

Tasmania is ageing first — so we should be planning first

Tasmania has long been described as Australia’s oldest state. But “oldest” can sound like a curiosity - a demographic footnote. It isn’t. It’s a warning light.

A new national analysis on ageing and aged care argues that the real pressures won’t show up evenly across the country. They will arrive earlier, faster and more intensely in certain places - especially in communities where the workforce needed to deliver care is already thin.

That is Tasmania in a nutshell.

Here’s the reality behind the headlines. By 2045, Tasmania is forecast to have 26% of its population aged 65 and over - and 11% aged 80 and over.

That 80-plus figure matters, because it’s often the point at which support needs intensify: more frailty, more complex health conditions, more dementia, more carers under strain, and more people who can’t safely “make do” without reliable services.

The report describes ageing in two distinct waves. The first is already underway, as baby boomers expand the 65-plus population. The second begins around 2026, when growth accelerates in the 80-plus cohort as the oldest boomers reach their eighties.

In other words, the hardest part of the demographic shift is not some distant future problem. It’s now.

So what should we do with this information?

First, we need to stop planning aged care using national averages alone. The report makes the point plainly: national lenses can hide the places where demand will rise fastest and where staffing pressures are most severe.

Tasmania’s demographic profile creates what it calls “a significant localised demand and workforce challenge” that doesn’t always show up at the national scale.

If we don’t design policy and funding that recognises this, older Tasmanians will keep paying the price through delays, gaps and avoidable stress.

Second, we must be honest about what is now the biggest constraint: workforce. The report argues that workforce feasibility (whether services can attract, afford and retain staff) is now a major determinant of whether aged care investment is viable. If an organisation can’t staff a facility or a service, it can’t operate it, no matter how strong demand looks “on paper.”

That rings true in Tasmania. Older people can be approved for support, families can do everything right, and communities can desperately need services - but none of that matters if the workforce simply isn't there.

Third, we must plan for the reality of ageing in place. The report contrasts metropolitan areas, which tend to attract younger adults and recent migrants, with regional communities where people are more likely to age in place, with fewer young adults moving in and a higher existing share already over 65.

Across Tasmania, that pattern is familiar — and it brings predictable challenges: transport barriers, thin markets, and fewer options when something goes wrong.

When policymakers talk about “choice” in aged care, older Tasmanians understand that choice depends on geography. If there's one provider in your area — or none — then “choice” becomes a word on a brochure rather than a lived reality.

There's a practical example closer to home. The report identifies a category of places it calls “moderate-risk regions” — areas that are stable today but “trending tighter,” and vulnerable if national workforce shortages deepen. It lists Launceston as one of those examples.

That's a timely reminder that we can't wait for a crisis to prove what the data is already suggesting.

So what should governments do?

For COTA, the priority is simple: plan early, plan locally, and treat workforce as the enabling condition for everything else. That means:

- A clear Tasmanian plan for the 80-plus wave now underway, including home support, carer supports, dementia-friendly services, and realistic pathways out of hospital.
- Workforce packages that match regional realities — training pipelines, incentives, and practical supports that make it possible to recruit and keep staff.
- Place-based transparency — local reporting at catchment level so communities can see what is planned, what is funded, and what is actually being delivered.
- Equity as a design principle — so older people in regional Tasmania don't face longer waits and fewer options simply because of their postcode.

Tasmania is not an outlier to be managed. We are a preview of the nation's future. If governments and the sector can build an aged care system that works here — with our older population profile, our dispersed communities and our workforce constraints — they will have built a system that can work anywhere.

And if we don't plan now, older Tasmanians will be the first to feel the consequences.

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