



TasCOSS 2022 FEDERAL ELECTION Tasmania Package

Two years on from our initial lockdown, Tasmanian households, communities and our economy continue to be severely impacted by COVID-19.

Thousands of Tasmanian households and businesses are experiencing financial pressures from escalating prices and costs. Incomes have reduced for many people due to illness and isolation requirements, costs are dramatically rising due to supply chain issues, business and consumer confidence is taking a hit and the cost of living is fast outstripping wages growth.

And it's not just COVID-19 that is presenting our state with significant challenges. We are facing persistent inequality of wealth and incomes, health outcomes determined by postcode, a widening digital divide, extreme weather events, surging housing costs and insecure employment.

Our response to COVID-19 demonstrated the positive impact of policies which prioritise our community's health and safety — we showed that we can reduce poverty, homelessness and barriers to employment such as transport costs and affordable childcare.

Poverty in Australia is not inevitable.

The pandemic has provided real world proof that poverty exists because federal government policy allows it to.

TasCOSS is looking to the next federal government to pull every lever at its disposal to address poverty and inequality. It must be committed to:

- keeping us safe and healthy;
- raising the resources needed to invest in people and our communities;
- ensuring essential services are funded and delivered;
- building a stronger social safety net; and
- providing a genuine response to climate change.

TasCOSS's *Tasmania Package* identifies the key policies and programs needed to tackle poverty and inequality in our state and support Tasmanian households struggling with the rising cost of living.



TasCOSS Tasmania Package

1



Raise the Rate

Tasmania has a higher proportion of people receiving income support payments (27.4% of our population), compared to the national average (20.1%).

With the rising cost of living, more Tasmanians than ever are finding it impossible to afford rent, food, healthcare, keep a car on the road and pay for other essentials like utilities. These are all huge barriers to securing employment.

To tackle poverty, inadequate incomes and the cost of living, we need to ensure that people struggling without a job have the resources and the confidence to begin new careers, retrain and look for paid work.

TasCOSS calls on the next federal government to:

Increase the rate of JobSeeker, Youth Allowance and other income support payments to at least \$70 a day, further supplement the incomes of people with additional living costs, including people with disability, and index all payments to wages as well as prices.

2



Affordable Housing

The importance of a safe and stable home became even more apparent during COVID-19. The pandemic showed what was possible when there is a government with the will to act — rough sleepers were housed, rental moratoriums imposed and new social housing constructed to boost the economy and improve affordability.

In Tasmania right now, housing stress remains acute, social housing waiting lists are long and rents have soared. The Rental Affordability Index has once again listed Hobart as the least affordable capital city in Australia and the only capital to be rated 'unaffordable'.¹

With the high cost of housing, immediate investment is needed to support Tasmanians into affordable housing and ensure everyone has a safe home.

TasCOSS calls on the next federal government to:

Provide a 50% increase to the Commonwealth Rent Assistance payment.

Introduce incentives to bring more private housing stock into the long-term rental market.

Deliver incentives to shift investment in rental housing from individual investment to institutional options.²

Boost investment in social housing to deliver a pipeline of new stock as part of a national housing strategy.

¹ National Shelter, SGS Economics and Planning, the Brotherhood of St. Laurence and Beyond Bank Australia 2021, *Rental Affordability Index*, November, [SGS Economics and Planning Rental Affordability Index 2021 \[sgsep.com.au\]](https://www.sgsep.com.au)

² For example, see [SHARP Program \[communityhousing.com.au\]](https://www.communityhousing.com.au) and proposals put forward by the [National Affordable Housing Alliance](https://www.nationalaffordablehousingalliance.com.au)

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Household Energy Efficiency and Energy Debt

The energy efficiency of Tasmania's older housing stock is so poor that thousands of Tasmanians on low incomes are getting sick and being hospitalised because they cannot afford to pay for energy to make their home warm in winter. Research shows that improving household energy efficiency delivers physical and mental health benefits, reduces poverty and emissions, generates jobs and stimulates economic growth.

Increasing energy bill debt has resulted from a loss of income due to the pandemic, as well as increased energy use due to more time spent at home. In the last financial year, the number of Tasmanians with an electricity debt rose by more than 13% and the average household electricity debt increased by more than 53% to \$1,366 per household.

TasCOSS calls on the next federal government to:

Commit to the Commonwealth and Tasmanian Governments working together to fund a program of investment in energy efficiency upgrades and improvements for existing homes of Tasmanians on low incomes, together with minimum energy efficiency standards for rental properties.³

Provide additional financial support of up to \$1,000 per household experiencing payment difficulties and energy debt.

4



Digital Skills and Affordability

Access to adequate and affordable telecommunications, together with the skills and confidence to navigate digital services, are essential in our day-to-day lives. However, more than 65,000 Tasmanians are not online and many more are lacking digital skills and confidence.⁴

Digitally excluded Tasmanians are less able to participate in our economy to find and maintain work, access education, health services and government services, maintain social connections; and find reliable information, especially in times of crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the digital divide in our state and created further disadvantage for those Tasmanians who are experiencing digital exclusion. Without urgent action the digital divide in our state is at risk of becoming even wider.

TasCOSS calls on the next federal government to:

Introduce a telecommunications concession to support people on low incomes to access data services.

Provide funding for community-based digital skills and education programs to support identified priority groups at higher risk of digital exclusion.

³ TasCOSS 2021, *Household Energy Efficiency Initiatives: Creating Jobs, Stimulating our Economy and Lowering Power Bills*, Budget Priorities Statement 2021/22

⁴ [Australian Digital Inclusion Index](#)

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Dental Health

One of the most significant gaps in our health system is the lack of a universal dental health scheme. Seeing a dentist often results in significant out of pocket costs, making dental care unaffordable for many people on low incomes, while access to public dental services is limited and involves long waiting lists. This means many Tasmanians go without the treatment they need. Many others will eventually present to a hospital emergency department as a result of entirely preventable oral health conditions.⁵

Our poor oral health creates costs in our broader health system, but also impacts on people’s ability to live their lives, including to eat well, work and be engaged in their communities. The cost of dental care was confirmed as a reason for delaying a visit to the dentist by more than a quarter of all Tasmanian adults.⁶

TasCOSS calls on the next federal government to:

Commit to a long-term funding model that doubles the number of Tasmanian adults who can access Commonwealth/state funded public dental services, including ensuring access for Tasmanians living in rural and regional areas.⁷

Fund a sustainable public dental workforce to meet the oral health needs of Tasmanians and provide best practice care that ensures the oral health of Tasmanians improves.

As a step towards a universal scheme, establish a Seniors Dental Benefits Scheme to make oral health and dental care more accessible to all older Australians, as recommended by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety.

5 Oral Health and Dental Care in Australia, Data — Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (aihw.gov.au)

6 AIHW, Patient experiences in Australia by small geographic area (PHN), 2017-18, Supplementary Table 18

7 This would mean the number of adults seen by Oral Health Services Tasmania would increase from 25,000 per year to 50,000 per year

The Tasmanian Council of Social Service (TasCOSS) is the peak body for Tasmania’s community services industry.

Our Mission is to challenge and change the systems, behaviours and attitudes that create poverty, inequality and exclusion.

Our Vision is of one Tasmania, free of poverty and inequality where everyone has the same opportunity.

TasCOSS’s 2022 Federal Election: *Tasmania Package* is informed by our research and analysis and reflects the expertise of our members, advocates and the lived experiences of Tasmanians.

→ tascoss.org.au



**INTEGRITY
COMPASSION
INFLUENCE**