

Affordable safe and long-term housing – a priority for the Tasmanian elections

With Tasmanian state elections to be held on 3 March 2018, Uniting Vic.Tas is setting out its position on key issues facing the Tasmanian electorate.

Affordable, safe and long-term housing lies at the heart of a healthy and prosperous community. However, housing availability and affordability is a persistent and growing problem facing Tasmania. Here at Uniting we believe that government, non-government organisations and the community should work together to find lasting solutions to the housing issues affecting Tasmania.

What are the issues facing Tasmania?

Uniting is particularly concerned that the tightening rental market is creating a housing shortage, which means there is less affordable housing for low-income earners. Some of the factors which contribute to the lack of affordable housing are:

- The 49% drop in advertised rental properties over the last 5 years.
- Rents increasing faster than the minimum wage [1].
- Introduction of short-stay websites.

The rising cost of renting creates significant extra stress for low-income earners. Recent studies show that Tasmanians on income support can afford only 6% of the rental properties on the market without having to experience rental stress, with only 2% of these properties suitable for single parent families [2, 3].

The current shortage of affordable housing has forced many into unsuitable or unsafe housing, with growing numbers of people seeking help from homelessness and relief services. Last year alone, Uniting provided Emergency Relief Services to over three thousand Tasmanians with 81% requiring support paying for bills and for food [4].

While demand for social housing has increased over the past 3 years by 36%, there is a shortage of available housing to cater for this sector [1]. People with health conditions and the homeless are some of the most vulnerable in our community – many having to wait up to a year to be allocated social housing due to existing shortages.

Between 2015 and 2017, there was an increase of 83% in people accessing Uniting's emergency services five or more times a year. Issues with housing are driving growing numbers of Tasmanians into crisis [4]. The shortage of affordable housing is also creating bottlenecks in emergency and supported housing, as people there cannot move on into stable housing.

What should be done?

All the major parties have indicated their intention to fund programs to increase housing stock. While this is a good start, we believe more ambitious targets are needed to prevent a homelessness crisis in the decade ahead. Current plans simply fail to meet the anticipated need in Tasmania. Uniting supports calls from the sector to increase the existing targets in Tasmania's Affordable Housing Strategy, for public and community rental housing, to at least 150 dwellings by 2025.

Safe and secure housing helps former prisoners address their problematic behaviours and decrease their chances of re-offending. Uniting would like to see the reintroduction of the Reintegrating Ex-Offenders Program to assist former and current prisoners eligible for parole. This program has proven to be effective in reducing the number of homeless ex-prisoners upon release and lowers the probability of re-offending.

We believe that the next government of Tasmania should change the Residential Tenancy Act so that tenants have more security. They should do this by:

- Providing more secure lease arrangements.
- Having maximum amounts by which rents can increase each year.
- Offering better ways for tenants to get help when they are being unfairly treated by their landlord.

Building new homes takes time. We therefore encourage the government to build on existing policies which have the ability to provide immediate relief for Tasmanians affected by the housing crisis. We suggest:

- Managing the impact of online short-stay platforms on the availability of long-term rental housing.
- Introducing a vacant property and foreign investment tax.
- Requiring any new developments to include a proportion of affordable rentals.
- Reducing the time it takes for tenants to have their bonds returned from the Rental Deposit Authority.
- Broadening eligibility for access to [Streets Ahead](#) and [HomeShare](#) programs.

References

1. Growing median rent costs rising between 5-8%, minimum wage increasing by just 2.4%. Source: Shelter Tasmania. 2017. State Budget Submission 2018-19. http://www.shelertas.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Budget-Submission_FINAL-2017-12-13.pdf
2. Moffatt, L. 2017. *Rental Affordability Snapshot 2017: Tasmania* [online]. Social Action and Research Centre. Accessed 1 February 2018. <https://www.socialactionresearchcentre.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/RAS-Summary-Tasmania-2017.pdf>
3. Shelter Tasmania. *Housing stress is rising up the income ladder - report reveals* [media release]. 17 May 2017. Accessed 1 February 2018 from http://www.shelertas.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ST_RAI-media-release_May17.pdf

4. Uniting Care Tasmania. 2015-2017 Emergency Relief Reports [internal documents].