

"I've had days when I've gone without food to feed the kids."

*Life on a low income: a consultation with the people of the West Coast, July
1999*



Anglicare Tasmania

The Poverty Coalition

TasCOSS

Acknowledgements

The researchers would like to thank the people of the West Coast who participated in this forum. Their contribution of time, ideas and stories of survival made this research project possible. In the words of one of the participants, who is living on a Disability Pension, “We hope something so beautiful will come from this that we will all stand amazed.”

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Introduction

The Just Tasmania Project

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of poverty on the lives of Tasmanians by conducting focus groups in seven Tasmanian communities. This was a qualitative research project which aimed to gain a rich description of individuals' responses to this problem and to extend this research by gathering a picture of what ordinary Tasmanians see as "the bottom line" for policy development within the State.

The information contained in this report may not contain a fully accurate picture of services available within communities, however it is an accurate picture of the participants' understanding of what is happening in their environment. Any inaccuracies may well reflect a point made many times by the participants themselves – that it was difficult to get a clear picture of what services are available to them.

The recommendations contained in this report are those of the participants. The recommendations of the researchers are contained in *Hearing The Voices: Vol 2*.

The participants

The Just Tasmania forums were attended by 144 people from around Tasmania. Demographic data on the participants is available in *Hearing the Voices: Vol 1* - the statewide report on the research project. To protect the confidentiality of participants, data is not broken down on a regional basis.

The process

In the preparation for the research project, the Just Tasmania coalition approached a range of community service organisations around Tasmania with a view to forming partnerships to assist with the development of the research. Sites for forums were selected on the basis of establishing viable collaborations with these organisations. Partner organisations were asked to identify individuals whom they knew to be living on low incomes – pensions, benefits or on incomes equivalent to, or lower than these – to discuss the possibility of participation in the project.

Invitations were then issued to these people with accompanying explanatory material. On the West Coast participants were identified with the assistance of workers from the West Coast Aged and Disability Care Team, the West Coast Crisis Accommodation and Referral Service, the community mental health worker, and the Anglican Church Emergency Relief Service.

The majority of participants were contacted by telephone prior to their involvement in the project to brief them about the process and to discuss media involvement in the forums.

The forums ran from 9.30 – 2.30 pm. Child care and a lunch was provided. The forum was held at the Zeehan Fire Station.

The forum was a mixture of small and large group discussions scribed by the Just Tasmania researchers. A large group format was used to discuss responses to those questions with a more structural focus.

Just Tasmania researchers developed the questions after consultation with the Clarendon Vale Neighbourhood House Advisory Group. In view of the potential sensitivity of the information we were collecting, people were placed in colour coded small groups on the basis of existing networks. Where a number of people had relationships of trust that had developed through friendships or joint participation in community activities, they were placed in the same small group.

Q1 What is the impact on you and your family of living on a low income?

In order to gain a rich description of the impact of life on a low income on the lives of individuals and families in the community, small groups of participants were asked to consider the impact of this problem in an externalised form. By separating the problem of “living on a low income” from the participants as individuals, the participants were given an opportunity to examine the impact of this problem on their lives and relationships.

Q2 Imagine a magic wand was waved over Tasmania and everyone was given the opportunity to have a decent life. What would people's lives be like? What is your vision of a decent life in your community?

In small groups, the participants were asked to participate in a “visioning exercise” – to imagine that all restraints were removed and to sketch their vision of a decent standard of living. Part of the purpose of this question related to the process of the workshop: it aimed to assist the

participants to think beyond the restraints imposed on their lives and their communities to enable them, later in the workshop, to visualise solutions to the problems they faced. However, we found that the question also offered an important content to the research. In response to this question, participants sketched a vision of community that could inform policy directions for years to come. Spokespeople for the groups reported this vision back to the larger group.

Q3 What is the minimum standard/bottom line for a decent life in your community?

Five themes from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) were extracted to be examined in the Tasmanian context. Participants were asked to set a “bottom line” for a decent standard of living with regard to these themes. The themes examined were: health care, income and employment, housing, education, and safety and security. One small group at each forum examined each theme.

Q4 What stops this community from reaching your idea of a decent life? What is working well in your community that helps people living on low incomes to have a decent life?

As part of the research we were interested to conduct an audit of local communities to discover what local people considered to be useful about their communities which acted to assist them in surviving on a low income and what acted to stop them from reaching this goal. To be given an opportunity to identify the strengths of their communities was also seen as an important part of the process as prior to the research commencing participants had expressed an unwillingness to participate in any process which brought further negative publicity to already economically depressed communities. The first part of the question invited the participants to explore the externally imposed restraints which acted to stop them from reaching the idea of a decent life which they had begun exploring in questions 2 and 3.

Q5 What does society need to do so that people in your community who are living on low incomes can have a decent life?

The small groups were asked to come up with concrete ideas for action. Ideas ranged from suggestions for the local community to suggestions for Federal policy direction, State Government action and Local Government initiatives. Five ideas were selected to feedback to the main group.

At the conclusion of the forum participants were asked to fill in a data form and an evaluation form.

QUESTION ONE

“WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF LIVING ON A LOW INCOME ON YOU AND YOUR FAMILY?”

We can't afford what it costs to live

The cost of living for people on the West Coast meant that the most pressing effect of life on a low income for the participants was the difficulty they had in buying the essentials they needed to live.

“I've got a Telstra bill for \$120. It has to be paid, but that means I can't pay the rates. Aurora bills are so high that all my pension has to go on it, everything else gets cut out.”

“I don't have heating because I can't afford it. I go to bed. I do this rather than going into debt: my mother didn't bring me up to be in debt, I go to bed at 3pm some days, noon others, clothes and all.”

“We get our own wood but it's a killer to get the petrol to go and get it. You have got to go to Derwent Bridge – that's 2 hrs. The distances we have to travel cost petrol and an overnight stay and you have to pay for food. Him going to get wood means I'm short for the kids.”

“I live on \$30 food a fortnight - noodles, pasta and milk. Since I started living on \$30 food I've gone from 12 st to 10 st,”

“I buy coffee on special and my visitors bring milk. I buy bread and a bit of jam – and make sure I eat a bowl of green vegies regularly.”

“I've had days when I've gone without food to feed the kids. I've done that a lot, you get used to it. It probably happens every couple of months - when the hydro bills come in.”

"I can't afford basic food. I have a 16-year-old boy who is always hungry. He eats a loaf of bread a day. One standard loaf of bread a day costs \$1,000 per year out of an income of \$12,000 per year. You're feeding a man."

"I can't afford the bills. Keeping the kids warm is difficult. The heating bills are a major one."

"Our Hydro bill has gone to \$400 a quarter. We have no electric heating, and a lot of the time I cook on the fire. I can't get the Hydro to come and check the meter. If you can't pay they disconnect. We got disconnected over Christmas, and all the meat in the freezer went smelly."

"My church get together once a month and have a counter meal. I can't go. You can't ask anyone to have a meal with you, well, I can't. I can't bake, I don't have a stove – I have to cook in a pan."

"I can't afford eggs. I rarely have eggs in the house."

"You run out of food completely."

"Prices in Queenstown are not geared for people on low incomes. You can't afford to go out for sandwiches and coffee. It's nearly \$3 for four little triangles of sandwiches – that would buy a whole loaf of bread. I see people sitting in cafes with hot chocolate and my lips fall on the ground."

"I got invited to a cafe once. I couldn't go, I couldn't afford it. These are the things other people take for granted - we can't."

"You must have the phone and power here and it's colder here than anywhere else. We need to pay for more heating. We need the phone for the kids and power for cooking and heating etc."

"You can't get credit on a low income – you can't get loans for household goods, stoves, washing machines, video, or a bank loan for a house."

"You have to buy cheap Chinese-made clothes, cheaper clothing, poor quality, badly made, it doesn't last and it doesn't keep you warm."

"The hardest bills to pay are the Hydro. We have payment plans but we're already in debt up to our armholes anyway. Then there's rego - how can you afford to put away \$20 for that, and for wood, and for medical costs?"

"I stopped having holidays. I can't afford them."

"You're less independent than you would like to be."

"You have no choices. You can't do courses."

"You can't buy anything, it's embarrassing."

"The car registration insurance is difficult to pay in lump sums."

"Hydro and telephone bills come one after the other; a fortnight to pay is not sufficient."

"The heating allowance is insufficient to buy a load of wood; this is an additional cost on your income."

"You always have to use hand-me-downs instead of new things - this is embarrassing and humiliating."

"Low income families can barely afford the basics to live, let alone afford any extras which involves medical expenses, education, clothing, entertainment and keep the upkeep and maintenance for a car, rego, insurance etc."

"It's wrong that unemployed don't get a cut on rates, electricity, concessions."

"That's an everyday word in our house - can't afford, can't afford. It is different from the past, then there was no money but plenty of food. Kids today have different expectations and different pressures, and there's less sharing now."

"Housing is not that cheap – it's still \$80 - \$100 per week rent."

"Housing Commission rent goes through the roof every time there is a payment increase."

"Housing Commission won't fix anything, and it costs more than private rental."

The cost of goods on the West Coast, the lack of competition for shops and the cost of transport to get to retailers were all issues highlighted at the forum.

"You can't afford meat, it's \$12 or \$13 for a small leg of meat."

"We pay much higher prices, but we get the same income; it's always the same excuse."

"With the cost of petrol, you can't afford to get around. We pay 89c per litre - you can't afford to drive to get cheaper foods."

"The cost of food is too high; you can't afford it. Purity pulled out of Zeehan, so there's no supermarket there, same as Queenstown (burnt down)."

"There's only one supermarket in Queenstown and it's expensive. The Black and Gold brand is too expensive."

"People can't afford to buy food in Queenstown."

"You need a car to go shopping."

"We don't have a range of clothing, furniture etc, we don't have shops like KMART, Chickenfeed, Bellinger's, or second hand shops where we can buy second hand items that suit our income."

"We've got a GST before we got a GST: prices on the West Coast are too high."

"Electricity is an essential"

It was stated that one of the main costs faced by the participants, which crippled their household budgets, was the cost of keeping the power on and their homes warm.

"The cost of running everyday items and heating, which is the main usage of our power, is a struggle."

"Living on the West Coast, we seem to use more electricity than average Tasmanians because of our climate."

"Those with wood heaters haven't much choice about where to buy wood. The cost of wood can average between \$40 - \$55 a metre and we need an average of about 20 metres a year."

Access to health care

For people living on a low income on the West Coast of Tasmania, access to health care was restrained by a number of factors. One of these was the distances involved in travelling to see doctors, another was the need to stay overnight in a metropolitan centre, for even a straightforward appointment. Local services have been cut back to weekly clinics, meaning that any x-rays or emergencies which occur between visits require a trip to the North-West Coast. The issue of getting access to health care is inseparable from the issue of transport. To the West Coast, having to get public transport to Devonport via Cradle Mountain and staying a night in Devonport, before getting a connecting bus to Burnie, means modern health services seem very far away.

"There is no bus to Burnie; you need to go to Devonport and stay overnight. This is expensive and discriminates against us."

"Single mums without a car are really isolated. There are no taxis here (Zeehan) and no community bus."

"Transport is a problem for most - we do not have the assistance that the elderly have (COZEE)."

"For specialist treatment we have to travel and there is a fee for most specialists or we have to wait on a waiting list to have treatment as we are not in private health insurance."

"The price of treatment doesn't come cheap, yes we do get assistance, but it's not always available here on the West Coast and transport becomes a problem."

"I had to take my baby to see the paediatrician in Hobart. I had to stay two nights for the appointment. The trip cost me \$300. I get \$360 a fortnight on the pension."

"I'm on a Disability Pension. I had to go to Hobart to see a specialist. I got there and they said, 'the appointment has been cancelled'."

"We have problems getting health care. For example, how do you get home after you've been taken to hospital by ambulance? I've got nobody to bring me back. We've got a community bus but it's only available to people on disability pensions. It should be available to everyone."

"I had a heart attack. I was taken to hospital by air ambulance. I had no way to get back, my husband had to come and get me and we didn't have the money for the petrol."

"If the medication that is needed is not on hand, we have to wait and that could be up to two days."

"People aren't told about travel allowance."

"I don't have any transport. I can't get to hospital for physiotherapy. I should have it twice a week. I only have enough money to get the taxi one way but I don't have the strength to walk back. My leg has deteriorated something shocking. I've got to live with the pain. I try to keep myself motivated, but you have your off days."

"At the Latrobe hospital discharge time is before breakfast so the hospital can save money. How is someone meant to come up from the West Coast to get us by breakfast?"

The clinics are hard to get into...

"There are no dental or orthodontic services here. It's expensive to get the service. To get dental services in an emergency you have to go to Devonport. Eight weekly visits from the dentist is too long apart and waiting list is too long."

"I need physio but I can't get it – it's booked out" (cut backs only 1 day per week)

We can't get into the public system, we can't afford health insurance and we can't afford to pay up front...

"They want you to join private health insurance but you can't if you're on a low income."

"I've been on a waiting list for 1 - 2 years. I work, sleep, live with pain."

"I'm on a Disability Pension but I've had to join health insurance because I'm a high risk patient. It also means I have to go on higher medication. I've had to get emergency relief for food. When you pay into health insurance you get scheduled fees but the doctor can overcharge. I'm really scared I'll have to see a specialist. My friend was overcharged and he died before he could pay off his medical bills. I'm thinking of pulling out of private health insurance. I'm terrified of specialists overcharging. I can't afford it, I'll lose my house."

"I can't afford health extras. Things like a visit to the Ear, Nose and Throat specialist - the gap is too great."

"We can't afford the nebuliser for asthmatics. We have to buy them; the hired ones are only available for a couple of days and they're not necessarily available when you want them."

"You don't get a choice of medical services."

"A limited choice of medication is offered to low income people."

"Orthodontists are not covered at all so how could a sole parent, or low income parent afford the treatment for their child?"

The impact on the children

The impact of life on a low income on their children was one of the most difficult issues for the participants. They felt their children were ridiculed and ostracised for being poor. The participants felt that options for their children in terms of activities, educational opportunities and simply a chance to 'belong' to their peer group were more limited because their parents' lack of income automatically set them apart.

"Kids are staying at home longer, and kids are always asking for things. I hate saying no to them, but I can't buy them clothes because I can't afford it. Kids want new clothes I just can't do it. It puts me in tears having to say no. The kids come home from school, and 'say so and so has this, can I have one?'"

"It has a big impact on the children. They're ridiculed, because they don't have what others have; they're not able to buy lunch, their friends can't stay over, you can't afford school trips. They get embarrassed – they get peer pressure from all angles - TV, friends. You worry about whether your kids know you love them. You argue with the children even when they know and understand. Not that they are spoilt, but for them it's like losing an arm or something."

"Advertising puts pressure on parents - toys and food. Kids want things like "Roll Ups" for recess and it's not just them, it's everything."

"The young people are committing suicide. The kids are getting so stressed out."

"Kids don't get an income any more. They argue - go on streets."

"Our kids can't have what others have - material things."

"Kids want clothes, the latest fashion, especially older kids. We feel helpless, it's either clothe them or feed them."

"I feel helpless – I can't take the kids out. Even the beach costs petrol money."

"There is no entertainment that is affordable or available on the West Coast for low income families, especially those who have no transport. We don't have a taxi service like most places do, then there is the cost. Family holidays and outings are a major problem, as most of us couldn't afford the extras."

Affect on our children's education

"We can't send our children to the catholic school – it's too expensive. The catholic school provides the best education – we can't provide the best education for our children."

"Schools ask for contributions (performances, fees, etc) which we can't afford."

"Government assistance doesn't cover compulsory uniforms. I feel like a scab being on assistance, it's humiliating."

"People look down their nose at you when you're on the free list."

"People are angry with us for being on government assistance. They think we are spongers; we don't choose to be."

"We don't have a choice about what kind of education our children get. If our children need that bit of extra help in their education we are unable to provide it, as we struggle to meet the demands of school clothing, trips, and all the other extras throughout the year."

"Public school systems do offer a lot for our children but it's not always suitable."

The affect on us

The participants were asked to describe what affect all these issues had on them personally.

"I went to the doctor for depression tablets because I couldn't work because of my health. I had to force myself to walk past the chemist and not get the tablets because I knew I would take them all. This sort of thinking happens often."

"You get treated differently when people realise you can't afford things."

"You get depression."

"You don't know how low you are."

"You're not thinking straight."

"You get so low, you just want to get out sometimes."

"You end up punishing yourself."

"When I was working I used to be out all the time, now I never go out. The last time I went out was in October. I've lost a lot of contact with people, and lost a lot of self-esteem as a result."

"It affects your self esteem, you don't have any security behind you. I know what I haven't got. Not that life exists on that but you have no freedom."

"I feel resentful - I see people with more asking for things."

"Government rumours are frightening, they make you feel like they don't care, for example, getting rid of Medicare. I don't trust them – I think they're not on your side. Tasmania should go it alone."

"I'm getting angry. The kids are getting angry and leaving home, the young people are stoned, getting frightened."

Unemployment was also having its impact.

“Casual jobs are useless, they set you back. But there are no permanent jobs, it’s all just casual, casual, casual.”

“There’s a feeling of hopelessness – there’s no way out.”

Other

““Most people would say ‘why not move to a more populated place that offers more services?’ but being brought up here and living in a remote area as the West Coast we are; 1. with family, 2. we have a lower crime rate, 3. we have cheaper rent, 4. we have a closer community, more friendly and caring, more supportive.”

QUESTION TWO

“WHAT IS YOUR VISION OF A DECENT LIFE IN YOUR COMMUNITY?”

Employment

The participants at the West Coast forum saw employment as central to a “decent life” for a community. They wished to see more work available generally – full-time and part-time - but also a working world free from the arbitrary demands of casual work. They wanted jobs that provided a modest but comfortable lifestyle which could fit around family life.

“It needs to be made worthwhile for people to work. At the moment, we are often worse off, money-wise, if we work. We are penalised: we lose our health card, and have to pay childcare.”

“There should be enough work at adequate rates for families to live comfortably with one partner working.”

“There should be enough employment for all who wish to, to work, including those who are older.”

“Employers should be more creative.”

“No compulsory retirement age.”

We could afford the cost of life

For members of a community to have a decent standard of living, the participants felt that they had to have the resources to be able to afford to pay for the essentials of life. They defined the essentials as a roof over your head, food, warmth, and communication (they felt that a phone was a necessity for modern life, especially in an isolated area).

“We would have a supermarket with decent prices on the shelf, so you don’t walk out with an empty trolley.”

“People would have access to decent food.”

"We would have enough money to afford to pay all bills."

"We would be able to choose to buy a house if we want."

"We'd be able to buy the essentials (including for kids) without the stress of being unable to afford them – clothes, books, toys, hobbies, pets."

"There'd be a Chickenfeed or a Kmart in Zeehan."

"We'd be able to pay the essential bills without constant worry, wear decent clothes, and have a couple of dollars in the bank for an emergency."

"Hydro would be cheaper. The West Coast has given so much to Tasmania – surely we can be given something back in return?"

"Food would be affordable: homegrown, Tassie food."

"We wouldn't fall behind because of the cost of essentials."

"We'd have free Hydro or the bills would be at least cut in half."

"All customers would pay the same for power – big companies and individuals."

"Water would be free."

Equality

The participants also felt that the disparity between the rich and the poor in the Australian community was getting too marked. A Government more sympathetic to the needs of those living on the lowest incomes could be achieved, they felt, if Government representatives would be prepared to live on a pension or benefit, even if only for a short time.

"Reduce the gap between the very rich and the very poor."

"Some salaries are too high."

"The Government would live on the wages we have (inc. pensions and benefits)."

"Everyone would be equal – decent wages for all but equal."

"Stop privatisation – we want good Tasmanian Government-run services."

"Bring back a 7 ½ hour working day – not 12 hour shifts. The men never see their families. We want decent working conditions."

"Every person would be equal. Everyone able to join in and participate."

"There would be a change in the attitude of social security. We are not beggars. I'm not on the pension by choice."

Transport

Access to transport was a critical part of having access to community services, particularly health care. For some people needing frequent treatment at Queenstown Hospital the only means of transport is a taxi – at a cost that was prohibitive to their budgets. One participant, a Disability Pensioner, described how this factor alone made attendance at prescribed physiotherapy sessions impossible. Access to other health services or the North West General Hospital in Burnie meant a bus trip to Latrobe and, often, an overnight stay there before catching a second bus to Burnie.

"There'd be a more regular and frequent bus service to the North-West coast – such as the service provided for the elderly."

"There would be adequate transport services – buses linked with services like hospitals. Maybe one day per week if it went to the right places."

"We would have public transport – running every day at a reasonable price. There would be a community bus."

"We would have public transport. We only have taxis and it's a \$10 fare from south Queenstown to central Queenstown."

"There'd be very cheap hostel accommodation available widely, eg: for staying when a friend or family member is in hospital, when you have a medical appointment etc."

"There would be more services on the West Coast. Simple operations would be done here, not in Burnie. There would be more physio available. X-rays would be available quickly."

Education

More opportunities and choices in education – their children's and their own, would also be part of a decent standard of living.

"We want to be able to afford to send our kids to the school we want."

"We'd have a school with low class sizes, good teachers, more computers and more recreational equipment."

"There would be computers in homes."

"There would be TAFE courses available in Zeehan."

"We'd get free education back. Every week there are demands for money: trips, shows, specials. The kids suffer if you can't afford this."

Recreational facilities

A community enjoying a decent standard of living would also have more recreational facilities available to it, and people would get the chance to enjoy a break.

"There would be a covered swimming pool in Zeehan."

"There would be more family entertainment; cinema, a fun parlor, an amusement park, a wildlife park."

"We'd be able to have an affordable holiday – everyone gets a break!"

"A community centre in Queenstown for the youth – kids off the street, with something to do – running it themselves.

QUESTION THREE

“WHAT IS THE MINIMUM STANDARD/BOTTOM LINE FOR A DECENT LIFE IN YOUR COMMUNITY?”

1. EDUCATION

1.1 More teachers in the classrooms.

- (a) A maximum of 15 children in each classroom.
- (b) Enough teachers to ensure that there can be one on one when it's needed.

1.2 More funding to public school system.

1b ADULT EDUCATION

1.3 More TAFE courses available on the West Coast.

1.4 Affordable access to classes for older people.

1.5 Greater choice of education/training (practical stuff as well as computers)

“Kids from a public school should be coming out as well educated as a kid from a private school.”

2. HOUSING

2.1 Extend the concessions available on Council rates to all health care cardholders

- (a) examine schemes for reducing payments for low income earners

2.2 Residents should have access to clean water.

3. INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT

- 3.1 No forced training for benefits.
- 3.2 No forced training for unskilled jobs and more recognition of experience.
- 3.3 Increase number of work programs focussing on young people.
- 3.4 The bottom line income for a family is \$30,000.

"When you're forced to train for benefits, that just knocks you down."

"An income of \$30,000 is not to live in luxury, but to cover the essentials – pay bills, plan a bit, buy a new dress once a year. At present our income, if you're on Disability or Sole Parent is about \$10,000 pa. That's a gap of about \$20,000 pa."

"My home is up for sale at \$18,000. I can't sell it and the government valuation is \$30,000. Banks won't touch us for a loan – we are high risk."

4. HEALTH CARE

- 4.1 Affordable medication
 - (a) Essential medications should be covered by health care, eg: cough medicines, "puffers", spacers, nebulizers.
- 4.2 Adequate affordable food.
- 4.3 An adequate Heating Allowance.
- 4.4 Transport to health services eg HACC bus.
- 4.5 Adequate respect for patients regardless of age, pension, status etc.
- 4.6 Exercise and recreation facilities.

4.7 High quality doctors who will stay a reasonable time.

5. SAFETY AND SECURITY

5.1 More community policing

- (a) A policeman living in each community
- (b) A policeman available at night

5.2 More programs for youth in Queenstown

- (a) A community centre for youth
- (b) A counsellor and a youth worker available
- (c) Employment programs for young people

5.3 House insurance rates need to be more affordable for low-income earners.

"In Queenstown we just got Neighbourhood Watch going but if you call the police you get put through to Burnie. The police are not always available – they might be out patrolling."

"House burning is a problem. The supermarket got burnt down and the grandstand, cars in garages, homes for revenge."

"Drugs are a problem in the high school. Smoking drugs is a 'smoking offence'."

"If you're on a low income you HAVE to be insured. There's no way you can get around it. I lost my insurance because someone else committed arson – someone set fire to my garage. My daughter moved out because she didn't feel safe."

"There's a problem with our young people - up to 20-25 year age group. They've got no respect. There have been 5 bashings on the street in the last 12 months."

QUESTION FOUR

“WHAT IS WORKING WELL IN YOUR COMMUNITY THAT HELPS PEOPLE LIVING ON LOW INCOMES TO HAVE A DECENT LIFE?”

1. LOCAL SERVICES

The library – accessible computers

Internet access

New computers

Community nursing – a good service to elderly and others

Food vouchers and Easter egg collections (from salvos)

TAFE

An excellent doctor and nurses

Rosebery High is a good school

Fit in with the children

Fairer/involve children

Less emphasis on uniform

HACC bus in Zeehan and some other areas

SBS in Tullah

Children’s vacation program

After school care “Kids Zone club”

Cozee – bus/cars for the elderly

The pool

Zeehan Neighborhood Centre

The emergency relief services

“If you have to, you can ask for a food voucher, but only once a month (and \$30 max). BUT – it’s embarrassing, demeaning, it hurts, it’s public, everyone knows, you can only shop at one shop. But still it’s appreciated.”

2. LOCAL VOLUNTEER INITIATIVES

Active Progress Association in Tullah

Reasonably community- minded RSL in Rosebery

People doing community work – the work we do for nothing – schools, for church, for hospice

3. LOCAL COMMUNITY

Our community spirit

“People are brilliant if something bad happens, like helping people out if their house is burnt down or if there’s a death in the family .”

“If a child needs an operation there are stalls set up in the street.”

Feel safe here still

Good neighbours

- ◆ keep an eye out
- ◆ older people watched out for

Friends

“You’d be lost without friends. They’re a support system. Most of them are in the same shoes but at least they understand.”

“Friendships are stronger now than ever because times are tougher than ever.”

Family support – parents support

“The church – in times of stress or need I’ve got somewhere to go.”

4. POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENTS

The ABT railway.

"It's a sign of hope."

**"WHAT STOPS THIS COMMUNITY FROM REACHING YOUR IDEA OF A
DECENT LIFE?"**

1. POLICY DIRECTIONS

A number of concerns were expressed about Federal Government policy directions, especially with regard to its dealing with social security recipients. The belief was expressed that "The Government in not trying to help" and that it is "putting people down" for being in receipt of pensions and benefits.

2. ECONOMIC DIRECTIONS

The participants expressed a range of concerns about local and national economic policies.

"Australia is importing too much. We need to do it locally."

"Interstate/international businesses. They are reducing employment, and we end up with fewer families living in the area."

"The Strahan development is about tourists and not locals."

"The GST will stop people from having a decent standard of living."

3. LACK OF RESOURCES/SERVICES

A lack of money circulating in the community was seen to be a major restraint on it from achieving a decent standard of living. This lack of money was seen as the major factor stopping the development of facilities and the maintenance of essential services.

"There's no money for the whole community, including the council."

"There's nothing for the kids."

"The Police station is hardly ever open and calls go via Burnie or Hobart."

"Amalgamating schools (primary and secondary) is not a good thing."

"Queenstown's high school (Murray High) is not going well."

"There are no places of entertainment for teenagers."

"The reducing population is a problem, for example Tullah has gone down from 2000 to 200 in the last decade."

The lack of money was also stopping potential tourist developments in the old mining towns.

"Money for tourism is not allocated to Zeehan."

"The history of the mine and town (Zeehan) are not promoted – nor are the links with the 'piners', Corinna, Remine, Granville Harbour, Money Rock – or the stock route, Dundas."

"It's time Zeehan was given TLC and more resources – Queenstown and Strahan have had money spent."

"Kids don't do projects on Zeehan – they are not taught about the town and it's history."

"New things start but fall over for lack of support."

4. MINE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Modern mine management practices, which require miners to work 12 hour shifts, were having a very negative effect on the local community, the participants felt. Local men were no longer available to support community activities or play in local sports teams. Their wives, without the support of their husbands in providing childcare were also inhibited in their capacity to participate in community activities.

“The long working shifts are stopping community spirit and community building. For example, the Zeehan Football Club had to close down because there was no allowance by the company for men to swap shifts so they could get to a game. We lost the social side of football.”

“If you can get work the shifts are too long. You work 12 hours a day for 3 or 4 days. Families go without seeing each other – marriages break up. The pressure is on people to operate in this way.”

The company no longer offered community support on a range of levels – it no longer assists with power bills or distributes presents to the children at Christmas time.

“Company support is needed for the community (like Renison in the past).”

The community was also feeling the effect of having commuters work in the mine – men who leave their homes and families on the north-west coast and just travel down to do their shifts.

“Many mineworkers do not have strong links with Zeehan – they spend their money on the northwest coast.”

“There are a lot of contract workers – they do the 12 hour shifts, come in and take the money out of the community.”

5. UNEMPLOYMENT

The participants felt that unemployment was a critical issue affecting their community. *“Unemployment is desperate.”* One of the obvious effects of unemployment was the depopulation of the West Coast. This made the lives of the people on low incomes more difficult because of a spiral of declining services and employment opportunities.

"We need higher populations. We need more investment and employment in the area."

"We need more reasons for people to live in the area."

"We need a decent wage if you're working, and a decent pension if you're not working."

"You can't have a decent life on our incomes – we skimp, we save, we bulk cook, we wash once a week, and it still doesn't work."

"Life is geared at around \$30,000 a year. Our incomes are around \$12,000 a year."

"Nobody is taking any notice of what is happening. The number of elderly is increasing; the number of low-income families is increasing; poverty is increasing and prices are increasing and at the same time the middle class is disappearing. There once was a middle class on West Coast – now they're becoming the poor class."

Part of the most devastating impacts of unemployment is the difficulty families face in paying for the essentials when living on Newstart Allowance.

6. THE COST OF LIVING, ESPECIALLY THE COST OF LIVING HERE.

The participants felt that the essentials of life are the following: basic money, health, food on the table, a place to call home, warmth. The high cost of goods such as food and clothes in local shops, and what they called 'overcharging' by local supermarkets, the cost of banking services and the high cost of power bills, all added to a cost of living which was beyond their incomes.

"People have small minds – some businesses threatened to close accounts if he saw people shopping elsewhere."

"Banks and bank charges – the dollars they make out of little accounts!"

"The cost of cheques is too high for people on the Disability Pension. I have to be able to write cheques because I can't go anywhere."

"Our level of income is too low. Everything else goes up but the benefit doesn't. Bread and milk have just gone up, but the pension didn't."

"Our power bills need to be lowered. So many of my friends cry every time they get a power bill."

"It's a choice between food and power and you've got to feed the children."

7. ISOLATION

The distances that separated them from services and the attention of political decision-makers reinforced the sense of isolation experienced by the participants. *"We're four hours from the nearest population centre."* A feeling that the West Coast communities had been forgotten and lacked the political strength to draw attention to themselves was expressed a number of times.

"People living on low incomes are silenced and don't ask, don't know who to ask, for help."

"People don't have respect for politicians and authority because they do us over. It flows on to kids."

"Politicians and decision makers don't live here so they don't know what it's like."

"The general public don't get near the politicians. Maybe we should stir the politicians more."

"There aren't enough ERIC REECES!!! We lost the MLC seat on the West Coast."

"We haven't got the numbers! There are only 6000 people on the West Coast."

For the participants, many of who had children, some of whom were elderly, and some of whom were on Disability Pensions, their isolation from essential services was a special cause of concern.

8. LACK OF ACCESS TO HEALTH FACILITIES

"People are going without medical facilities."

"We have to go to Burnie for essential services."

"It's hard for us to deal with overcharging by doctors and specialists. Specialists can charge what they like."

9. SMOKING AND GAMBLING

Smoking and gambling were also named as issues which affected the ability of participants to have a decent standard of living. Aids to help people to give up smoking were too expensive for those wishing to get access to them.

“Patches to help stop smoking are expensive and not paid by government: they should be available on prescription.”

Gambling was seen as a negative in the community – a trap that was particularly primed to attract people who were desperate.

“Gambling is bad. Adults and kids are gambling. In the lounge of the pub you see 15 – 18 year olds gambling. On pension days the pensioners are in there. They should stop the gambling in hotels.”

“Keno and pokies are a trap. They offer you a chance to win, not a fortune but maybe 1 or 2 dollars. They are aimed at low-income families, hoping to turn \$2 into \$5. We lose.”

QUESTION FIVE

‘WHAT DOES SOCIETY NEED TO DO SO THAT PEOPLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY WHO ARE LIVING ON LOW INCOMES CAN HAVE A DECENT LIFE?’

The Just Tasmania participants made the following recommendations for initiatives to address the problems faced by people living on low incomes.

Local community

Issue: Community development

- Establish a barter system.
- Provide encouragement and support to families – support for family group
- Establish an “adopt a grandparents scheme” to provide assistance to parents.

Issue: Housing

- Hold a public forum to discuss issue and options.
- Establish a “community committee” to negotiate with council. Discuss issues such as garbage, roads, water, rates, the pool.

Local Government

Issue: Transport

- The senior citizens monthly trip to Burnie – available to all.
- Review availability of community bus. Broaden criteria of those eligible to use this service.
- Provide incubation funding to start small taxi services in West Coast communities.

Issue: Community development

- Establish a covered swimming pool in Zeehan.
- Provide funding to establish a community centre for youth in Queenstown.
- Employ a counsellor and youth worker to work with young people on the West Coast.
- Ensure residents have access to clean water.

Issue: Income/employment

- All recipients of pensions and benefits should get rates concessions.
- Companies must look after workers and communities. They must employ locals.
- Develop the tourist potential of Zeehan – promote the history of the mine and the town, its link with the piners and the stock route.

Issue: Heating

- Negotiate with Forestry for local service clubs to get scrap firewood for free from Forestry areas and distribute it or sell it cheaply.

Issue: Housing

- Charge according to services received – council should survey this.

State Government

Issue: Transport

- Review public transport system ensuring availability of affordable services from isolated areas to urban health services.

Issue: Health care

- Increase availability of health services: x-rays and physiotherapy available daily, locally.
- Link transport services with health facilities.

Issue: Community development

- Establish an additional outlet in Zeehan for larger support agencies with extra funds for critical periods: winter and Christmas. . Could be run through the Neighbourhood House.
- Establish a consumer watchdog to look at supermarket prices on the West Coast.
- Negotiate with mine management re: management practices. Shift hours at the mine must be changed to ensure community has a life.
- Extend police services on the West Coast to ensure availability to West Coast townships.

Issue: Education

- Increase funding to public school system to ensure that children from financially disadvantaged families do not miss out on educational programmes.
- Put more teachers in the classrooms to ensure staff student ratios of around 15:1.
- Increase availability of TAFE courses on West Coast.
- Lower TAFE fees for low income earners.
- Increase funding to TAFE to ensure a greater diversity of courses available.

Issue: Income/employment

- Essentials like the Hydro must cater for low-income families.
- People on pensions and benefits must get the same concessions as pensioners on the following:
 - Aurora bills
 - Banking fees
 - Telstra
- The ABT railway must employ locals
- Increase funding to Emergency Relief services to end quotas on eligibility for crisis support.

Issue: Heating

- Lower power bills.
- Longer to pay power bills.
- Negotiate with Forestry to allow people on low incomes to collect their own wood for free.

Issue: Housing

- Conduct a survey of need – in the community.
- Housing Commission rentals need to come down. This is a priority action.
- Housing Commission need to do some maintenance.
- Housing Commission homes need to be well built – currently have problems with damp and mildew.

Federal Government

Issue: Health care

- Provide funding for hostel accommodation for rural people required to visit urban hospitals.
- Ensure that asthma medication is fully covered by Medicare.
- Negotiate with professional health bodies to ensure that low income earners are bulk billed by general practitioners and specialists.

Issue: Community development

- Increase funding to community development projects aimed at supporting families.
- Act on behalf of low income earners to protect them from bank fees and charges.

Issue: Education

- Return free education.

Issue: Income/employment

- Review earnings thresholds for people on pensions and benefits.
- Pensions and benefits must be increased - at least \$200 - \$300 a fortnight so you can at least live decently.
- Remove the compulsory retirement age.
- Develop work programmes focussing on young people.
- Put an end to forced training for benefits.