



Demographic change in Tasmania:
Strategies for addressing challenges and
opportunities

TasCOSS Response

Demographic change in Tasmania: Strategies for addressing challenges and opportunities

TasCOSS see a number of opportunities in Tasmania's response to demographic change. This is a rare occasion on which Tasmania's social justice and industry imperatives combine. As the Tasmanian Government seeks to introduce initiatives which will bolster Tasmania's labour force and improve productivity, there will be a need for increased focus on engaging population groups that are currently disengaged from the workforce.

There is recognition at industry level that to engage disadvantaged groups in the labour force requires that the barriers that impede their access to the workforce are addressed. There will need to be increased investment in education, training, childcare and programs which assist young people, migrants and people with disabilities enter and remain in the workforce.

There also needs to be increased recognition of the importance of population health in terms of sustaining a labour force, enabling productivity growth and constraining demand for clinical services. With the projected diminishing availability of health professionals, there will be a need to shift the focus from provision of clinical health services to investment in the factors which are known to have most impact on population health; income, education levels, employment, appropriate housing, good transport, access to services, social and recreational activity have a significant and measurable impact on population health.

We have included more specific comments in relation to the strategies to which they relate.

Strategy 1: Sustain Tasmania's Workforce

Reducing the obstacles that prevent people from entering or remaining in the labour force

Potential Australian Government Action

Early years intervention

TasCOSS support the proposal for cross government early childhood development programs, focusing on disadvantaged children as a method of increasing labour force participation. International research indicates that such an initiative can be expected to result in increased literacy and numeracy levels, increased educational attainment and increased school retention rates. TasCOSS note that the Tasmanian Government's ability to take action in this regard independent of the Australian Government and that Tasmanian Government has a Jurisdictional Action Plan in relation to early years intervention which should be implemented as part of any response to demographic change.

Reform of labour force disincentives

TasCOSS supports measures that increase incentives for people to remain in the labour force, on the proviso that such incentives, or the reduction of disincentives, does not involve the

reduction of benefits for people who are not in the workforce. TasCOSS research indicates that the level of Australian Government pensions and benefits is currently too low and that this impacts severely on the quality of life enjoyed by the 30% of Tasmanians who rely on a government pension as their main source of income. We would therefore argue that as part of any long-term response to demographic change the State Government should be advocating for an increase in income-support payments to ensure people are not living in poverty, which we know has a correlation to poor health, education attainment, and ability to participate in the community.

Potential State Government Action

Local training initiatives

TasCOSS see local training initiatives such as provided by the Huon LINC as fundamental to increasing labour force participation in areas of locational disadvantage including isolated and urban fringe areas. Training provided through neighbourhood houses has also proven an effective model for local training provision in disadvantaged areas, especially where this has been coupled with childcare provision.

Childcare Provision

Provision of adequate childcare places, especially in areas of locational disadvantage including urban fringe and isolated areas is fundamental to increasing training and labour force participation by women.

Additional proposed initiative: An intermediate job market

TasCOSS proposes the following additional proposal for State Government action.

Facilitate the development of projects, such as community based enterprises that provide an intermediate labour market. The intermediate labour market refers to waged work in temporary jobs (commonly 12 months) in community enterprise specially created to provide a transition from disadvantage into open employment. This concept is currently being promoted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Victorian Dept of Planning and Communities. This initiative responds to currently expressed concerns by employers that many potential employees are not “work ready”. This initiative would include:

- Developing local area-based partnerships involving not-for-profit community organisations, local business and industry, education and training providers, employment service providers, and state and local government
- A whole of government focus and policy platform to facilitate the proliferation of community enterprises
- Procurement policies of government, business and community organisations that encourage procurement of goods and services from community enterprises
- Mechanisms to improve access to capital for viable projects, such as a mix of grants and low-interest loans from both government, commercial and philanthropic sources

Potential Tasmanian Stakeholder Action

Community Services Sector response to changing demographics in the workforce

TasCOSS supports research to gain a better understanding of the changing demographics of the community services workforce and the ability of the sector to respond to the challenges it is likely to face. This research could contribute to work that TasCOSS has initiated in relation to an industry plan and could be complemented by:

- A research project exploring what assistance community sector employers would require to begin employing workers with higher skill development and social needs.
- Establish a planning and development framework for the community services workforce that addresses issues to do with the paid and volunteer workforces.

Retaining and attracting younger people and families from interstate and overseas

Potential State Government /Tasmanian Stakeholder Action

Migration

TasCOSS supports proposed initiatives in relation to improved recognition of overseas qualifications and increased pre-employment and post-employment support for migrants.

Strategy 2: Increasing Tasmania's long term labour productivity growth

Improving the skills of Tasmania's current and potential workforce

Potential State Government Action

Raising literacy levels

TasCOSS strongly support the proposed initiatives for raising adult literacy levels. Our recent research has confirmed the importance of adult literacy programs as a "second chance" for Tasmanians who were not able to achieve good literacy levels during their primary and secondary education.

Improving school education outcomes to enable school leavers to adapt to a changing work environment

Additional proposed initiative: An intermediate job market for young people

TasCOSS propose further investment in flexible learning models such as the *Studentworks* and *Tool* programmes which provide an intermediate labour market for young people and enable them to become "work ready". It is recommended that:

- These programmes be benchmarked in terms of their employment outcomes
- That there be further investment in those types of programmes that are demonstrated to provide an effective transition for young people into the workforce.

Strategy 3: Ensuring that Tasmania has a sustainable healthcare system

Potential State Government Action

Additional proposed initiative

TasCOSS believe that a key element missing in this discussion of how to achieve a sustainable healthcare system is how to reduce reliance on Tasmania's health care system (beyond seeking to address high risk behaviour). There is no discussion in this section of the social determinants of health ie the social, behavioural, economic and environmental conditions that are the root causes of health and of illness and how action to improve these could reduce demand for clinical services.

In the light of an ageing population and projected shortages of health professionals it is imperative that demand for health services is constrained. The World Health Organisation has clearly stated that social and environmental factors such as income, wealth, education levels employment, appropriate housing, good transport, access to services, social and recreational activity have a significant and measurable impact on population health.

The Tasmanian Director of Public Health recently released the *State of Public Health Report 2008* which presents a compelling case for specifically targeting socio-economic factors in order to improve the health of Tasmanians. This report clearly indicates the direct relationship between the health of Tasmanians and their income levels. Not surprisingly the wealthiest Tasmanians are the healthiest and the poorest Tasmanians the least healthy. The Report states:

...differences in health outcome measures are likely to be largely determined by the cumulative effect of socioeconomic and demographic factors, rather than by the quality of Tasmanian hospitals and health care system, or matters such as the length of our elective surgery waiting lists. (State of Public Health Report 2008, p 1)

In the light of this research, it is clear that the key to reducing reliance on Tasmania's health system is investment in the factors which drive good population health, especially among the most economically disadvantaged groups, such as education and training, affordable housing and public transport services.

Investment in the social determinants of health should be complemented by a comprehensive health promotion strategy that coordinates health promotion activity in Tasmania.

Strategy 4: Maintaining independent living for older Tasmanians

Potential State Government Action

TasCOSS support the focus on expanding general living support programs, creating more age-friendly environments through amendment of planning schemes, provision of appropriate transport services, engagement in social and recreational activity and support for older people's participation in the voluntary sector.