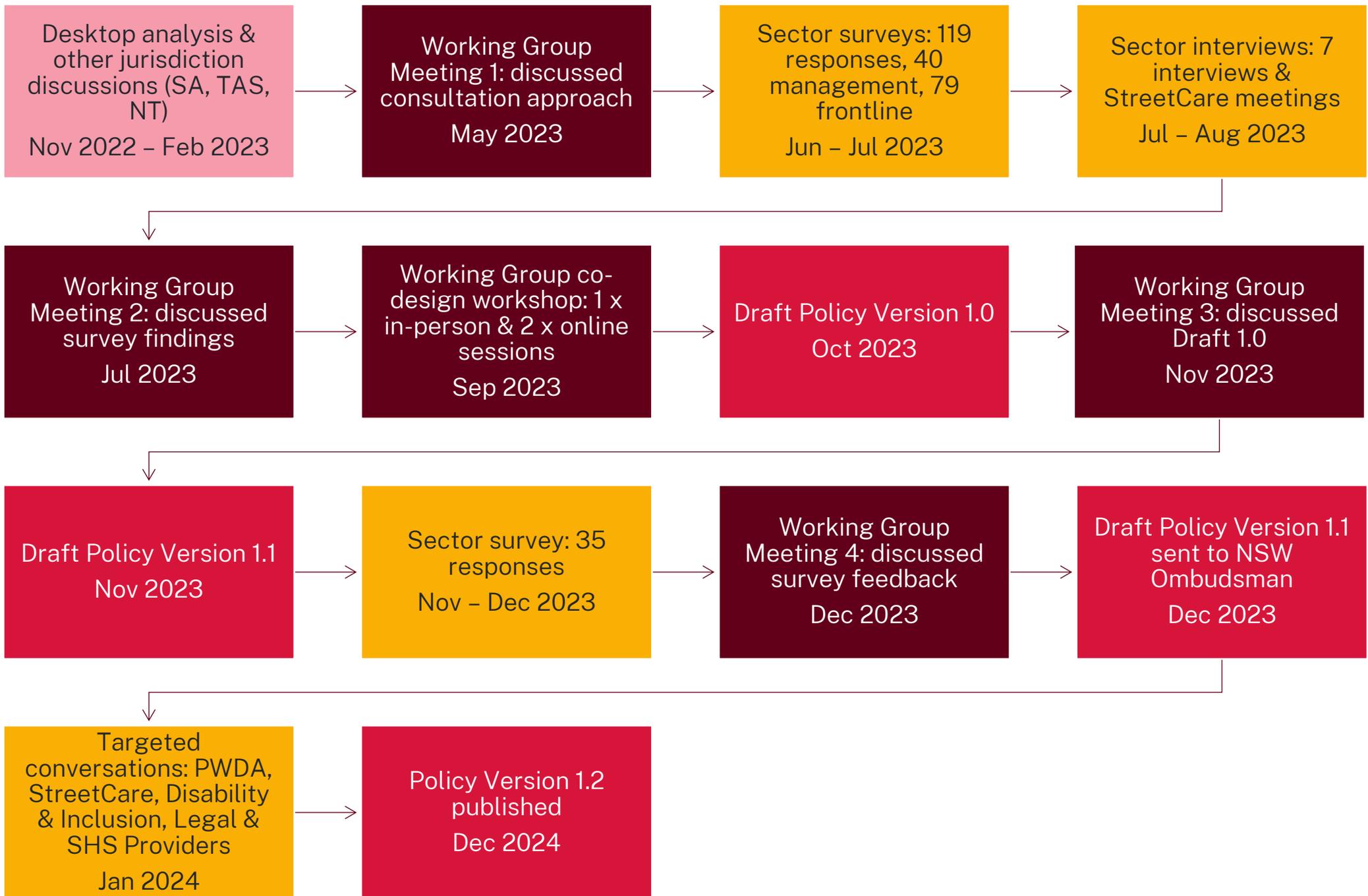
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Creating a policy

How did we do it?

What were our key learnings?

Timeline of Policy Development



Policy design process



Key findings that informed the policy development

Desktop analysis

- Other jurisdictions did not have policies on this topic. One document was helpful from Victoria which discussed discrimination in homelessness services.
- Program Specifications had limited guidance for SHS providers on Withdrawal of services, Unacceptable and discriminatory exclusions, Bans and blacklists and risk management.

Surveys and interviews with providers

- DCJ should consider the safety of the client, safety to other clients and safety for staff
- When accepting a client, the dynamics of crisis refuges need to be considered
- Language is important when developing policy/practice guidance e.g. trauma informed
- Policy cannot be too prescriptive as each service operates differently e.g. target group, location

Project Governance



SHS Access and Withdrawal Working Group - Membership

DCJ

- Strategy, Policy and Commissioning
- Commissioning and Planning (Metro / Regional)
- Youth Justice
- Partnerships
- Transforming Aboriginal Outcomes (TAO)

SHS Sector

- SHS Providers (Metro / Regional)
- Homelessness NSW
- Domestic Violence NSW
- Yfoundations

NSW Government departments

- Health
- NSW Police
- Corrective Services (then moved to DCJ)

Representation

- Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO)
- Aboriginal representative Homelessness NSW
- People with Disability Australia (PWDA)
- Lived experience – StreetCare and JEC

Project Governance



SHS Access and Withdrawal Working Group – How it worked

Role

- Review practice and guidance in relation to SHS access and withdrawal of services
- Provide input into developing a notified policy and practice guidance for SHS
- Advise on District and sector implementation

Structure

- **Independent facilitator** procured – Rooftop Social – so project team could focus on presenting content/research and Secretariat role
- **Four online meetings** May-Dec 2023 and **one face-to-face** Co-design workshop process (opt-in)
- **Sitting fees** provided to ACCO and lived experience members
- **Pre-briefings** with members and de-briefs where needed and specific briefings with lived experience members

Supporting Project documents and tools

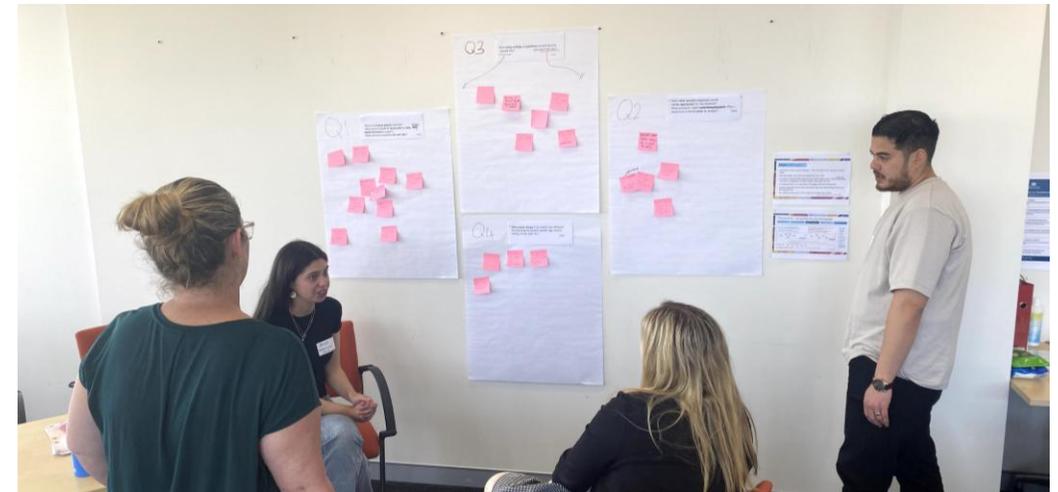
- **Clear Terms of Reference** outlining roles
- **Forward Work Plan** outlining the full 12 months of work ahead
- **“Mural”** collaborative tool used for knowledge management and live sharing and feedback loop in one place
- **Annotated agendas** between Project Team and Rooftop Social to have clear outcomes and objectives

Working Group Process



Co-design

- 4 x Working group online meetings across development phase, 1 x in-person workshop day
- Workshop used lived experience scenarios and asked:
 1. What would good practice look like?
 2. What responses would not be appropriate?
 3. What policy settings would help?



Co-design: Lived Experience Insights

How your story is told can shape service access

Case notes are powerful

Not all disabilities are visible

All behaviour is communication

Information should be current and readily available

Congregate living is not for everyone

Policy in practice guidance

Voice of people with a lived experience of homelessness 3



These stories were shared to encourage service providers to continue to keep an open mind when people are accessing services.

Presenting 'too well' can be a barrier to accessing services

A person with lived experience shared that when they presented to a homelessness service and were articulate, knew their rights and their needs, they were then considered too articulate to receive support.

SHS providers in these instances will need to keep an open mind when people present for support and work with the person collaboratively to understand how they can be supported, regardless of how this information is being presented.

Experience of a person with disability accessing services

"This is particularly true for people with disability, who may have an invisible disability (or a condition other people don't consider 'severe enough' to be accepted as a disability). At times I've been advised to present myself to a service in my wheelchair with a support worker in tow, instead of on crutches or with a walking stick by myself, because only 'real' disabilities garner sympathy and understanding."

SHS providers can continue to work on understanding hidden biases that can take place when they meet people seeking services.

Safely engaging people with a lived experience



StreetCare Monthly Meetings Run by PIAC

- DCJ had a **standing item** on StreetCare's monthly meeting agenda for the duration of the project (Jun-Dec 2023).
- Close relationship with PIAC to attend the sessions, send out materials ahead of meetings, coordinate follow up thank yous

Representatives on the Working Group

- **2 x StreetCare** representatives participated in the SHS Access and Withdrawal Group with a support person from PIAC.
- Briefings and debriefings with Rooftop Social and our project team
- **Sitting fees paid** for attendance at meetings

Project tool

- **Sector Consultation Plan** clearly identified how the group's insights would be embedded in the Policy – not tokenistic
- **'Storycrafting' method used during one meeting for StreetCare reps to safely share their story**

Feedback loop

- The 2 x representatives would share outcomes from StreetCare discussions at Working Group meetings and vice versa. This meant they had support from their wider group.
- Wider group reviewed the policy as well to see how their views were incorporated.

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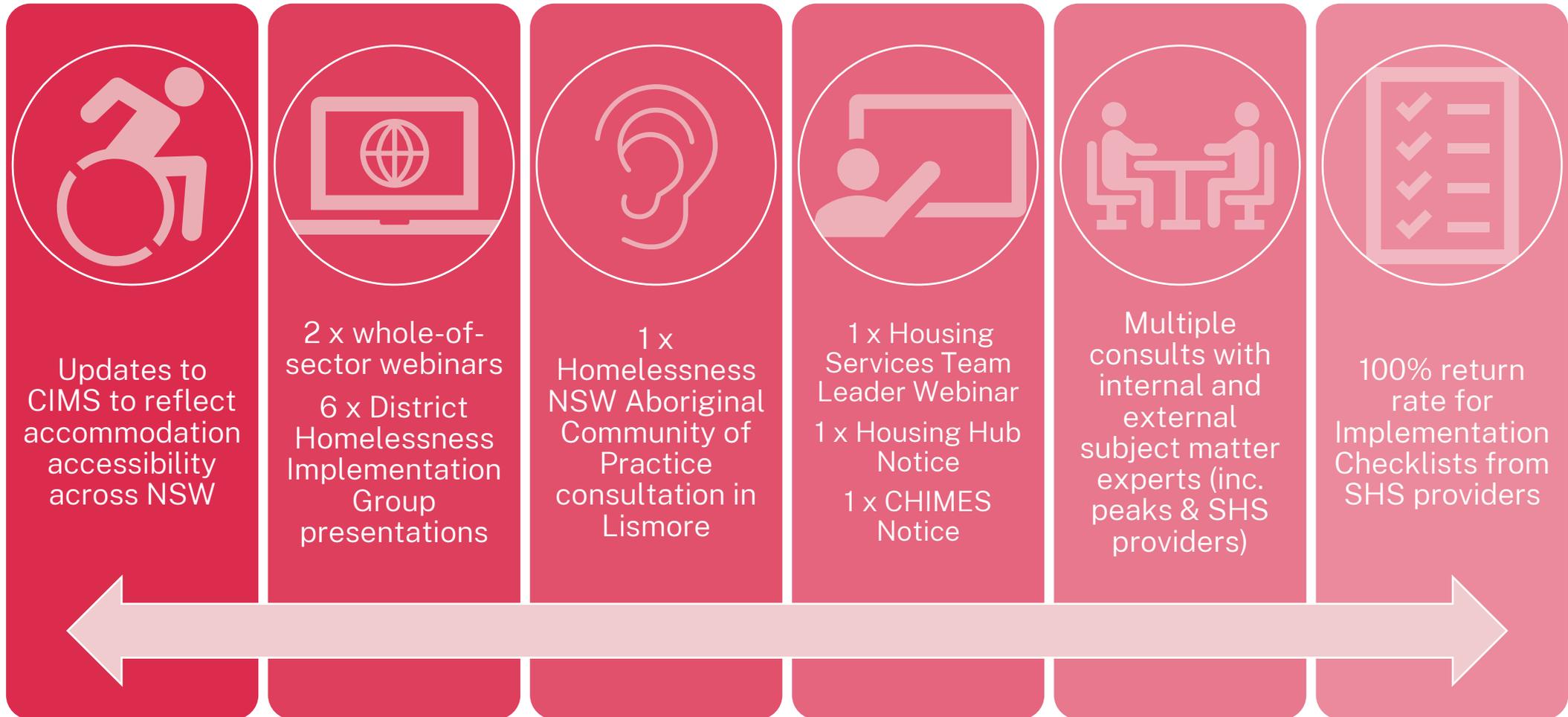
Making the policy real

What is co-implementation?

Good consultation doesn't have an end date.

Co-implementation Activities

Co-implementation is a collaborative, concurrent approach to putting initiatives into practice, where stakeholders work together to design, deliver, and refine solutions.



Interim Review: Provider Feedback

“The policy emphasizes respectful communication and a trauma-informed approach when discussing withdrawal or eviction, which **supports dignity and trust**”

“We've undertaken a review process with our leadership team, looking at how the policy aligns with our model of practice and organisational values and **exploring ways to make sure implementation is consistent across the organisation.**”

“We would have loved to have more ‘Accessible’ properties, however as many of our properties are older style houses the **hallways won't permit wheelchair access.**”

The policy is flexible enough, we would make the point that it should not become too rigid over time. **We have the expertise and can manage risk without new policies.**

“I found the policy **easy to read** and very helpful for the staff in switching between the voice of people and voice of provider”

“The SHS eligibility criteria is so broad that it can feel like SHS's become a catch all safety net for a range of social issues that other systems also have a responsibility for, and our **system is really at point where it can't stretch anymore.**”

Resources Launched and in Development

Specialist Homelessness Services Case Management Resource Kit

February 2012

Version 1

UNDER CONSTRUCTION!

- Handouts include new practice template tools: SHS Client Charter & Implementation Guidelines and SHS Client Safety, Risk & Decision-Making Practitioner Guide and Tools
- Updates to SHS L&D program offerings underway
- Extensive revision and modernisation of the SHS Case Management Kit underway
- Resources and tools needed identified by sector and co-designed alongside sector

A full 12 months to
implement (and the
learning continues...)



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Lessons for system reform

TOFU: Take Ownership and Follow Up.

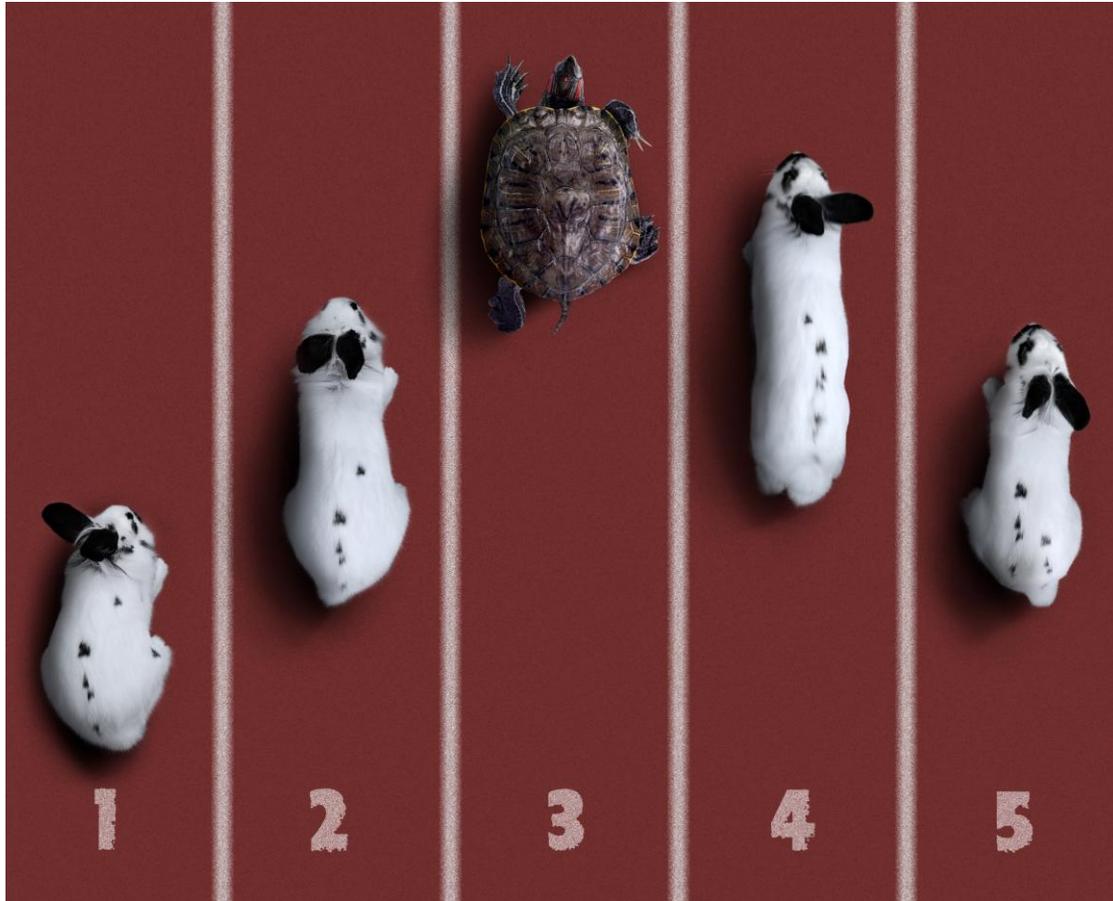
Willingness to change and adapt is key.

Centring Aboriginal Expertise



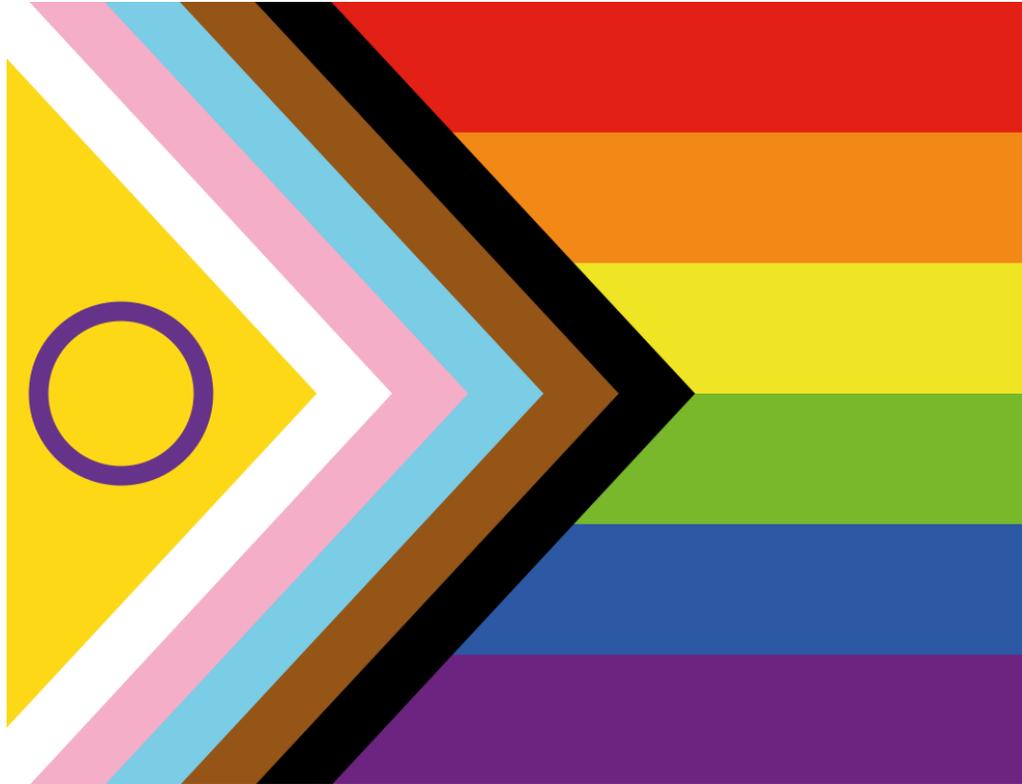
- Consulted with colleagues at the Homelessness NSW Aboriginal Community of Practice on Bundjalung Country (Northern Rivers region)
- Attend in-person wherever possible
- Using TOFU (Take Ownership & Follow Up) principles to address feedback

Slow & steady wins the race: 'What We Heard'



- Accepting that new information will arrive *after* your set consultation timelines (good consultation has no end date!)
- Incorporating new information will strengthen and extend the lifespan of the work and potentially reduce 'street level bureaucracy' policy distortions.
- Willingness to change and adapt with new information: admitting when we got it wrong and addressing it quickly through honest dialogue.

Leave no room for misinterpretation



Flag design by Daniel Quasar and Valentino Vecchietti. Used under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

- Gender access equity in shared/congregate accommodation facilities
- Transitional accommodation where SHS providers have client nomination rights must use SHS program eligibility criteria rather than social housing eligibility criteria
- Services cannot cap the number of temporary visa holder clients they support in crisis accommodation and but can exercise discretion with transitional accommodation where rent is subsidised by provider

Key Ingredients for Success

Internal
staffing/
resourcing

Strengths-
based approach

Focus on client
outcomes

Non-punitive
approach (no
witch hunt)

Acknowledging
our limitations

Maturing sector
– maturity
continuum

Sector trust

Embracing the
difficult parts

Co-
implementation

Good
consultation has
no end date

Centring lived
experience

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Panel Discussion

Courtney | StreetCare | Justice Equity Centre

Suzanne Naden | CEO | Bungree Aboriginal Association

Lynda Townsend | Manager of Homelessness & Domestic Violence |
Sora Community Services

Charmaine Jones | Project Manager, StreetCare | Justice Equity Centre

StreetCare Representative Insights

What should DCJ and the sector know about involving people with lived experience?

- Rapport with staff and availability to pre-brief and de-brief is essential
- Importance of in-person support from Justice Equity Centre

I believe both DCJ and the wider homelessness sector need to involve a diverse group of people with lived experience in future policy and practice reforms, so that they get a three-dimensional and fully-fleshed out picture of the issues being discussed.

If you could improve one thing about your time on the working group – what would it be?

- More time allocated ahead of meetings to familiarise with Mural platform:

Limits imposed by technology ... should be addressed before the consultations occur. People with little experience with technology, living in rural and regional areas or unable to afford the necessary equipment to meet online must not be excluded from the conversation.