



**SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE TASMANIAN
GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC AND HEALTH RESPONSE
TO COVID-19**

July 2020



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Shelter Tas is supported by the Department of Communities Tasmania.

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Submission to the Parliamentary Standing Committee of Public Accounts *Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's economic and health response to COVID-19*¹

About Shelter Tas and our members

Shelter Tas is the peak body for housing and homelessness services in Tasmania. We appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback to the *Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Economic and Health Response to COVID-19*.

Shelter Tas is an independent, not-for-profit peak organisation representing the interests of low to moderate income housing consumers, community housing providers and Specialist Homelessness Services (crisis and emergency shelters) across Tasmania. The membership of Shelter Tas includes all funded homelessness services and all registered Community Housing providers in Tasmania. Shelter Tas holds regular meetings with homelessness services and Community Housing providers across the state. We provide an independent voice on housing rights and a link between governments and the community through consultation, research and policy advice. We seek to end homelessness and improve housing access for all Tasmanians.

Shelter Tas is an active member of national housing and homelessness peaks, including the Community Housing Industry Association (serving as the CHIA representative in Tasmania) and National Shelter (serving as the Secretary of the National Shelter Council).

Shelter Tas' vision is that every person has affordable, appropriate, safe and secure housing and our mission is to end homelessness in Tasmania.

Health and Housing

Public health measures that require people to stay home, maintain social distancing and isolate where necessary, all rely on people having somewhere to live. Increasing numbers of Tasmanians were facing a chronic shortage of affordable housing long before the COVID-19 health emergency. Hobart has been in the top two capitals for unaffordable rentals since the *National Rental Affordability Index* began in 2015. Hobart has been Australia's least affordable capital city since 2018.² The chronic lack of affordable rental housing leads to increasing numbers of people experiencing homelessness across the state. In 2016, 1 622 Tasmanians were experiencing homelessness on Census night, and we know that number is much higher now. In 2019, CoreLogic reported that rents in Hobart had increased by 45.7% over the last 10 years, far outstripping people's incomes and ability to pay.

¹ Terms of Reference: 1. the timeliness and efficacy of the Government's economic response including stimulus funding and targeted financial support programs/payments; 2. health expenditure with specific reference to preparation and response to the COVID-19 pandemic; 3. the impact, progress and outcome of the Government's economic recovery plan for Tasmania; and 4. any other matter incidental thereto.

² <https://www.sgsep.com.au/projects/rental-affordability-index>

Housing is the highest household expense for people on low to moderate incomes. There are over 120 000 Tasmanians living in poverty.³ The need to reduce homelessness and housing hardship in Tasmania existed well before the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 has clearly revealed that the housing security of all citizens is of paramount importance. It is more obvious than ever that health and housing are inextricably linked. People's need for accommodation, support and homes has become even more critical during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

When COVID-19 struck, the Tasmanian Government had in place the *Tasmanian Affordable Housing Strategy 2015-25* and the *Affordable Housing Action Plans 2015-19 and 2019-23*. These were a solid base to enable rapid expansion of services where needed, and to bring in additional COVID-19 focussed responses. Shelter Tas was pleased to see that many of these initiatives reflected our representations on behalf of the housing and homelessness sector. For thousands of Tasmanian families and households affordable social rental housing is an absolute must.

In March 2020, Shelter Tas initiated weekly meetings with the Department of Communities and the Housing and Homelessness Sector to ensure appropriate safety responses, especially for communal settings and domestic and family violence shelters.

The Commonwealth Government introduced measures, including JobSeeker and JobKeeper income supplements, so that people could remain housed and afford essential costs of living.

The Tasmanian Government's COVID-19 new initiatives include⁴

- Announcement in April of almost \$4.3 million for additional housing and homelessness support for vulnerable Tasmanians
- Moratorium on evictions initially until the end of June, then extended until the end of September
- Freeze on rent increases across private rental and social housing, extended until the end of September⁵
- The COVID-19 *Rent Relief Fund* which assists renters who have lost income due to COVID-19 with up to \$2000 to help pay their rent, available to tenants experiencing COVID-19 related hardship and are in rental stress; that is, they are paying more than 30 per cent of their income in rent and with less than \$5000 in savings
- Extended (COVID) Brokerage to assist people experiencing homelessness into temporary motel and hotel accommodation
- A new Health Screening program for people experiencing homelessness
- A new Mental Health Homelessness Outreach Support Team (MHHOST)
- \$2.6M to fund the expansion of the Hobart Safe Space (low barrier 24 hour shelter), and the establishment of a Safe Space in Burnie and Launceston for people sleeping rough
- Rent Waiver for all "head-leased" properties rented from the Department of Communities, expiring 31 August 2020

³ TasCOSS 2018 <https://www.tascoss.org.au/120000-tasmanians-live-in-poverty/>

⁴ See <https://www.pesrac.tas.gov.au/reports>

⁵ http://www.premier.tas.gov.au/releases/residential_tenancy_protections_extended

- Financial support for people on temporary working and student visas, including those on spousal visas needing access to family and domestic violence shelters⁶
- Announcement in June of \$100 million to deliver an additional 1000 new social houses, in partnership with Community Housing Providers, along with a further 220 dwellings brought forward under the Affordable Housing Strategy.⁷

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Shelter Tas' organisational members and the workers in the Tasmanian housing and homelessness sector have continued to deliver essential services and affordable rental homes to Tasmanians in housing hardship and experiencing and at risk of homelessness. Workers have adapted to serve and support some of the most vulnerable people in the community and to deliver the new Tasmanian Government initiatives. Services have all needed to develop new COVID-safe working protocols, safety plans and risk assessments.

The Tasmanian Government's COVID-19 responses have averted a much worse health crisis. However, the transition pathway out of these supportive programs is not yet clear. It will need to be cautious and carefully timed, to avoid people slipping into precarious housing, overcrowded homes, housing hardship and homelessness, creating both a social cost and a public health risk. Tasmania is only safe when citizens are securely housed.

As the Commonwealth income supports of JobSeeker and JobKeeper are reduced and possibly phased out, the underlying fragility of household budgets and vulnerability to housing hardship across Tasmania will be exposed. More and more Tasmanians, will be unable, for the first time, to pay their rents and mortgages. Shelter Tas is greatly concerned about how the predicted rising unemployment and loss of income will increase housing hardship and place more Tasmanians at risk of homelessness.

Housing needs to be the cornerstone of any pathway to recovery. Safe, secure, appropriate, affordable housing is the necessary foundation of any public health response to COVID-19. The pandemic presents an opportunity for a renewed commitment to a robust housing safety net, a reassessment of the way our housing market works, and, a renewed appreciation of the importance of safe, secure affordable housing for all Tasmanians.

The Shelter Tas submission to the Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Committee (PESRAC) contains more detail, and can be accessed [here](#).

For any further information on this submission, please contact

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⁶http://www.premier.tas.gov.au/releases/additional_funding_to_help_prevent_and_respond_to_family_and_sexual_violence

⁷ [http://www.premier.tas.gov.au/releases/two_year_blitz_to_generate_\\$3.1_billion_in_construction_value](http://www.premier.tas.gov.au/releases/two_year_blitz_to_generate_$3.1_billion_in_construction_value)