

Press Release
11 November 2020



Byron Shire Connections Week 16-20 November: Byron's world-first approach to reducing rough sleeping

Byron Shire will be the first community in the world to pilot an innovative real-time digital platform to help drive a reduction in the number of people sleeping rough across the region.

During Connections Week (November 16-20) trained volunteers will head out into areas across the Shire where people are known to be rough sleeping and gather personal stories and information from people living there.

“When we understand and help those who are sleeping rough today we learn how to help people exit homelessness now and prevent homelessness for others in the future. That’s why Connections Week is so important, it gives us accurate information not only about *who* is sleeping rough but *why*. It is a first step in understanding the root causes of rough sleeping and making concrete improvements in the systems that cause it.”, said Convenor of the End Street Sleeping Collaboration, the Hon Graham West, speaking from the Byron Shire Connections Week base.

It’s an approach supported by Dr Gregory Smith, an academic with lived experience of sleeping rough in Northern NSW, who is advising the project, “Byron Shire is one of the most desirable places to live in NSW but it is also a place where many people are sleeping rough and living on the margins. Solving homelessness in the Northern Rivers will be one of the more challenging tasks our community faces but I strongly believe it is a goal that will yield benefits to the whole of NSW.

Christine McBride, CEO of End Street Sleeping Collaboration explains that the Connections Week survey aims to build a By Name List – a comprehensive database of people sleeping rough that will allow service providers and policymakers tailor their approaches to what works best.

“When rough sleeping, a person’s sole focus is survival. It is almost impossible for a person to address the causes of their homelessness while they are sleeping rough, and the likelihood of a person’s circumstances deteriorating further is high. Rough sleeping is multifaceted problem that for many people is chronic and cyclical. That’s why it takes a community wide collaboration. By banding together and sharing information and resources the Byron community is taking the first critical step toward ending rough sleeping. And that is good for everyone because ending rough sleeping by preventing it is a goal that powerfully impacts all arenas of disadvantage.”

“I believe ending rough sleeping in Byron Shire is possible and we need to do everything we can to learn about how to make this a reality – and that is why we are so excited to be part of this ground-breaking approach to end rough sleeping for good,” Byron Shire Council’s Director Corporate and Community Services Vanessa Adams said.

In February 2019, Premier Gladys Berejiklian, alongside leaders of some of the state’s largest homelessness NGOs signed a joint commitment with the Institute of Global Homelessness to halve rough sleeping by 2025 and work toward ending it all together.

This is the first time an entire State had signed the agreement, rather than a City, bringing with it immense challenges associated with tackling homelessness in regional and remote areas.

Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services Gareth Ward said Byron Shire, like many regional areas across our state, has its own unique challenges when it comes to tackling homelessness.

“Across NSW we have seen government, non-government and community groups collaborating to deliver assertive outreach, housing and wraparound supports to help people break the cycle of homelessness,” Mr Ward said.

“We have set an ambitious target to halve street sleeping in NSW, and this is another example of how local communities are working across the State to address specific local challenges associated with street homelessness.”

End.

Note to Editors

Connections Week will be staged across Byron Shire between Monday, 16 November and Friday 20 November 2020.

Ending Rough Sleeping Byron Shire is a community-initiated collaboration that is supported by the state-wide organisation, End Street Sleeping Collaboration. Further information about the Collaboration can be found at <http://endstreetsleeping.org>.

Contacts:

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Interviews:

Owing to privacy obligations media are not invited to film or photograph interviews with people sleeping rough during Connections Week. Interviewees include:

Talent:

[Dr Gregory Smith](#)

Dr Smith’s remarkable personal story of emerging from homelessness to academia has been documented by [Australian Story](#), [interviews](#) and in his writing. Dr Smith is advising the End Street Sleeping Collaboration – Byron Shire. He is available for interviews, including video, by appointment.

[Graham West](#)

Mr West is a former NSW State government Minister and the Convenor of the Act to End Street Sleeping project. He is available for interviews, including video, by appointment and on location.

Spokespeople from local homelessness services and the Byron Shire Council are also available for comment.

Themes:

Gregory Smith and Graham West believe this is a valuable opportunity to discuss homelessness in our region for the following reasons:

- Everyone has the right to access safe and sustainable housing but some of the most vulnerable members of our community are people sleeping rough. They need our help.
- Finding the right information about who is sleeping rough and why is vital to developing effective strategies to support them.
- [Vanguard Cities](#) around the world have shown us that rough sleeping in the Byron Shire is both preventable and solvable.
- The COVID 19 response to rough sleeping has shown that change can happen and happen quickly, but now we need long term responses based on good data and the lived experience of those experiencing homelessness.
- Byron Shire is the first regional community in NSW to make a start on the state-wide project of ending rough sleeping.
- Our work aligns with the [Premier's Priority](#) commitment to halve rough sleeping by 2025.

The Ending Rough Sleeping Byron Shire collaboration partners are:

- Anglicare
- Byron Community Centre
- Byron Shire Council
- NSW Government Department of Communities and Justice
- Mission Australia
- Momentum Collective
- Mullumbimby District Neighbourhood Centre
- North Coast Community Housing
- Northern NSW Local Health District
- Salvation Army
- Social Futures
- St Vincent De Paul Society
- The Family Centre
- Tweed Byron Police

More About Dr Gregory Smith:

Dr Gregory Smith is Lecturer at Southern Cross University (with a focus on the development of social policy) and an academic with a PhD in Sociology. Dr Smith is patron of several not-for-profit organisations working for and with homeless and vulnerable people including Northern Rivers homelessness services: Fred's Place, Pete's Place in Coffs Harbour and Signal Flare in

Brisbane and the Gold Coast.

In 2018 Dr Smith authored the memoir 'Out of the Forest' and followed up by writing numerous mainstream media articles and book contributions, all of which seek to highlight the issue of

homelessness in Australia. Dr Smith was featured in ABC-TV's Australian Story and also in Conversations with Richard Fidler on ABC Radio.

Dr Smith says that his dedication to addressing homelessness stems from his own life experience. "Much of my adult life was spent completely untethered from society and for a long time I lived rough in a forest on the NSW North Coast. I foraged for food, traded for produce and even ate bats to survive. I suffered from many of the problems that come from a childhood marked by trauma and disadvantage. I called my book 'Out of the Forest' because, several years ago, I did just that – I walked out of the forest and back into society. It is not a stretch to say I have been at the very bottom of Australian society and climbed to the very top. With the benefit of the experience I gained on that long journey I have dedicated my working life to helping my brothers and sisters who are still suffering the ravages of street sleeping.

In all my years working with many homelessness organisations in regional NSW I have come to recognise that Byron Bay Shire, and the wider Northern Rivers area, is an incredibly complex homelessness ecosystem. It is also the geographical area where I spent the last ten years of my homeless life. The Northern Rivers has always been a magnet to people who don't quite fit in conventional society – something I know only too well."