



# RENTAL AFFORDABILITY SNAPSHOT

NATIONAL REPORT / APRIL 2020

## **ABOUT THIS SNAPSHOT**

The Rental Affordability Snapshot highlights the lived experience of looking for housing on a low income. It focuses on people who earn the least – those on government income payments or earning the minimum wage.

Each year, Anglicare Australia agencies use data provided by REA Group to analyse rental listings on realestate.com.au. Each property is assessed for its affordability and suitability for low income households.

This and previous reports are available on the Anglicare Australia website: [www.anglicare.asn.au](http://www.anglicare.asn.au)

## **ABOUT ANGLICARE AUSTRALIA**

Anglicare Australia is a network of independent local, state, national and international organisations that are linked to the Anglican Church and are joined by values of service, innovation, leadership and the Christian faith that every individual has intrinsic value. With a combined expenditure of \$1.82 billion, and a workforce of 20,500 staff and 9,000 volunteers, the Anglicare Australia Network contributes to more than 50 service areas in the Australian community. Our services are delivered to 450,000 people each year, reaching over 1.33 million Australians in total. Our services are delivered in partnership with people, the communities in which they live, and other like-minded organisations in those areas.

Anglicare Australia has as its Mission to “partner with people, families and communities to build resilience, inclusion and justice.” Our first strategic goal charges us with reaching this by “influencing social and economic policy across Australia... informed by research and the practical experience of the Anglicare Australia Network.”

# RENTAL AFFORDABILITY SNAPSHOT

## Contents

INTRODUCTION	4	SPECIAL ANALYSIS: AFTER THE DISASTERS	16
THIS YEAR'S SNAPSHOT	6	The journey from the first response	16
A snapshot in a time of disruption	6	Case studies	18
How we measure affordability	6	What comes next: Build back better	21
The impact of the Coronavirus Supplement	7	Everything comes back to home	22
The findings	7	CONCLUSION	22
The impact of a permanent increase	8	REFERENCES	23
THE NEED FOR AFFORDABLE AND SECURE HOUSING	11		
What is needed, what is possible	11		
Raising the rate for good	12		
Time for independent expertise	13		
Protecting renters in the eye of the storm	14		
More affordable rental homes	15		

## INTRODUCTION



Our 2020 Rental Affordability Snapshot is released as the reality of Australia's crash into deep recession is starting to bite. Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their jobs as we grapple with the threat of the coronavirus pandemic, its end point unknown.

"Stay at home," our governments plead. But what if you are struggling to pay the rent to keep your

home, or you simply don't have one? What if you lost your home in the terrible fires of summer? What if violence in the family means it's not safe to stay there? What if the homes you were promised for your communities, as has happened for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over many years, never materialised? These questions are not hypotheses. They are the stark reality that governments are now struggling to address, or in some cases, ignore.

**"Stay at home" our governments plead. But what if you are struggling to pay the rent to keep your home, or you simply don't have one?**

The disasters Australians have faced leave no doubt about the importance of secure, affordable homes. It should not take a series of unprecedented crises for governments to realise that they have not kept their covenant with the Australian people, but it has. For years governments have allowed the fabric of our safety net to fray, picking away at its structure.

Now we have seen swift action to mend some of the more gaping holes, for example raising government income payments. This shows us what is needed, and what is possible. As we turn our eyes to softening the impact of this historic downturn, we must insist that every person has a home, and enough income to live with dignity. These are non-negotiable.

This will take government action. Our Snapshot shows once again that the private rental market is failing to provide homes for people on low incomes. It shows that social housing is an urgent priority, as are permanent increases to government income payments.

As the summer bushfires raged and people lost everything, communities did not wait for government to help. They reached out to those affected. Outside of times of disaster, resourcefulness and thrifty budgeting is the only thing keeping a roof over the heads of many Australians. Our communities know how to weave a fabric of connection and caring, but this year has shown that governments can no longer dither and duck their responsibilities.

As governments plan how to stimulate the economy back to health in the wake of the pandemic, investing in social housing as essential public infrastructure should be a priority. The people and townships shattered by bushfire and flood, as we explain in our report, show us the urgent need and the opportunity for governments to partner with communities to do so.

It is time for governments to meet community expectations, rebuild trust, and ensure every Australian has a home..

Kasy Chambers  
Executive Director

We must insist  
that every  
person has  
a home, and  
enough income  
to live with  
dignity

## THIS YEAR'S SNAPSHOT

Every year Anglicare Australia tests if it is possible for people on low incomes to rent a home in the private market. We do this by taking a snapshot of the thousands of properties listed for rent on realestate.com.au on one weekend in late March or early April. We then assess whether each property is affordable and suitable for fourteen household types on low incomes. Those households are:

- Single people receiving the Disability Support Pension, Youth Allowance, the Jobseeker Payment (formerly Newstart) and the Aged Pension, or earning minimum wage
- Single parents receiving the Parenting Payment or earning the minimum wage
- Elderly couples without children on the Aged Pension, and
- Couples with children on the Jobseeker Payment, Parenting Payment, earning the minimum wage, or a combination of these income sources.

## A SNAPSHOT IN A TIME OF DISRUPTION

This year Anglicare Australia's Rental Affordability Snapshot fell on the weekend of 21 March 2020, just days before the federal, state and territory governments enacted a range of extraordinary measures in response to the coronavirus pandemic. These measures included a significant, temporary increase in some government income payments,

captured in several household types we measure. There has also been a shutdown of much of the economy, resulting in hundreds of thousands of job losses and high volatility in the private rental market.

This year's Snapshot has given us a unique opportunity. It provides a point in time analysis of the private rental market for people on low incomes before a major economic downturn and government response. It also allows us to use the temporary increase to some government incomes to test private rental affordability if these increases were made permanent. Accordingly, this Snapshot includes that analysis, and the results inform our recommendations in these extraordinary times.

## HOW WE MEASURE AFFORDABILITY

For most people on low incomes, rent needs to be no more than 30 percent of a household budget to avoid financial stress and difficult choices. This is an internationally accepted benchmark from years of study into living costs. This is the benchmark that Anglicare Australia uses.

To test whether a listing is *affordable*, we calculate the income for our household types. This is done using government information on rates of payment for the Jobseeker Payment, Youth Allowance, the Disability Support Pension and Aged Pension, Commonwealth Rental Assistance, Family Tax Benefits, and the minimum wage. We use these figures to calculate the maximum affordable rent for each household type, and compare that against listed properties that are suitable.

*Suitable* means appropriate for the number of people or the family type. One area where we are likely to over-estimate the number of suitable properties that is for people on the Disability Support Pension. While not all people with a disability need modified housing, many do. This is another major barrier for them.

The full methodology for the Rental Affordability Snapshot [can be found here](#).

## THE IMPACT OF THE CORONAVIRUS SUPPLEMENT

To analyse what would change about rental affordability for people on low incomes if the Coronavirus Supplement was permanent, we used the same methodology to recalculate the incomes for all fourteen household types. We treated the \$275 per week increase from the Coronavirus Supplement to some allowances (Jobseeker Payment, Youth Allowance, Parenting Payment, and Parenting Payment-Partnered) as a permanent increase to annual income. We also included the regular CPI increases for all government incomes that took effect on the weekend of our Snapshot, although these were not included in our original calculations as it had not taken effect at that point.

Suitability considerations for all households remained the same.

## THE FINDINGS

On our snapshot day of 21 March 2020, there were 69,960 properties listed for rent across Australia, as surveyed by our members. Table 1 shows how many of those properties were affordable and suitable for the different low income households.

Taking the national figures and aggregating them by income type, we find that on the Snapshot day, just three percent of all properties for rent were affordable and appropriate for households on government income support payments. For households on minimum wage it was 22 percent. These results show that finding an affordable and suitable home to rent in the private market if you are on a low income is extraordinarily challenging.

Once again, the situation is worst for people on government income support. It is particularly daunting for single people. There were just three properties out of the more than 69,000 that were affordable and suitable on the Snapshot weekend for people receiving Youth Allowance and only nine for a single person on Jobseeker Payment (formerly Newstart). Just 526 properties were affordable and suitable for a single person on the Aged Pension. The situation was even worse for people on the Disability Support Pension, with only 245 were affordable and suitable properties across the country.

Families reliant on government income support are once again priced out of the private rental market, with less than one percent of properties affordable and suitable on the Snapshot weekend. Even for a couple

with one parent receiving the Parenting Payment and the other earning the minimum wage, just over six percent of listings were affordable and suitable.

Those earning the minimum wage have slightly more options than those on income support. But our findings show that unless they are coupled, with both partners working full-time, the situation is still dire. Single people on a minimum wage had just over two percent of properties to choose from across the whole country on the Snapshot weekend. Those earning the minimum wage in part-time, casual, and seasonal work will have far fewer options.

Our Snapshot once again shows that the private rental market is failing to provide affordable secure homes for people on low incomes. People on low incomes are skilled at managing the little money they have to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. Achieving those basic needs is made harder, not easier, by many current government policies. It is past time that governments stepped in to ensure secure affordable housing and a liveable income for all.

The recent increases to government income payments stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic give us an insight into what that might look like.

## THE IMPACT OF A PERMANENT INCREASE

The unprecedented coronavirus pandemic has seen governments rapidly change policies and assistance to people. This Rental Affordability Snapshot was taken just days before the government announced a temporary, six month increase to some government income payments in response to the pandemic. This 'Coronavirus Supplement' of an additional \$550 per fortnight will be paid to all new and existing recipients of the Jobseeker (formerly Newstart), Youth Allowance, and Parenting Payments from 27 April 2020<sup>1</sup> in addition to their normal payments.

These temporary increases allowed us to pose a hypothesis: How would rental affordability change if the Coronavirus Supplement increase was permanent?

After recalculating household incomes to reflect the recent CPI increase, and the Coronavirus Supplement, we then analysed the changes in affordability using the same dataset of property listings sampled on the weekend of 21 March 2020. The results, including a comparison of both sets of results are at Table 1.

Table 1. Number and percentage of affordable rental listings

		Business as Usual		With Coronavirus Supplement	
Household Type	Payment Type	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
01. Couple, two children One aged less than 5, one aged less than 10	Jobseeker Payment (both adults)	589	0.8%	8,106	11.6%
02. Single, two children One aged less than 5, one aged less than 10	Parenting Payment Single	321	0.5%	1,798	2.6%
03. Couple, no children	Age Pension	1,898	2.7%	2,212	3.2%
04. Single, one child aged less than 5	Parenting Payment Single	395	0.6%	2,109	3%
05. Single, one child aged over 8	Jobseeker Payment	71	0.1%	1,187	1.7%
06. Single	Age Pension	526	0.8%	743	1%
07. Single aged over 21	Disability Support Pension	245	0.4%	326	0.5%
08. Single	Jobseeker Payment	9	0%	1,040	1.5%
09. Single aged over 18	Youth Allowance	3	0%	624	0.9%
10. Single in share house	Youth Allowance	3	0%	484	0.7%
11. Couple, two children One aged less than 5, one aged less than 10	Minimum wage + FTB A	15,373	22%	15,373	22%
12. Single, two children One aged less than 5, one aged less than 10	Minimum wage + FTB A & B	2,723	4%	2,723	3.9%
13. Single	Minimum wage	1,688	2.4%	1,688	2.4%
14. Couple, two children One aged less than 5, one aged less than 10	Minimum wage + Parenting payment (partnered) + FTB A&B	4,455	6.4%	10,272	14.7%
Total number of properties		69,960			

# People on the Disability Support Pension and the Aged Pension have been left behind, with no increases to their payments

As the findings show, the Coronavirus Supplement increased payments to selected government income recipients by \$275 a week. However, the impact was not even. If the supplement were made permanent, we would see:

- Couples with children where both parents are receiving Jobseeker Payment would experience an increase in the number of affordable properties, from one percent to over 11 percent
- Couples where one parent is receiving minimum wage and the other the Parenting Payment (Partnered) would experience a 10 percent increase in the number of affordable and suitable rental properties
- Single people, including those with children, would see little improvement in affordability

People on the Disability Support Pension and the Aged Pension have been left behind, having received no increases to their payments. This is reflected in the results for households 6 and 7, which are virtually unchanged.

Understanding the impact of these increases – and exploring who is left behind – will be critical to informing future policy decisions. Understanding how many Australians are vulnerable in this time of crisis is another large piece of the puzzle.

# THE NEED FOR AFFORDABLE AND SECURE HOUSING

The most recent government data show more than 81,000 people are receiving Youth Allowance,<sup>2</sup> and close to 750,000 people receive the Disability Support Pension.<sup>3</sup> We also know that 660,000 people on the Aged Pension do not own their own home.<sup>4</sup> Many people on government incomes are renting and living in severe housing stress. Australia's unemployment figures are in a state of rapid expansion. Expert forecasts predict that the number of people on the Jobseeker Payment is due to at least double, from 734,000 to 1.4 million.<sup>5</sup> Some are predicting that as many as one in four Australians could be out of work.<sup>6</sup> Payroll data shows that around 780,000 Australians lost their jobs in the first three weeks April 2020.<sup>7</sup> The pace of change in the unemployment figures is making it difficult to keep up with figures and predictions. Additionally, as many as 6 million Australians are expected to access the new JobKeeper Payment with support from their employer.<sup>8</sup> Paying \$1500 per fortnight, the JobKeeper scheme is aimed at paying a basic salary to ensure people stay in employment. Given the flat rate, it will mean that some workers retain their income or improve it slightly. For others, it will be a fall in income. The uptake of the Scheme means we can expect a large expansion in the number of Australians earning the equivalent of the Minimum Wage, captured in the Snapshot's household types 11-14. The general consensus is that lower paid workers will be most impacted, and particularly young people and women, in terms of unemployment or reliance on the JobKeeper Payment.<sup>9</sup>

Another concerning factor is the hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, people seeking asylum, and international students who cannot return home. They are not eligible for income support under either Jobseeker or JobKeeper Payments. With their jobs vanishing, this represents another huge increase in the number of vulnerable people needing help.

The bushfires and flooding that scarred the 2019-2020 Summer, combined with this historic downturn, are creating and worsening financial stress for an unprecedented number of Australians. With a third of us living in rental housing, the loss of jobs and income will see more people struggle to pay rent and keep their homes.

The lack of affordability was already reflected in rising rates of couch-surfing, rough-sleeping, over-crowding, and other forms of homelessness. These worrying increases were captured in the last Census. Without urgent intervention, Anglicare Australia fears there will be a significant increase in the number of people who are homeless.

## WHAT IS NEEDED, WHAT IS POSSIBLE

The lack of affordable housing for people on low incomes has been a crisis for over a decade. Now, with millions of Australians facing severe financial stress, a reckoning has come.

Our Snapshot shows again that the private rental market is failing to provide affordable housing for people on low incomes. With hundreds of thousands more Australians now reliant on government incomes or the Minimum Wage, it will take a total collapse in rental prices for that to change. More affordable rentals may become available, but this will be countered by large drops in income. This means that many more people may need access to affordable housing.

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, the summer bushfires exposed the limits of our housing system. Thousands of Australians lost their homes. The private rental market could not offer anywhere near enough homes to rent at the right cost, and the lack of social housing meant there is no capacity in the public safety net. Far too many people are now trying to socially isolate and stay healthy while living in caravans, tents, or the burnt out remains of their former home.

We need long-term, structural change to stop a surge in poverty and homelessness.

## **RAISING THE RATE FOR GOOD**

The experience of the Anglicare Australia Network is that many people on low incomes avoid becoming homeless by sacrificing basic living needs to pay the rent – things like food, transport, heating or cooling, or visits to the doctor. Many rely on member agencies for emergency food relief, financial counselling, and help to pay essential bills.

Many hundreds of thousands of Australians have been living in financial stress for many years due to low government income payments and high rental prices. If they are lucky enough to receive the Coronavirus Supplement, it will no doubt bring some relief. For people and families already skilled at making very little cover the absolute bare essentials, the new money will mean the chance to address debts, consider seeing a doctor or dentist for medical treatments that have been continually unaffordable, new clothes for the family, and other essentials that most of us take for granted. If the increases to payments remains temporary, so will these improvements in quality of life.

The government's move to double Joseeker and increase other payments highlights what we've always known – the old rates simply aren't liveable. It is now time to move quickly and give people on government incomes dignity and security, by making these increases permanent. As our Snapshot shows, it won't solve rental affordability. But it will help meet the true cost of living pressures at a time when food prices are high, and staying at home means more spent on electricity and digital connectivity.

The dire lack of affordable rentals for people on the Disability Support Pension, and for Aged Pensioners, must be urgently addressed. Along with those who are reliant on carer payments, these are the groups most vulnerable to the coronavirus. It defies logic that they have not been included in the Coronavirus Supplement. Self-isolating in

precarious rental situations is expensive, distressing, and exhausting. The Supplement must be immediately extended to these groups, along with any permanent increase. Older Australians and people with a disability typically have much higher medical, power and transport costs, and therefore equity demands it.

The Jobseeker Payment eligibility should also be expanded to include people from overseas who cannot return to their home countries, and are living in Australia. They are part of the fabric of our communities. Leaving them to fall destitute will ultimately diminish us all, and risks a rising rate of homelessness.

### **TIME FOR INDEPENDENT EXPERTISE**

Anglicare Australia and many others have argued that government income payments should be set, and regularly reviewed, by an Independent Social Security Commission. The political intractability of recent decades has shown this to be essential. An independent body would use comprehensive evidence and community expectations to guide its decisions.

Rapid changes, arbitrary disparities between payments, and the confusion surrounding eligibility have only made the need for an independent body clearer. Such a Commission would provide governments with much-needed clarity, and the community with the assurance that decisions are based on evidence – not political posturing.

The move to  
double Jobseeker  
shows what we've  
always known  
– the old rates  
simply aren't  
liveable

If the government wants to lower government income payments in six months, as it says it does, it should make the case to an independent body for why an income of less than two thirds the Minimum Wage is liveable. Anglicare Australia believes that asking people live on less, at a time when hundreds of thousands of Australians could fall into poverty, is unconscionable.

Anglicare Australia calls for:

- A permanent adoption of the \$275 per week increase for Jobseeker, Youth Allowance, Austudy and Parenting Payment recipients
- An expansion of the increase to cover people on the Disability Support Pension, Carers and Aged Pensioners with accommodation costs
- An expansion of the Jobseeker Payment to cover migrants, people seeking asylum, and international students
- The creation of an Independent Social Security Commission to review and set government income payments.

## PROTECTING RENTERS IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

Renters are on the frontline of this downturn. They are much more likely to be in low-paid or precarious work, and are more likely to be losing their income. In much of Australia, they also have very little security and few rights. The federal government has left it to states and territories to protect people renters in the midst of the pandemic – but their response has been patchy, and will leave many people at risk of eviction, of accumulating rental debts. We need a better and nationally consistent response.

National cabinet has agreed to a moratorium on evictions for renters in financial stress – but in most of Australia they can still be evicted for no reason at all. In most jurisdictions, individual negotiation between tenants and landlords is the first step to seeking help. From there, tenants will find a confusing mixed bag of policies that may affect them, such as land tax incentives for landlords who reduce their rent, hardship payments, the waiving of break lease fees, and banning rent increases. Details for tenants are scarce and difficult to find. In some jurisdictions, it is unclear whether rent arrears will be carried over once the crisis is over.

Rental arrears could be a recipe for disaster, trapping people in debt long after this crisis ends. Tenants need certainty now, wherever they live. Certainty for renters, clarifying their rights, and relief for renters to prevent debts should be enacted as soon as possible to form nationally consistent policy.

Anglicare Australia calls for:

- An end to all no-cause evictions and stronger renters rights
- A relief package for renters to avoid debts from rental arrears
- Uniform tenancy legislation across Australia.

## MORE AFFORDABLE RENTAL HOMES

Australia has a dire shortfall in social and affordable rentals. Until we tackle that shortfall, people on low incomes will face uncertainty and dire odds in finding a home. The coronavirus pandemic, on top of catastrophic fires and floods, has shown the need for social housing. Modelling from the Everybody's Home campaign shows that Australia needs 500,000 social and affordable rentals to end the shortfall. We cannot wait any longer to achieve this target.

As governments and communities consider how to support the vulnerable and recover from these crises, social housing offers a vital investment to secure the health and wellbeing of all Australians, create new jobs, and stimulate the economy. It is typical for governments to invest in vital infrastructure as part of economic stimulus and

# To meet demand, the government must invest in 500,000 social and low-cost rentals

strengthening. Social housing projects can get off the ground more quickly than road or rail infrastructure – and they bring longer-term benefits.

Responding to landlords in financial distress could offer another approach to boosting social housing. A government buy-back scheme for landlords who need to sell their properties would allow governments to replenish their housing stock, while offering landlords a fair price in the midst of a downturn.

The location and scale of social housing can be guided by expert advice from key research bodies such as the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI); and by community co-design. This issue is explored in greater the next special section, focusing on communities recovering from bushfires.

Anglicare Australia calls for:

- A national economic stimulus package with targets for building social housing.
- A government buy-back scheme for private landlords wishing to sell their investment properties.

## SPECIAL ANALYSIS – AFTER THE DISASTERS

The nationwide impact of bushfires that raged from July 2019 and throughout the summer of 2020 has been extraordinary. Thousands of homes have been burned, towns have been destroyed, and lives have been lost. Fires of unprecedented ferocity burned across the Eastern seaboard through Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, scorching great swathes of inland forests as well the Blue Mountains and Gippsland. The Adelaide Hills, Kangaroo Island, remote areas of Western Australia and Tasmania did not escape. And after the fires came floods, most notably in northern New South Wales and North Queensland.

Most people on this growing front line now expect to face extreme weather events year after year. Australia must build its capacity to prepare and respond at both the community and government levels. We must learn to homes that can survive, save homes during disasters, and ensure that people can get new homes in their own communities.

Anglicare Australia's member organisations are deeply involved with the disaster response and recovery. In NSW the Anglicare Australia Network has a key role in formal disaster relief, coordinating evacuation centres and working with other agencies to provide joint emergency services. Across the country the Australia Anglicare Network provides services and support to people during these disasters, and in the recovery period as they seek to rebuild their lives. They provide emergency financial support and support systems including housing, family services, and financial and mental health counselling.

## THE JOURNEY FROM THE FIRST RESPONSE

During the peak period of the events this year, formal and informal disaster response teams set up emergency centres on their local ovals and beaches. People reached out to each other. Many communities drew strongly together, in shared grief and compassion. The key message – that we need to support each other through hardship and trauma – was crystal clear, and much repeated.

Since then it's been an uneven journey. Long lasting road closures have added to the isolation for many towns and communities. A slow start up to financial support, and an unending wait for utilities such as power and water to be reconnected all generating further hardship and frustration. In some towns, the clearance of burnt out buildings is still backed up from other fires that happened more than a year ago.

The people who have survived the fires are full of praise for the fire-fighting agencies, but are less positive about the governments. The lack of preparedness, communication and coordination after that initial disaster response are a common thread.

Nonetheless the wheels have begun to turn. Some large businesses have begun helping to put facilities back in place. Public appeals over the Christmas period, both international and local, have made a real difference to the communities affected by those fires. The local appeals in particular are giving some community autonomy. The more substantial grants and government loans have now just started to roll out. And insurance companies, very much in the public eye, have

generally been prompt in processing contents insurance and covering their rental housing costs. There are many people who can now start to explore their options or get on with their lives.

However more than half of the people our Network works beside were not insured for the homes they owned or even for the contents of their houses, and they have lost what they had. Many are living, or have lived, in structures that were not formal houses at all. These are the homes of people who have never had much money, but are thrifty and get by in temporary arrangements as they save to build on their land. Some have stayed for months with other family or friends, although that's not a sustainable solution. Others have borrowed caravans or built humpies to set themselves up on their burnt out blocks. These are the homes of people who are often not counted or seen by government.

In the short-term, small grants proved an immediate help and our Network has played a role in distributing these funds. As with much of this community work, non-judgemental support allows people some agency to manage the challenge and discomfort that surrounds them. Community organisations such as Blaze Aid and Sheds of Hope have also proved crucial, acting as a social contact as well as practical support. Regular gatherings at recovery centres or community centres have also played a key role in maintaining contact, keeping people informed and connected. Unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic has seen much of this activity shutdown.

Many people are  
living, or have  
lived, in structures  
that are not  
formal houses at  
all

## CASE STUDIES

Telling these simple stories makes the experience, and future direction, clearer. Each of these stories points to the need for a stock of social housing in rural Australia, and additional support after extreme weather.

**Julie** is a 62 year old woman who lost her home, pets, outbuildings, some stock, orchard, vegetable garden and chickens in the fires on New Year's Eve. She is a pensioner and usually survives by growing or raising much of her own food. Julie did not have insurance. Some of her immediate family members also lost their homes. She has been forced to live in a small caravan in the front yard at her daughter's home, a family of six, at Cobargo. Julie looked at renting something small, but the lowest priced rental she could find was a one bedroom bedsit for \$220 per week. She cannot afford this rent on a pension. She has been working frantically to establish a shed on her property as a home in preparation for winter. She is limited to the \$20,000 provided by the Red Cross and donated help from family and friends to make this happen. The coronavirus pandemic has made this challenge even greater and she is still in the caravan at her daughter's Cobargo home.

**Lilly** lives at Cobargo with her partner and two young children. Her rented home was not damaged during the fires, yet she lost electricity for nearly three weeks. She lost the contents of her fridge and freezer and was not insured. Since the fires the housing market has risen, with a sharp rise in demand and limited supply. She has been issued a notice of termination for her lease as the owner intends to sell her home. She is now trying to find a rental elsewhere. Her children attend the local school and her partner has a local casual job with diminishing work hours. She is struggling to find a suitable rental within the local area on their tight budget. The lowest priced three bedroom home is \$330 per week, and despite her many applications, properties are being offered to others. Lilly is worried that her family may be forced to move into temporary accommodation and has grave fears that they will end up homeless.

Each of these stories points to the need for social housing in rural Australia, and additional support after extreme weather

**Jane** has three young children, including a baby. She and her partner's Quaama rental was significantly damaged in the fires. They stayed and defended the house but could not save the outbuildings, losing many of their possessions. They had limited contents insurance. They were provided with two weeks of emergency accommodation, but were unable to move back into their rental due to the required clean up. They lived in a tent in the yard of a friend for many weeks, along with a third family who also lost their home in the fires. Despite applying for several rentals they have not been successful. They are being supported by family and will now move into Jane's sister's home, which is 50kms away. They will occupy one room of this house. Jane's partner has been working as many jobs as he can yet they are not able to afford a rental payment of \$330 and are priced out of the market.

This family story is from the NSW mid North Coast, which has been through extensive drought, bushfires, and then floods.

**Ryan and Adele** have three children aged fourteen, thirteen, and eight, and a therapy dog for Ryan due to PTSD. They lost their rental property and all of their belongings in the devastating bushfires over summer. They did not even have a change of clothing. Ryan also lost all his tools in the fire and therefore his capacity to work as a handyman. They had no contents insurance or savings in the bank, and slept the first night in their car. They were then offered the local showground tea room to live in for the first week.

The family could not secure accommodation for a family of five so the children stayed in Sydney, away from their parents and traumatised by the fire. Adele and Ryan stayed in a motel for several weeks before finding a property to rent. They struggled to find furniture for the new house before a community drive eventually helped them. The family is now working through the trauma with counselling.

This story from Townsville shows complexity of people's lives, and the impacts of disasters, in this case floods. The most urgent issues might seem to be health, but without a home there is rarely a pathway to wellbeing.

**Rosie** is a woman in her mid-40s with Rheumatic Heart Disease. She had been living rough or in unstable accommodation for many years with a history of mutual domestic violence in her primary relationship, and several emergency presentations for chest pain and breathlessness over the preceding few months. Following the floods and consequent health issues, Anglicare Southern Queensland partnered with the Townsville Drop-In Centre to get the couple housed. They gained their trust, got them a full health check, and then began to address Rosie's significant dental problems as precursor to heart surgery.

As a result of this engagement, the couple have had much less aggression in their relationship and have learned good coping skills. Rosie is still awaiting a final dental appointment before booking cardiac surgery. This is only possible because they are safely housed.

This is about  
building a supply  
of social housing  
that can support  
people this year,  
next year, or  
whenever they  
need it

## WHAT COMES NEXT: BUILD BACK BETTER

The evidence from the recent bushfires and floods is that informal dwellings and low-cost rentals are more precarious than ever before. They are the homes of those who are most likely to struggle with the effects of natural disasters over the long-term. They are people who are committed to their local communities. Many have nowhere else to go. For these people, health has been an issue long before we were overrun by the pandemic. Whole communities lived shrouded in dense and damaging bushfire smoke, and then in tents and caravans through hailstorms and downpours. People who are virtually homeless and usually safest on the river bank in Northern NSW and Queensland have struggled with lung disease and skin infections when it flooded. Not surprisingly, those with the least resources have least chance of escaping these health impacts.

Australia is adjusting to the changing risk of extreme weather events, but these adjustments risk leaving some people behind. Building standards will be set higher. Demand for tradespeople will rise. Material costs and costs for services will go up. Informal arrangements will be harder to arrange. And in many parts of fire and flood prone Australia, there will be fewer low-cost homes. The scale of the area that is fire prone in Australia means that it is not sensible to suggest abandoning vast areas for habitation, deserting regions that have history, community, and industry. Instead we must adapt to living in such areas and become more inclusive.

Most of the people the Anglicare Australia Network has worked with hope to continue living within their communities. It is the community connection and the sense of belonging that need to be recognised and valued. Our towns deserve community infrastructure that meets the needs of their people. While some funding might be provided for people's immediate needs, the supply of basic resources such as community services and housing are not.

This also means resourcing local communities at the right level. Local government does not have a wealth of resources at its disposal, but it is closer to people and communities. It can be held to account by local residents, and work in genuine partnership to design and implement place-based responses and recovery. For that to work, state and federal governments need to resource local communities and councils.

## **EVERYTHING COMES BACK TO HOME**

The limiting factor to any community recovery is safe and secure housing. Immediately after the fires and floods, our services were scrambling for beds, competing with others even for single rooms for families. It has come down to people living in tents, caravans, and temporary accommodation for long stretches. Large families are often trapped in overcrowded housing. There simply aren't the resources in regional and rural Australia for transitional housing. As our case studies show, the shortage of suitable housing options prolongs the struggle and the hardship for people seeking to rebuild their lives. It doesn't help anyone if people are forced away.

Historically, governments have focused on giving people short-term grants after disasters and giving funds to other services for ongoing impacts. They have expected the market, through insurance, builders, and suppliers to deal with the loss of homes. Our experience shows that this is not enough. People are left waiting years for new homes, even when they have insurance, because prices go up and supplies bottleneck. For those without insurance, this is simply not a solution at all.

Building back better means recognising that things have changed. The recovery we have to do can help us rebuild in a better way for future events. In this case it means recognising and investing in community services, who play a critical role in connecting and harnessing people and resources. It also means listening to the people most affected by the disaster and responding to their needs. Members of the Anglicare Australia Network who work in these regions tell us that the continuous need is housing. This means safe, secure, and affordable homes for all. If governments are investing in infrastructure to rebuild these communities then that infrastructure must include housing. These developments should be negotiated with the towns and communities, and brokered by local government and community organisations. This project is about more than providing a house for someone who has lost their shelter today. It is about building a supply of social housing that can support people this year, next year, or whenever they need it.

## CONCLUSION

The decisions of government to walk away from social and public housing, to freeze income support payments, and to leave renters to the mercy of the private market have been political ones. Australians, reeling from the impact of the current downturn and the summer bushfires, are now feeling the impacts of these decisions.

Renters have found themselves on the frontline of the economic crisis wrought by the coronavirus and the summer bushfires. They are much more likely to be in low-paid or insecure work, and many of now face an impossible situation: Not only losing income, but at risk of losing their homes.

Welfare increases have given many Australians badly needed relief – but this year's Rental Affordability Snapshot has shown that the private rental market is still failing those on the lowest incomes. Age pensioners and people with disability have been left out altogether. Instead of looking after for them in the midst of a health crisis, we are leaving them to the mercy of the market.

# This economic crisis has shown that Australia's housing system is broken

Anglicare Australia calls on the federal government to make these increases permanent, and to expand them to those in greatest need.

We must also invest in affordable housing. The shortfall of 500,000 social and affordable rentals must be tackled. The events of the past six months – and the sobering results of this Snapshot – show that this is truly urgent. Ending our affordable housing shortfall would be the most powerful way to tackle the rental crisis and boost our economy.

This economic crisis has shown many Australians that our housing system is broken. A decade of Rental Affordability Snapshots also shows that crisis has been many years in the making. Instead of 'going back to normal', we need a vision for housing that works for everybody, including renters and people on low incomes.

As we head into a historic downturn, it will again be political decisions that determine whether we are left to survey the wreckage of many thousands being left in severe hardship – or whether we truly face this crisis together and leave no one behind.

## REFERENCES

- 1 The full list of government income payments temporarily increased through the Coronavirus Supplement [is available here](#).
- 2 Department of Social Services (2019) [Labour Market and Related Payments](#).
- 3 Department of Social Services (2019) [DSS Payment Demographics Dataset](#).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 See, for example, [predictions from Deloitte Access Economics](#).
- 6 Grattan Institute (2020) [Estimating the Covid-19 Employment Shock](#).
- 7 See reports from [recent payroll data](#).
- 8 Cassels, R., and Duncan, A. (2020) [JobKeeper Payment: How Will it Work, Who Will Miss Out and How to Get it](#).
- 9 Op cit 6.

As we head  
into a historic  
downturn,  
political decisions  
will determine  
whether we  
face this crisis  
together and  
leave no one  
behind

