



Population change and housing needs in Western Tasmania: a preliminary analysis

Report prepared by the
Tasmanian Policy Exchange
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A close-up photograph of traditional Indigenous objects. In the foreground, a large, shallow, reddish-brown clay bowl is filled with a dark, granular substance. To its left, a woven basket made of light-colored fibers contains several dark, smooth stones. Another woven basket is visible in the background. A beaded necklace with blue and white beads lies on a textured, brown surface in the foreground. The background is a blurred green field.

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the palawa/pakana of lutruwita, the traditional owners of the land upon which we live and work.

We pay respects to Elders past and present as the knowledge holders and sharers. We honour their strong culture and knowledges as vital to the self-determination, wellbeing and resilience of their communities.

We stand for a future that profoundly respects and acknowledges Aboriginal perspectives, culture, language and history.



About the Tasmanian Policy Exchange

The TPE has been established at the University of Tasmania to make timely and informed contributions to key policy debates occurring in Tasmania and beyond, thus making a positive contribution to the future of our state and its people.

The TPE's policy work and analysis can be found at www.utas.edu.au/tpe

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Part 1: Introduction

The West Coast is a strategically important region undergoing a period of economic and social transition, including growth in the tourism and aquaculture sectors; new mining ventures as part of Australia's commitment to greater self-sufficiency in essential minerals; and significant investment in new energy projects as a result of the global energy transition.

Residents are among the most disadvantaged in Tasmania, and the region faces challenges relating to relatively low levels of population growth; limited access to key services and amenities; and growing numbers of drive-in/drive-out (DIDO) workforces.

Our previous research highlighted the social and economic development challenges linked to high levels of long-distance commuting in the West Coast's small regional workforce. In many ways, the growth of long-distance commuting is both a symptom and a cause of diminishing liveability and long-term population decline.

The role of housing

We have heard anecdotally that a shortage of appropriate housing may be a barrier to attracting and retaining a more sustainable long-term resident workforce and population. This report aims to provide preliminary analysis of the role that housing plays in attracting or preventing new residents from settling in the region.

Failure to invest in better housing and community infrastructure may threaten the viability of strategically important resource projects and the sustainability of communities on the West Coast. By analysing the relationship between population change and housing stock, type, tenure, and quality, it is hoped that more effective strategies for increasing liveability can be developed that will contribute to the sustainability of this historic and important region of Tasmania.



Context and aims of the report

This report builds on existing research and analysis to establish an evidence base in relation to the housing stock available on the West Coast and related population demographics.

We aim to provide a clearer picture of who is moving to the West Coast, who is leaving, and the likely reasons motivating their departure.

We then aim to understand if and how these decisions are impacted by the availability of housing and other infrastructure and services, such as education. By identifying and better understanding the factors which drive residents' decisions to leave or remain on the West Coast, we can better enhance the social infrastructure required to improve liveability and ensure the long-term sustainability of the community.

The findings of this report are intended to inform ongoing conversations between state and local governments, industry, and community organisations. This includes the development of the Tasmanian Government's first Strategic Regional Plan, which is focusing on the West Coast region. Additionally, it is hoped this information will inform Commonwealth programs designed to support regional development amid the transition to a low-carbon economy.

The report is organised around four sections as follows:

1. Provides an **overview** of the West Coast community.
2. Analyses **population** churn and the characteristics of key cohorts **arriving** to, **departing** from, and **remaining** on the West Coast.
3. Analyses the existing **housing stock** on the West Coast and its **utilisation** by different cohorts.
4. Investigates the **relationship** between **housing supply and quality** and **population change**.

Method

The West Coast faces distinct challenges and pressures primarily linked to its remoteness and the nature of employment in key industries such as mining. It requires a **nuanced 'bottom-up' housing stock analysis**, different to approaches usually applied to more urban areas.

Data sources

We utilise data from the 2011, 2016, and 2021 editions of the **ABS Census of Population and Housing** in combination with other research on housing stock, value, and quality from **HACRU**, **SGS Economics**, the **Real Estate Institute of Tasmania**, and **CoreLogic RP Data**.

Compared to Tasmania as a whole, on the West Coast...



Population growth is slower
(2.6% versus 8.5%
statewide between 2016-
2021)



There are more lone-
person households (42%
compared to 29%
statewide)



People with no income or
with government benefits as
their primary income
outnumber wage/salary
earners



More residents are
unemployed (9.6%
versus 5.6% statewide)



More people work in mining
(9.7%) and accommodation
services (6.4%) than the
state average



The population is older
(median age of 47,
compared to 42 statewide)



There are more unoccupied
dwellings (28.5% of houses
versus 11.3% statewide)



More people suffer from a
long-term health condition
(38.2% compared to
37.5% statewide)

Comparing the five West Coast settlements

Zeehan

Population: 722

Labour force participation: 44.7%

Top 3 industries by employment:

1. Mining (25.2%)
2. Accommodation & Food Services (5.8%)
3. Public Admin & Safety (5.8%)

Strahan

Population: 697

Labour force participation: 64.2%

Top 3 industries by employment:

1. Accommodation & Food (17.1%)
2. Arts and Recreation Services (6.2%)
3. Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing (5.6%)

Rosebery

Population: 752

Labour force participation: 43%

Top 3 industries by employment:

1. Mining (31.2%)
2. Education & Training (8.1%)
3. Retail, Hiring & Real Estate Services (6.4%)

Queenstown

Population: 1,808

Labour force participation: 48.3%

Top 3 industries by employment:

1. Retail, Hiring & Real Estate Services (6.6%)
2. Health Care & Social Assistance (5.9%)
3. Public Admin & Safety (5.5%)

Tullah

Population: 202

Labour force participation: 44.4%

Top 3 industries by employment:

1. Mining (21.7%)
2. Accommodation & Food Services (13.5%)
3. Construction (8.1%)

The West Coast LGA

Population: 4,263

Labour force participation: 48.9%

The West Coast of Tasmania is a distinctive region known for its rugged environment and historic mining settlements. Mining remains a significant source of employment, as does tourism and aquaculture.

The West Coast's population is dispersed across five longstanding and remote townships, each with slightly different characteristics: Queenstown, Strahan, Rosebery, Zeehan, and Tullah.

Benchmark communities

Remote communities have distinctive characteristics and needs, including for housing.

To provide further insight into the specific issues facing West Coast communities, comparisons with Scottsdale (located in the Dorset LGA) and Smithton (located in the Circular Head LGA) are provided throughout the report.

These benchmark communities were selected because of similarities to the West Coast:

- Both are smaller regional communities with significant employment in primary industries.
- Both are experiencing population decline related to net migration loss, ageing populations, and the restructuring of traditional industries (such as forestry in Dorset).

	Population	Median age	Median household income	Labour force participation rate	Key industries (% of total employment)	Share of population resident for less than 5 years (%)
West Coast	4,263	47	\$958	48.9%	Mining (22.6%)	39.7%
Scottsdale	2,408	47	\$965	49.8%	Manufacturing (20.8%)	27.6%
Smithton	3,934	42	\$1,189	55.8%	Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (15.6%)	29.4%

Part 2: Recent arrivals and departures

The West Coast has a relatively distinctive population profile shaped by its remote location and the local economy.

The West Coast's demographic outlook is primarily characterised by net loss through migration and high levels of population 'churn', which refers to the percentage of the population moving to or leaving the West Coast every five years. The region has experienced lower population growth (2.6%) over the last five years compared to the state as a whole (8.5%), and demographic projections highlight the risk of long-term population decline in the absence of mitigation strategies.

Therefore, understanding the factors that cause residents to leave is critical to ensuring a sustainable population in the long-term.

Additionally, with the growth of DIDO workforces, understanding the factors that attract new residents to the region could inform the design of policies and strategies to encourage the growth of a resident workforce.

By analysing and comparing the demographic characteristics of long-term residents and new arrivals to the West Coast, as well as of people who have moved away, it is possible to begin to understand who wants to live on the West Coast and why. This analysis of who is coming to, and who is leaving the West Coast also provides some indication as to how its communities may look in the future if present trends continue.



The West Coast experiences relatively high population churn

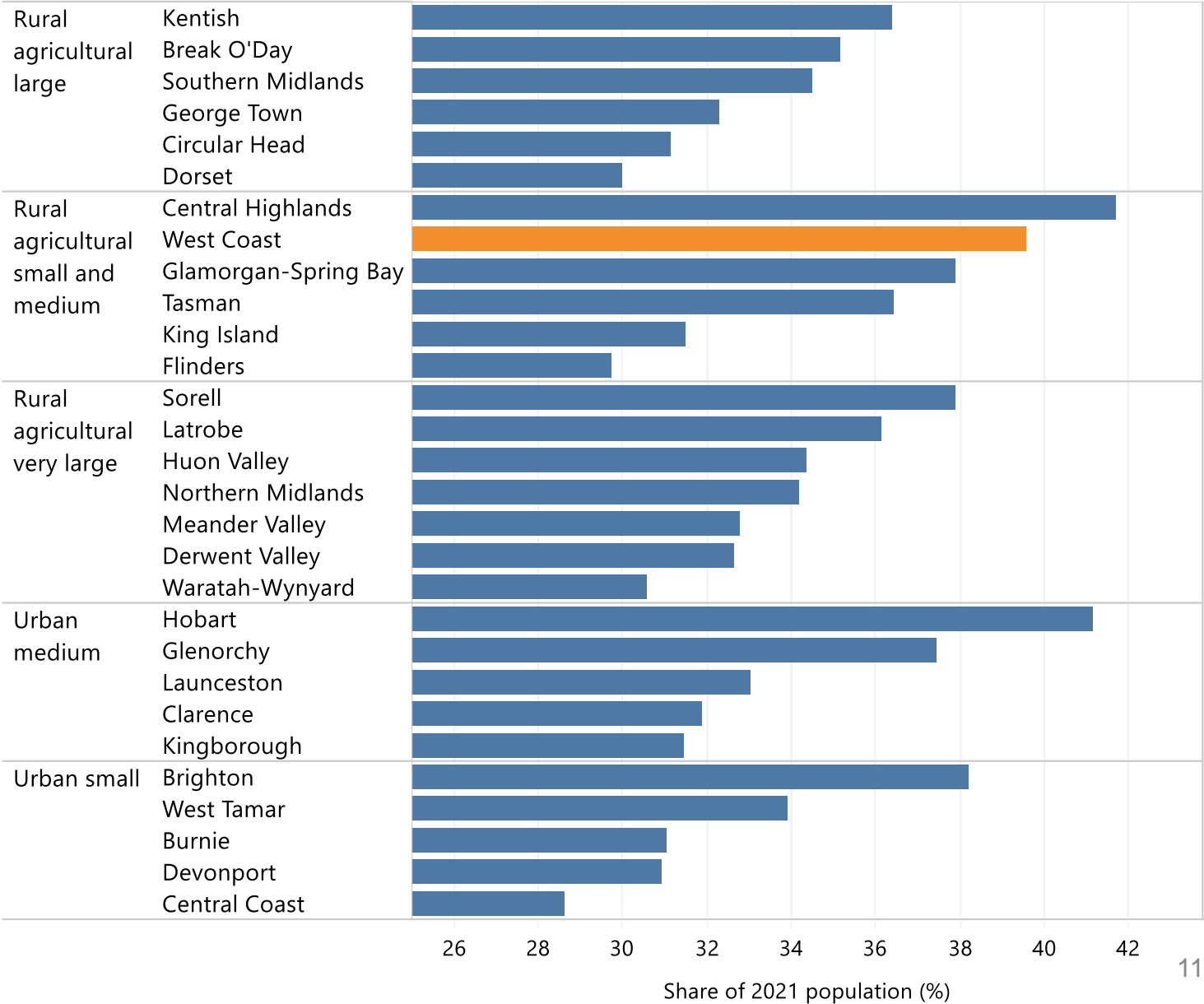
The West Coast experiences relatively high population churn compared to other similar rural and regional LGAs in Tasmania, with almost 40% of West Coast residents having lived there for less than five years. Furthermore, the rate of churn has increased in recent years: in 2016, only 32% of the West Coast population had lived there for less than 5 years, which was more or less in line with the state average.

Further research is required to ascertain the impacts of population churn on the West Coast; however, anecdotal evidence identifies a loss of social cohesion and dwindling rates of volunteering and community participation within sport and local organisations as challenges already facing the region.

Key Insight

Population churn on the West Coast has been increasing and is now at the second highest level in the state behind Central Highlands.

Recent arrivals (since 2016) as a share of total population by LGA and Australia Classification of Local Governments, 2021



Population churn may be driven by employment or service needs

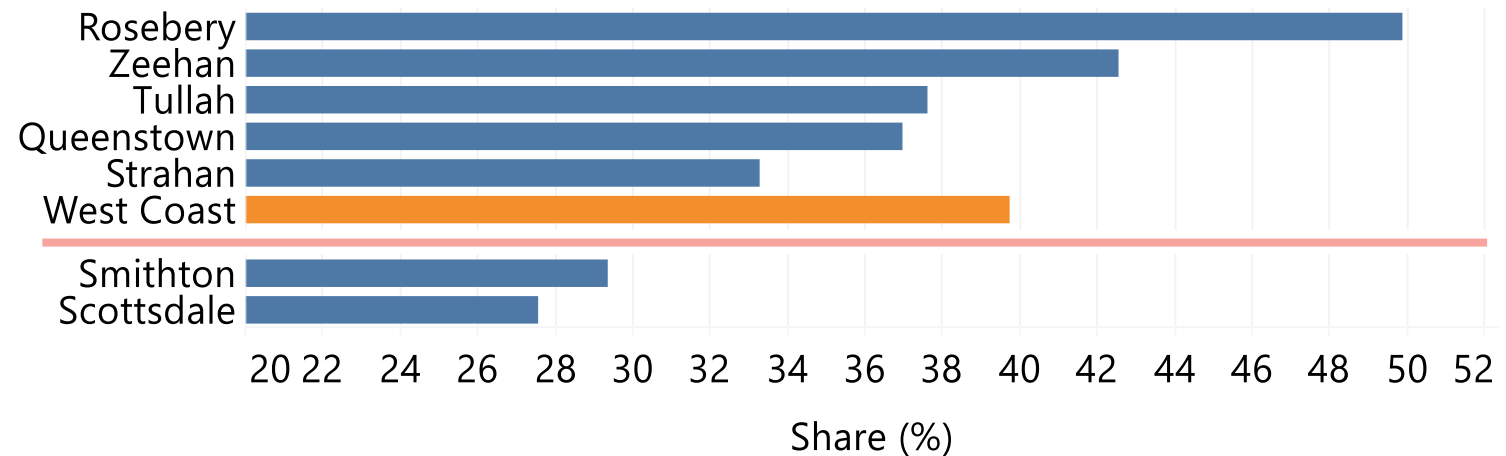
A very large share of residents of Rosebery and Zeehan have lived in those communities for less than five years (50% and 42.5% respectively) compared to other West Coast communities and the benchmark communities, Smithton and Scottsdale. This may be a result of short-term project specific employment, changing employment opportunities, or service needs, such as being closer to schools or healthcare.

Further social research focussing on the motivations and experiences of both new and departing residents will be required to fully understand the drivers behind these trends.

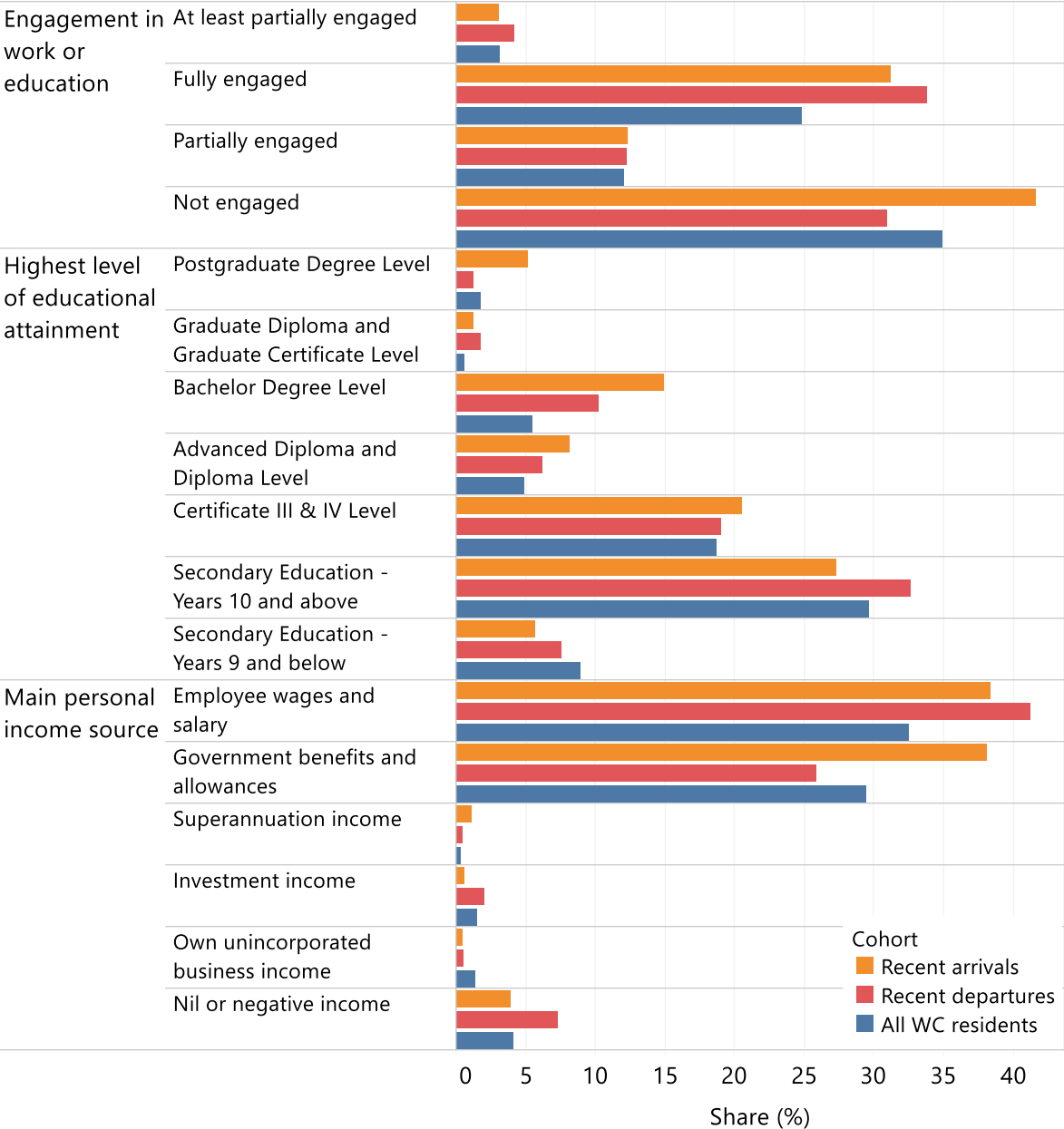
Key Insight

Population churn is worse in the mining towns of Rosebery and Zeehan than in other West Coast communities.

Recent arrivals as a share of total population by settlement, 2021



Characteristics of newly arrived and recently departed West Coast residents, 2021



There are two distinct cohorts of new arrivals to the West Coast

Data on labour force participation reveals that recent arrivals to the West Coast are split almost evenly between employed and unemployed people, and the median ages and other characteristics of the two groups diverge starkly. The two groups consist of:

1. Younger employed people (37%)

(often highly educated and working in skilled and specialist occupations)

Median age = 36.5

2. Older unemployed people (36.5%)

(more likely to receive government benefits, particularly Jobseeker/Newstart and the disability support pension)

Median age = 56.5

Key Insights

More than 270 people in their 20s and 30s moved to the West Coast to work between 2016 and 2021, highlighting employment opportunities and workforce shortages in Western Tasmania.

Employed new arrivals are more likely to be highly skilled

Employed new arrivals tend to be more highly educated and occupy more highly skilled jobs across all major industries in the region than either long-term residents or former residents who have moved elsewhere.

In combination with their age, the differences in skills and education between the two cohorts – and the West Coast population at large – suggests that many younger new arrivals may be drawn to the region by specific job opportunities. Given the likelihood that many of these in-demand roles are filled on a contract or locum basis, however, it is likely that few of these younger arrivals become long-term residents.

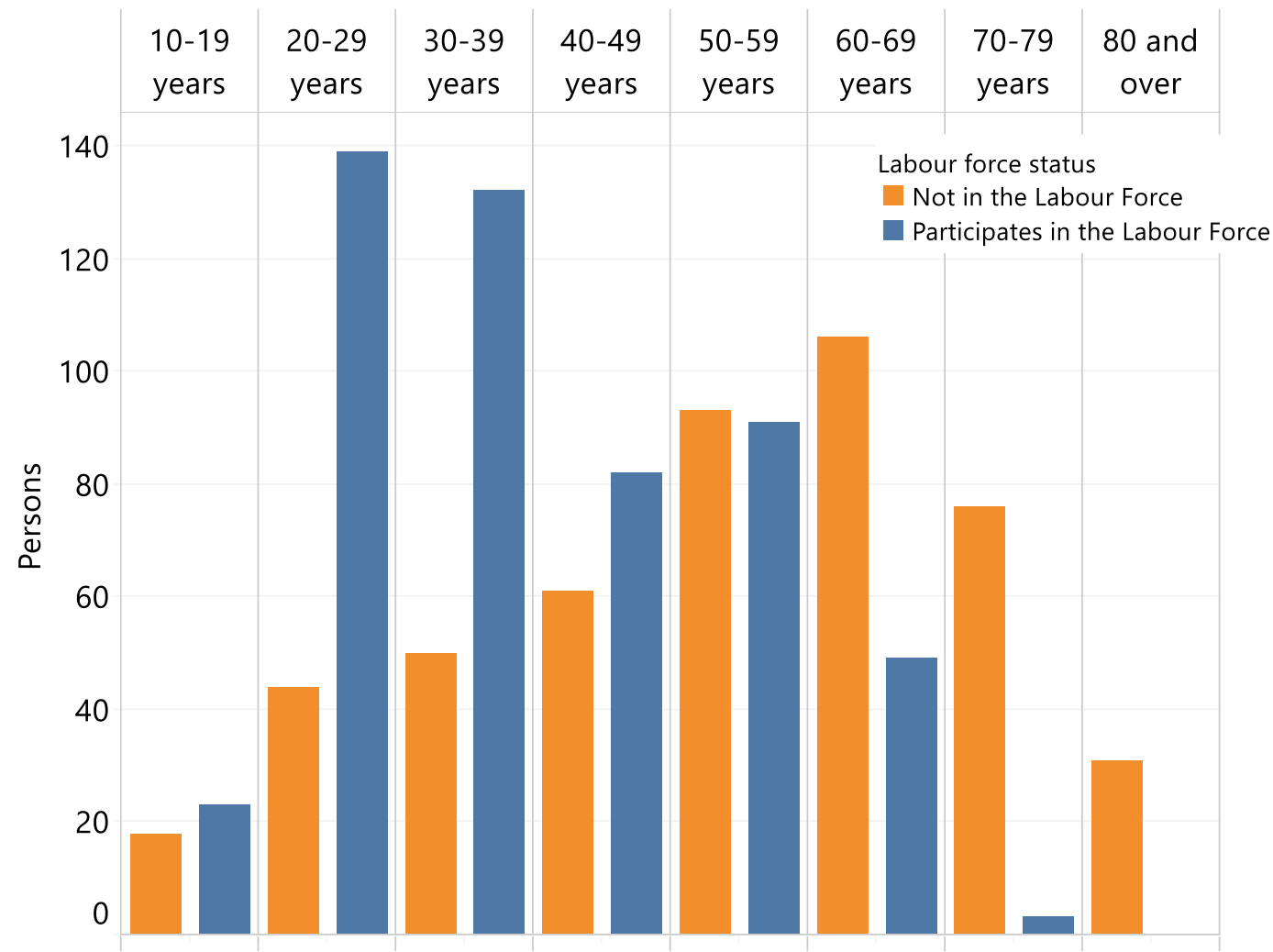
Key Insights

Demand for skilled professionals plays a major role in attracting new residents to the West Coast, particularly in the fields of education, healthcare, and public administration, and among younger, employed recent arrivals.

Occupational skill in current job by industry of employment, recent arrivals and departures, 2021



Labour force participation of recent arrivals by age, 2021



The two cohorts of arrivals have starkly different age distributions

Unemployed arrivals to the West Coast are older than the average resident. However, judging by the types of government benefit that most receive, this cohort of new arrivals are predominantly working-aged unemployed people rather than retirees: more than twice as many unemployed new arrivals receive Newstart/Jobkeeper or the Disability Support Pension than receive the Age Pension.

It is possible that the relatively cheaper cost of housing is a factor attracting this cohort to the region, however, further social research is needed to understand this trend.

Key Insights

- More than half (270) of employed new arrivals are between 20 and 40 years of age.
- Incentivising more members of this first group to become long-term residents could have a major impact on the West Coast’s overall age profile and long-term sustainability.

Recent arrivals are more likely than long-term residents or recent departures to suffer from chronic disease

Reflecting the age and relative socio-economic disadvantage of the unemployed cohort in particular, new arrivals are more likely than either recent departures or long-term residents to suffer from a wide range of chronic health conditions.

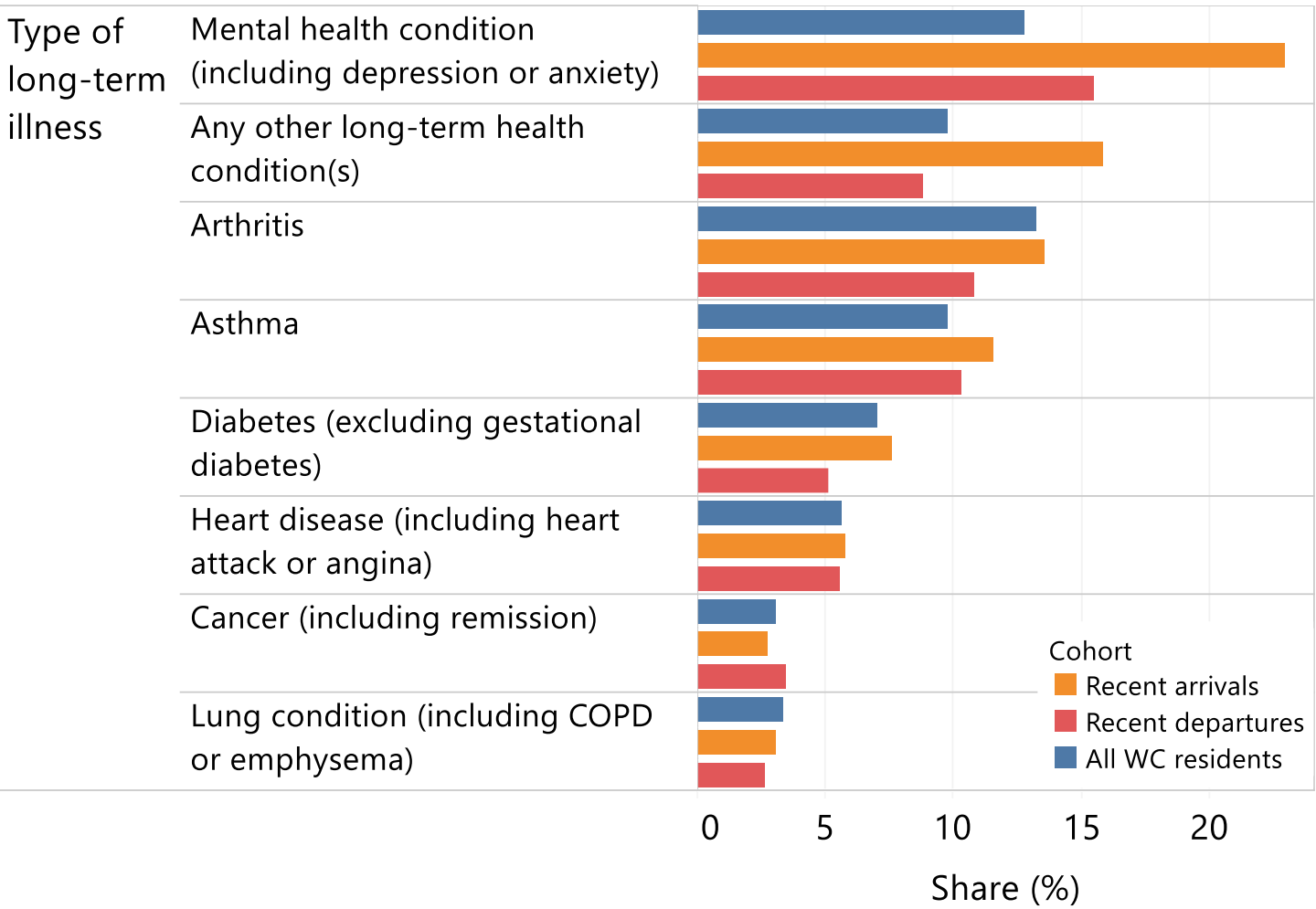
New arrivals to the West Coast have a median age of around 42, while departing residents are almost 7 years younger, with a median age of around 35. This is likely related to the number of young families with school aged children leaving the community. The median age of the West Coast community is 47.

Further research is needed to better understand why so many people with chronic health conditions would move to the West Coast given its relatively limited health services.

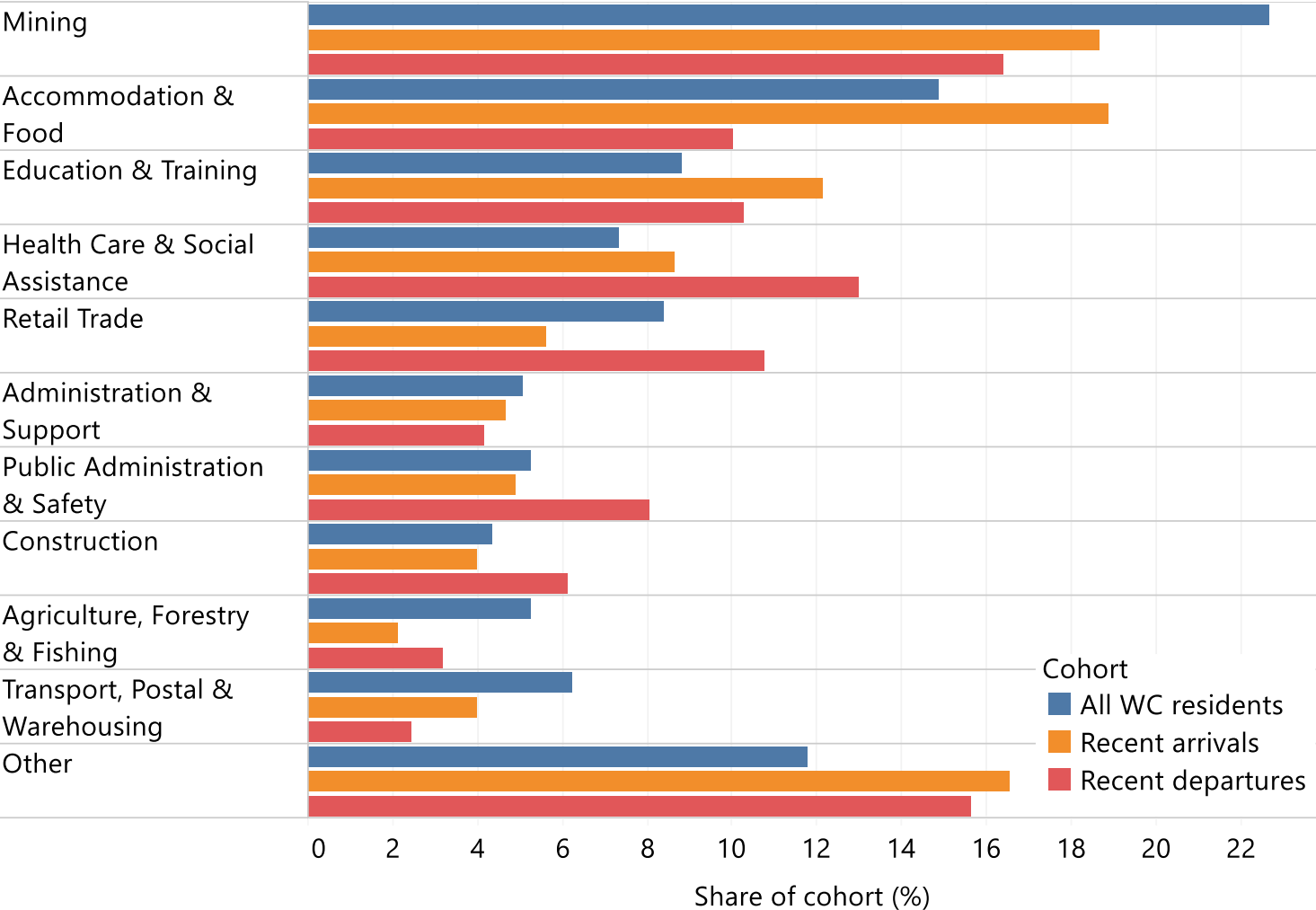
Key Insights

The departure of younger, healthier residents and their replacement by older residents with greater health care needs (including mental health) could pose considerable service provision challenges for the West Coast in the future.

Chronic illness among newly arrived and recently departed West Coast residents, 2021



Industry of employment of recent arrivals and departures, 2021



Many of the West Coast’s critical industries experience a high degree of workforce churn








Data on the industries of employment of recent arrivals to and departures from the West Coast reveal several important insights:

- Employees in primary or mining industries are most likely to be long-term residents, however, the greatest overall share of departing residents are also employed in the mining industry;
- Service industries (particularly hospitality and education) are dominated by newer residents, reflecting high turnover in this sector; and
- There is a greater share of workers departing (relative to new or long-term employees) in the health care and social assistance, retail, public administration and safety, and construction sectors.

Key Insights

- Critical industries such as health care, social assistance, and education appear to be largely dependent on new arrivals and departures, with a high degree of churn.
- Better understanding how to encourage these workers to become long-term residents is critical to the future sustainability of the West Coast community.

There are several distinctive features about new arrivals to the West Coast that set them apart from the benchmark communities

Jurisdiction 	Number of new arrivals 	Engaged in work, education or training 	Wage-earning new arrivals 	New arrivals receiving government benefits 	New arrivals with no chronic health conditions 	Median income 
West Coast LGA	976 (22% of total residents)	Fully Engaged: 28.6% Partially Engaged: 15.2% Not Engaged: 34.91%	38.4% (375 People)	38.1% (372 People)	51% (502 People)	Personal: \$548 Family: \$1,406 Household: \$958
Dorset LGA	1,083 (15.8% of total residents)	Fully Engaged: 28% Partially Engaged: 17.2% Not Engaged: 31.2%	43% (466 People)	26.3% (285 People)	59.7% (647 People)	Personal: \$583 Family: \$1,358 Household: \$1,039
Circular Head LGA	1,243 (15.3% of total residents)	Fully Engaged: 31.0% Partially Engaged: 16.8% Not Engaged: 25.6%	44% (547 People)	22.9% (285 People)	61.2% (761 People)	Personal: \$670 Family: \$1,614 Household: \$1,270

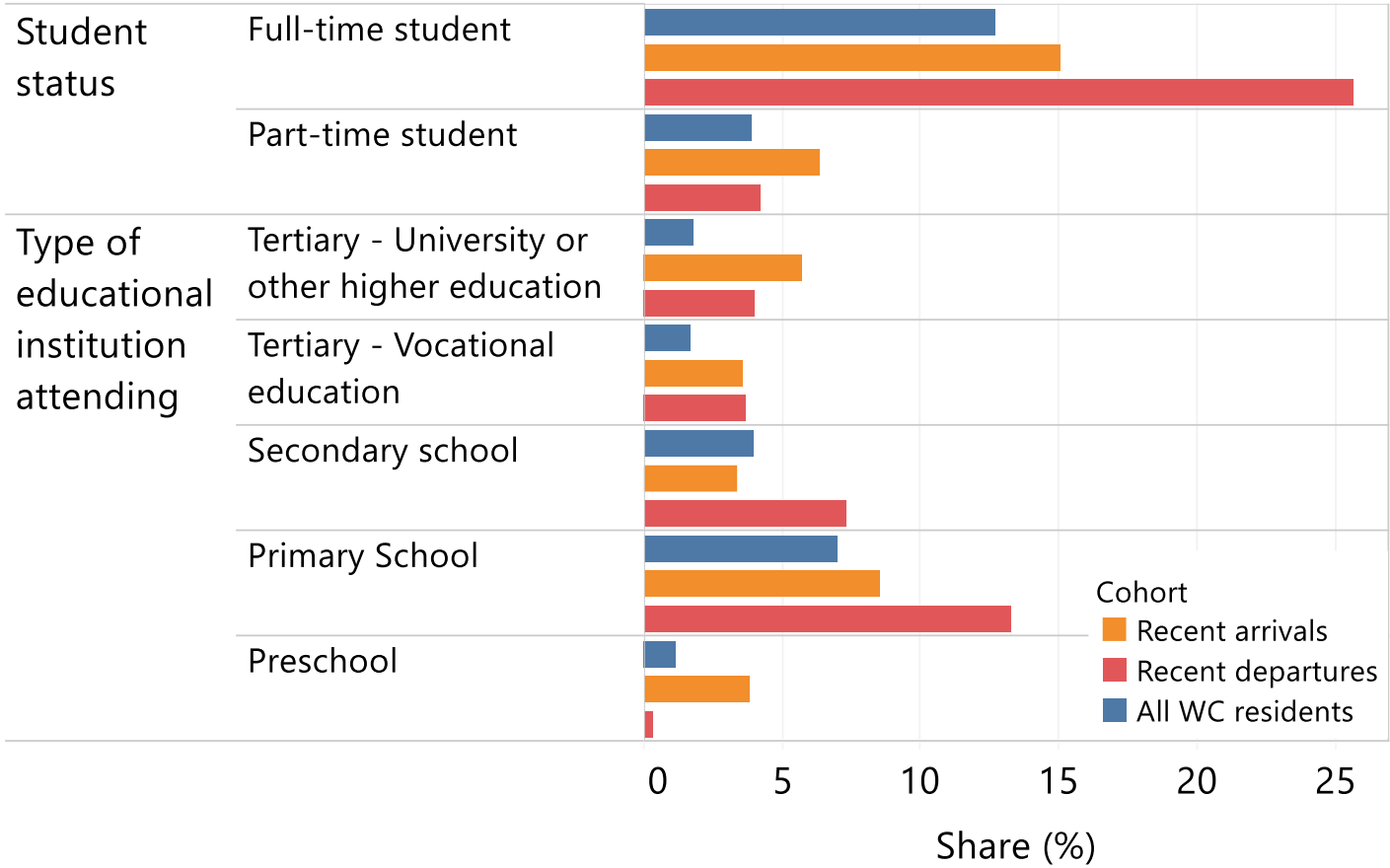
Many young families are moving away from the West Coast

The student status and educational enrolment of people who have recently moved away from the West Coast suggests that young families with children account for a large share of departing residents. Around 30% of residents who moved away from the West Coast in the past five years were students, the largest number being primary-school students (132). It is reasonable to assume that access to quality education – as well as other services and lifestyle factors – is a significant factor motivating these young families to relocate to other areas of the state.

Key Insights

- Our previous research suggests that around 53 people (2.5% of the workforce) moved away from the West Coast but kept their jobs between 2011 and 2016.
- It's likely that a large share of people employed in the mining industry who leave the West Coast but continue to work there via DIDO arrangements are parents of young families.

Student status of West Coast arrivals and departures, 2021





Part 3: Housing stock and utilisation

Like other remote mining communities, the West Coast's housing market is relatively volatile, influenced by boom-and-bust resource cycles and underinvestment. The West Coast's large number of DIDO workers occupy a range of rental, short-term, temporary, and permanent housing stock, which could be limiting the availability of rental stock for new or longer-term residents.

Evidence analysed in this report suggests that the availability of suitable rental housing in the region may deter prospective residents and limit opportunities for sustainable economic diversification. However, while housing may be a contributing factor in explaining population decline on the West Coast, it is likely only one issue among several. As the data presented in this section demonstrate, the relationships between housing and the dynamics of population change are complex and nuanced.

Despite clear housing market pressures, the data highlight significant housing underutilisation. The West Coast has the highest share of lone-person dwellings in the state and a high share of unoccupied dwellings. This is potentially exacerbated by a mismatch between the profile of dwelling types available and the housing needs of both current and future residents.

Overview of housing stock on the West Coast

Rosebery

533 dwellings in total
26.1% of dwellings are rentals
1.86 people per dwelling

Tullah

146 dwellings in total
23.3% of dwellings are rentals
2.02 people per dwelling

Zeehan

496 dwellings in total
20.8% of dwellings are rentals
2.06 people per dwelling

West Coast LGA and Statewide average

3105 dwellings, 258,611 statewide
25.3% of dwellings are rentals,
compared to 26.4% statewide
2 people per dwelling, compared
to 2.4 statewide

Queenstown

1217 dwellings in total
16.8% of dwellings are rentals
1.98 people per dwelling

Strahan

563 dwellings in total
19.2% of dwellings are rentals
2.06 people per dwelling

The West Coast experiences volatile house prices and large fluctuations in demand – both typical of remote regions with major resources industries

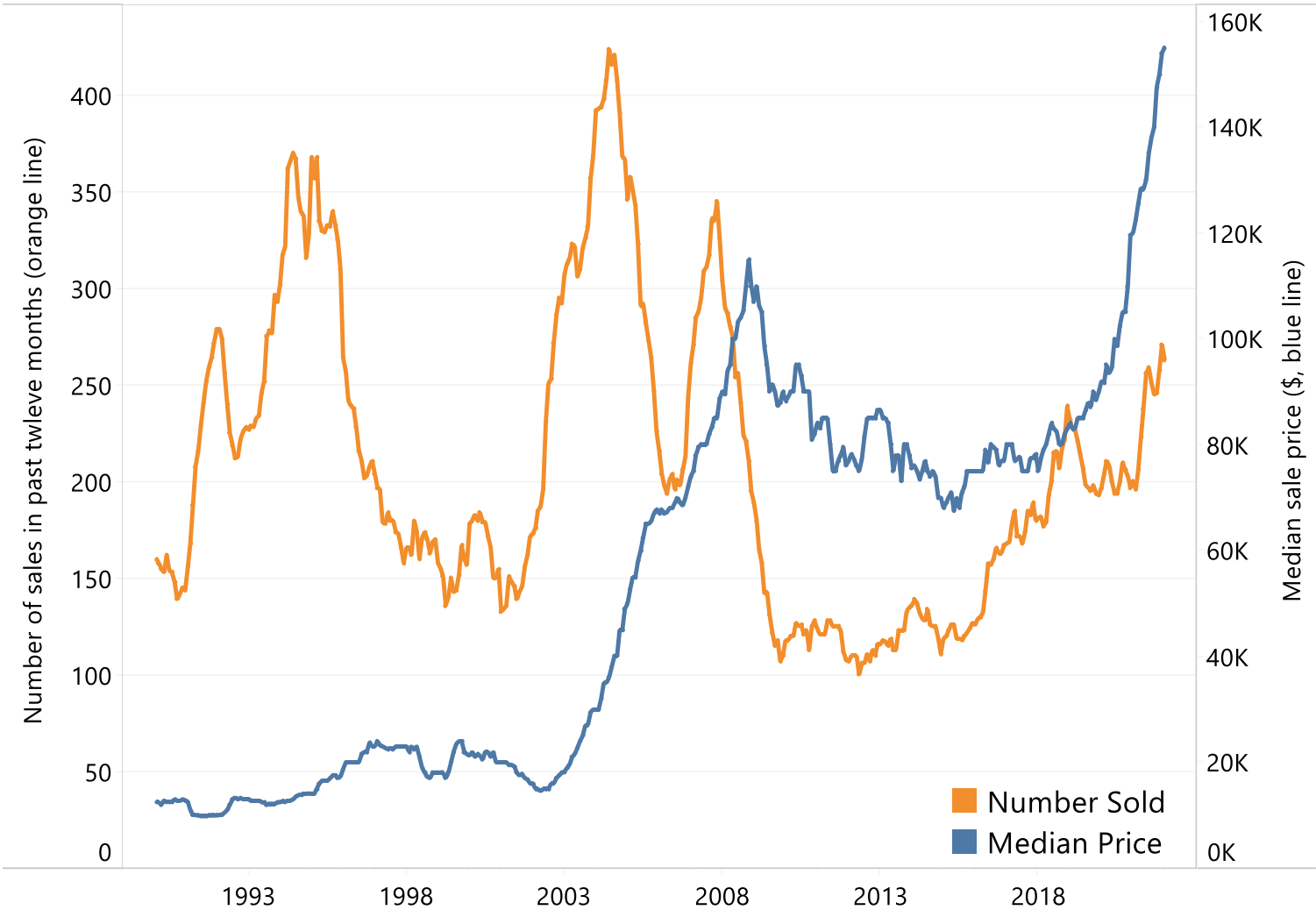
Part of the volatility is also due to the low frequency of transactions. Sale numbers and house prices have been increasing in recent years, but values remain well below the median for the state (which was \$610,000 at the time this chart ends, in mid-2022).

Given that the population of the West Coast has declined by almost half during the period covered in this chart, it is likely that price growth has been driven more by speculation than by demand among prospective owner occupiers.

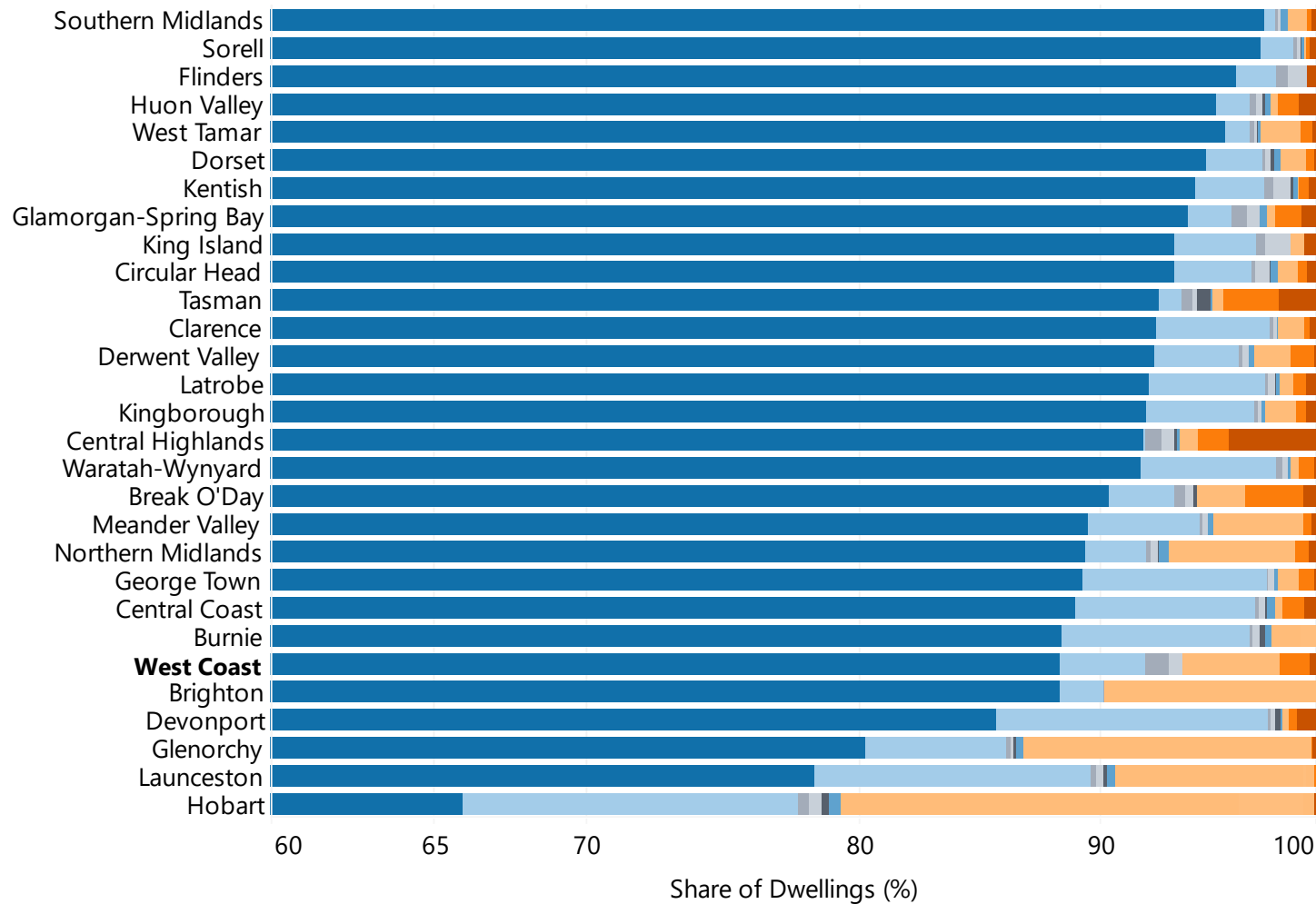
Key Insights

- Historic median values and growing sales have not translated into increased building approvals (see page 29). The approval rate for new dwellings remains among the lowest in the state despite ample affordable land.
- During the period covered in this graph, 1990 to 2021, the population of the West Coast has declined by almost 45%, from 7,664 to 4,263.

12-month sales and median prices of West Coast houses, 1990-2021



Dwellings by type by LGA, 2021



The West Coast has a high proportion of ‘flats and apartments’ for a rural area

Separate houses are the dominant type of dwelling on the West Coast (88%), with around 36% of dwellings consisting of detached, three-bedroom homes. This percentage is not unusual for the state.

There is, however, a relatively high proportion of accommodation categorised as ‘flats and apartments’ for a remote rural area. This is likely a reflection of the demand for short-term worker accommodation in this area, although further research is needed.

Key Insight

The fact that the region is an outlier in terms of its high proportion of apartment-like dwellings is likely related to several of the other ways in which its population and economy are atypical.

The West Coast has a relatively low rate of overall home ownership for a rural area

The profile of tenure types on the West Coast is unusual for a rural area in Tasmania. Just under two thirds of dwellings occupied on census night were either owned outright or with a mortgage: a relatively low rate of overall home ownership for a non-urban area, making it the seventh lowest in the state.

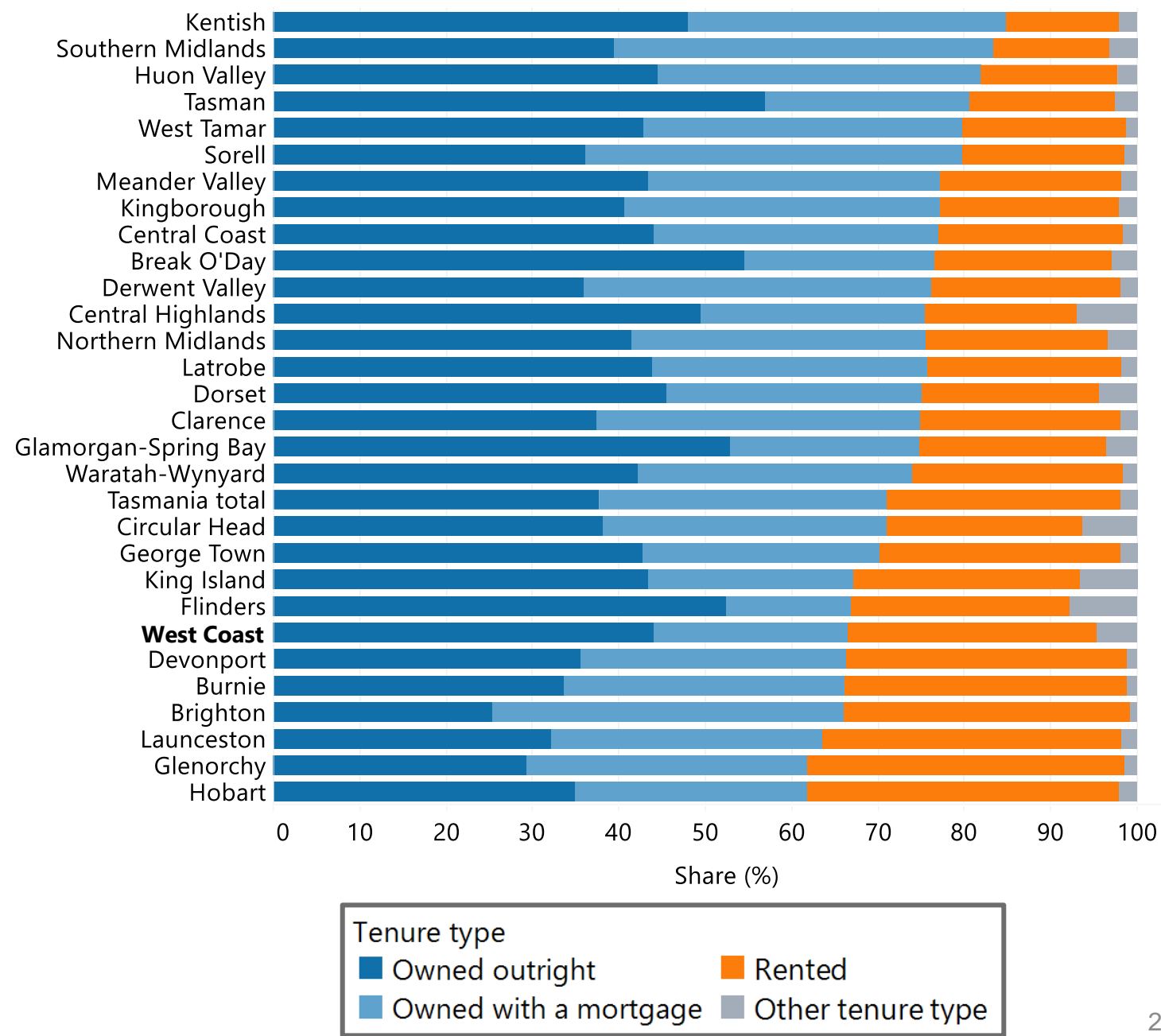
This breakdown between owner-occupied and tenanted properties is much more typical of smaller urban centres than regional areas.

While it's possible that the low rate of ownership is partially due to low incomes among local residents, further research is needed to understand the drivers of high rental demand on the West Coast. This tenure profile is likely underpinned by DIDO workers and workers filling locum positions or short-term contracts who may not intend to live on the West Coast in the long-term. It could also reflect that the available housing stock doesn't meet some residents' needs i.e., lower quality, located in the wrong areas, or having the wrong number of rooms.

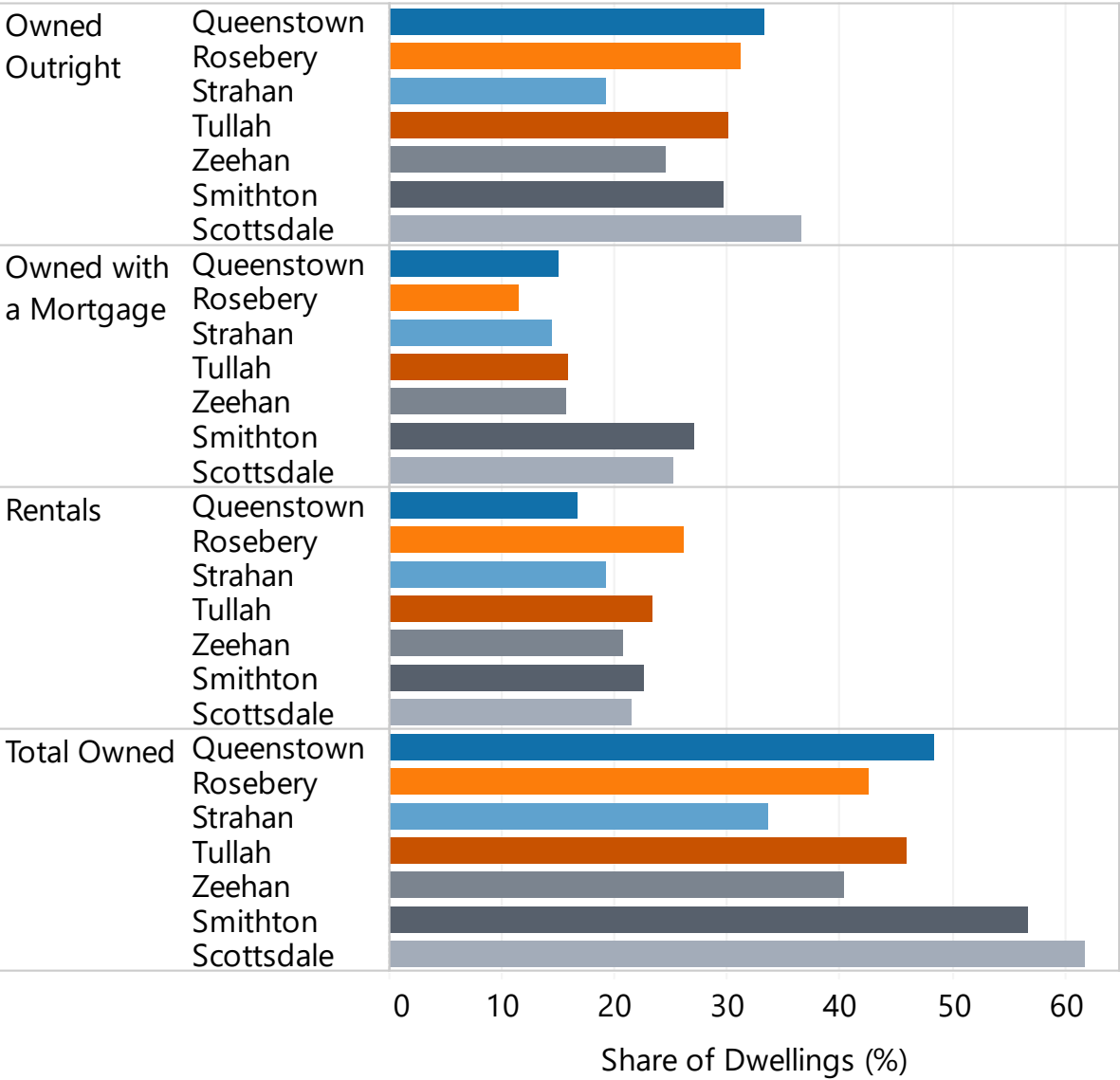
Key Insight

It is possible that the West Coast requires an even greater share of rental accommodation to meet demand.

Tenure type of occupied dwellings by LGA, 2021



Proportion of Ownership and Rentals, 2021



Home ownership is slightly lower across the West Coast compared to benchmark regions

Home ownership is much lower in West Coast communities than Smithton and Scottsdale, particularly in Strahan (33.5%) and Zeehan (40.3%). This may be due to higher proportions of lower-income households and/or population churn.

Of those who do have a mortgage, there are similar rates of affordability (those with a mortgage payment less than 30% of their household income) on the West Coast and Smithton (between 77% and 82%). This is standard and consistent with urban areas across the state.

The proportion of rentals is fairly consistent between Scottsdale, Smithton, Strahan, Tullah, and Zeehan (between 19 and 23%). Rosebery (26%) and Queenstown (16.7%) are the outliers with the highest and lowest numbers of rentals of these communities.

Rental affordability differs between communities (measured as those with rent payments less than or equal to 30% of household income). Tullah has the least affordable rentals (50% of households) while Rosebery has the most affordable (85% of households).

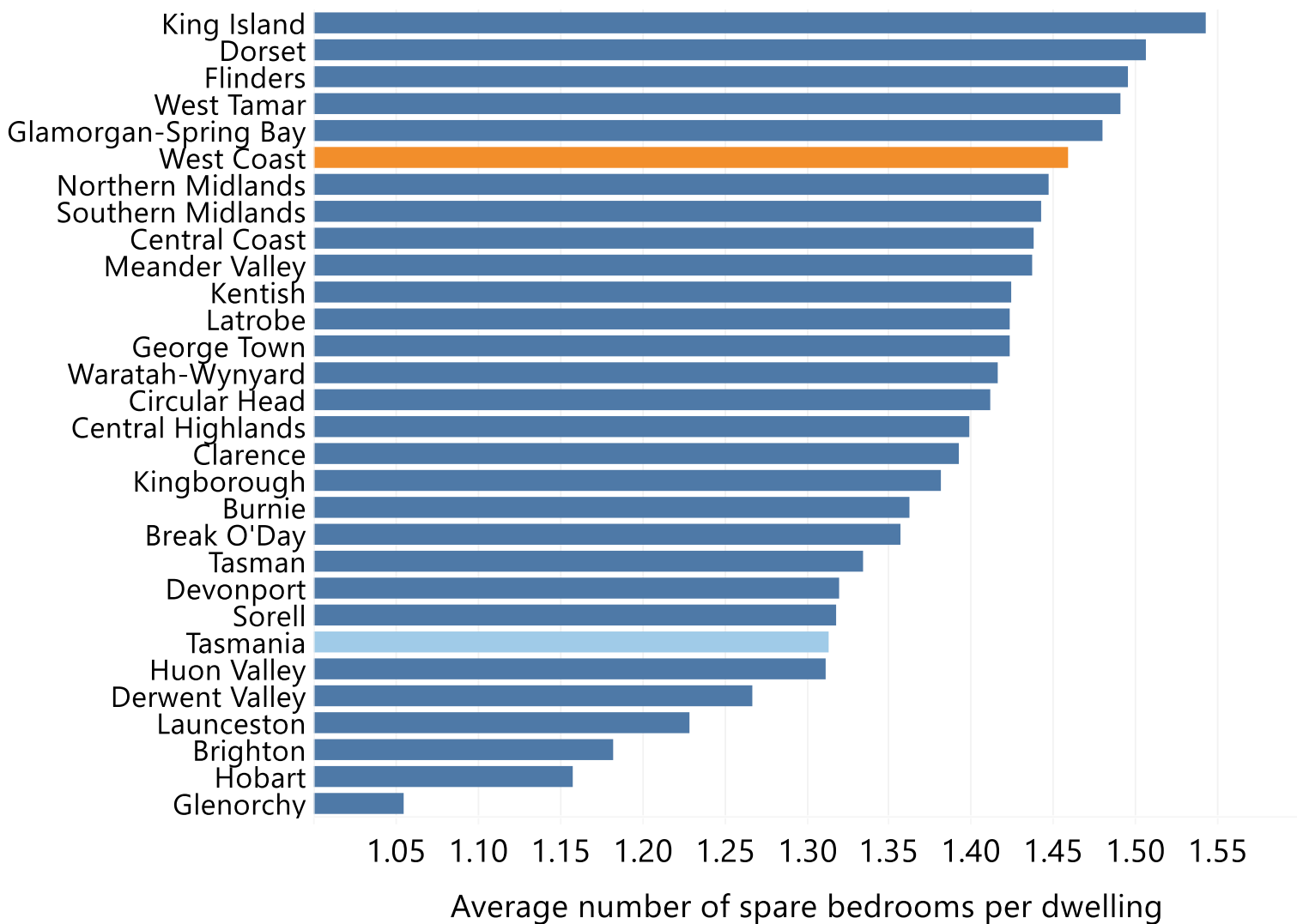
Housing underutilisation: almost half of West Coast households have at least one spare bedroom

Almost half of households on the West Coast (~48%) have at least one spare bedroom. This is due in part to the large number of lone-person households on the West Coast (see the next page).

Key Insights

- There may be a lack of smaller homes, units, or apartments as options for people who live alone.
- Available alternatives for these households may not be desirable, even if technically liveable/habitable, due to being lower quality or undesirably located.
- The identified ‘spare bedrooms’ may not all represent underutilisation but may be put to other uses such as study, office, playroom, craft and hobbies, or as a guest bedroom.

Average number of spare bedrooms per dwelling by LGA



The West Coast has more lone-person households than any other LGA in Tasmania

The West Coast has the highest share of lone-person households in Tasmania (~42.5% of occupied dwellings). 47% of West Coast lone-person houses are owned outright; 14.5% are owned with a mortgage; and 29.3% are rented.

There appear to be two major cohorts occupying lone-person households:

Older Residents:

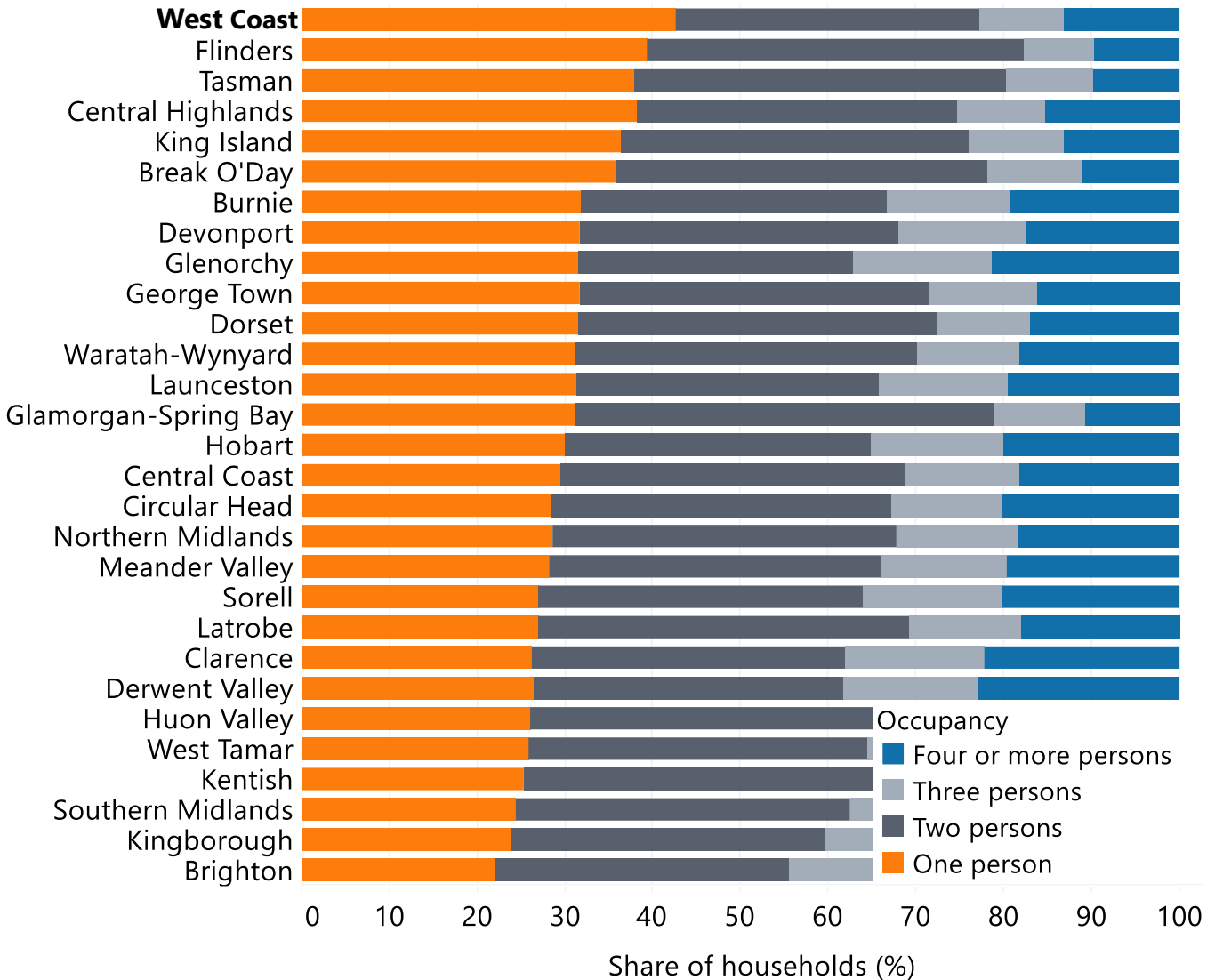
25% of people living in lone-person households on the West Coast reported the Age Pension as their primary source of income. It may be that older residents are unable to downsize due to a lack of suitable alternative housing options for ageing in place. There is [anecdotal evidence](#) to reinforce this interpretation.

Employees in the Mining Industry:

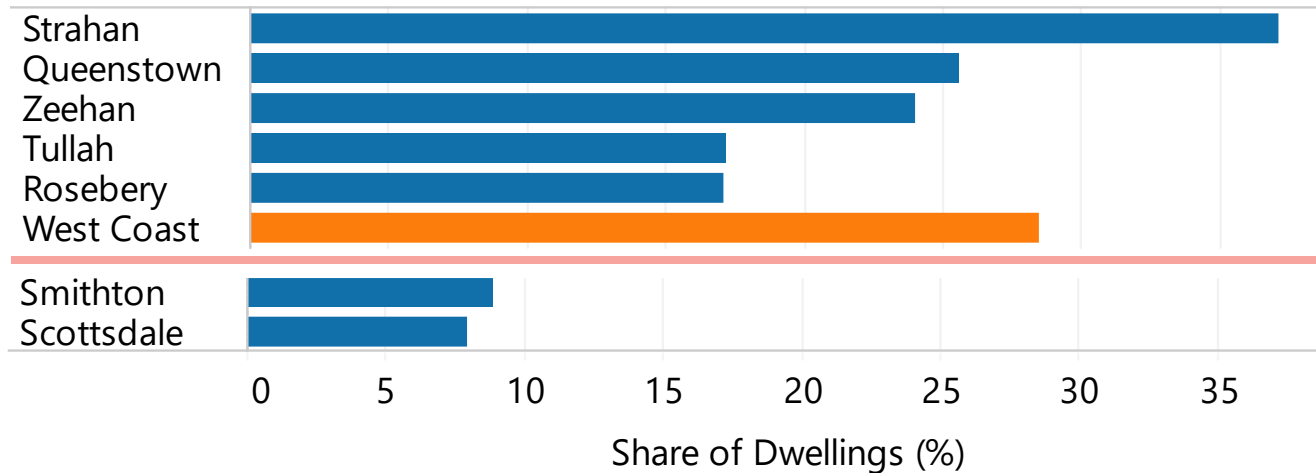
Approximately 40% of those residing in lone-person households are employed, with 9.7% working in the mining industry. Additionally, 5.3% work in accommodation and food and 4.8% work in education and training. These three industries are notably dominated by new arrivals (see page 17).

The significant portion of lone-person households that consist of mine workers may be constraining the already limited supply of vacant rental properties in the area, particularly given that DIDO workers in particular would be well-suited to group accommodation models. Further research is needed to determine what proportion of these workers are employed on a DIDO basis, versus how many actually live on the West Coast but decide to rent, and why.

Household composition by LGA, 2021



Unoccupied Dwellings, 2021



The West Coast has a large number of vacant properties

The West Coast communities have higher rates of unoccupied dwellings (28.5%) than the benchmark communities of Smithton and Scottsdale (8.9% and 7.9% respectively).

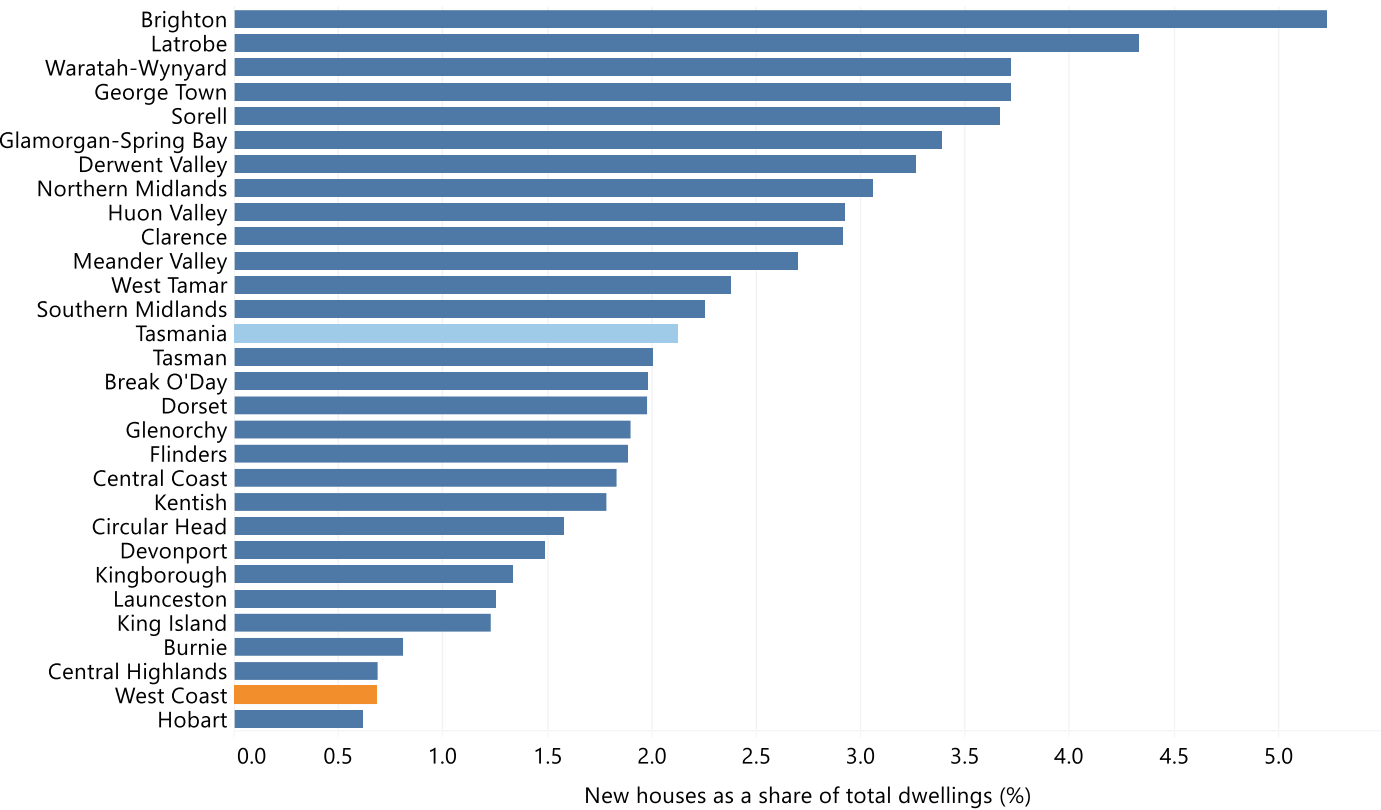
Queenstown has the second highest rate of unoccupied dwellings of the communities listed, after Strahan. Even the mining towns of Rosebery and Tullah, while having the lowest vacancy rates on the West Coast, have significantly higher vacancy rates than either Smithton or Scottsdale.

The West Coast's high rate of unoccupied dwellings is potentially due to housing quality (it's possible many of the homes are low quality or uninhabitable); the non-resident and seasonal workforce; shacks which are only occupied periodically; short-stay accommodation (i.e., AirBnB); and population decline/low demand.

Key Insights

- 28.5% of dwellings on the West Coast are unoccupied, compared to the state average of 11.8%.
- Further social research is needed to explain the West Coast's high vacancy rate.

New dwelling approvals as a share of total dwellings by LGA, 2021 to May 2023



Investment in new housing

Despite available land, dwelling completions as a share of total housing stock are among the lowest in the state. This is second only to the City of Hobart.

While this may simply reflect low and variable demand in the local housing market, it is likely that a complex mix of several factors explains this low figure:

1. Construction costs: The West Coast is relatively remote, presenting challenges to new residential development, such as limited access to skilled labourers and challenges procuring and transporting construction materials.
2. The distinctive West Coast housing market: A combination of volatility associated with booms and busts in the region’s resource industry and a transient professional population leads to under-investment in new home construction. Fixed-term and contract/locum or DIDO workers, even highly-paid ones for whom it would otherwise make financial sense to purchase property locally, are far more likely to buy existing stock than to build.
3. Lower incomes: Established and long-term residents of the West Coast tend to have lower, fixed incomes and struggle to secure finance to purchase or build a home. Rent to buy schemes could alleviate this issue.

Key Insight

These factors pose challenges to prospective residents wanting to build as well as to developers completing larger projects with a limited and uncertain return on investment.

New dwelling approvals are of lower-than-average value

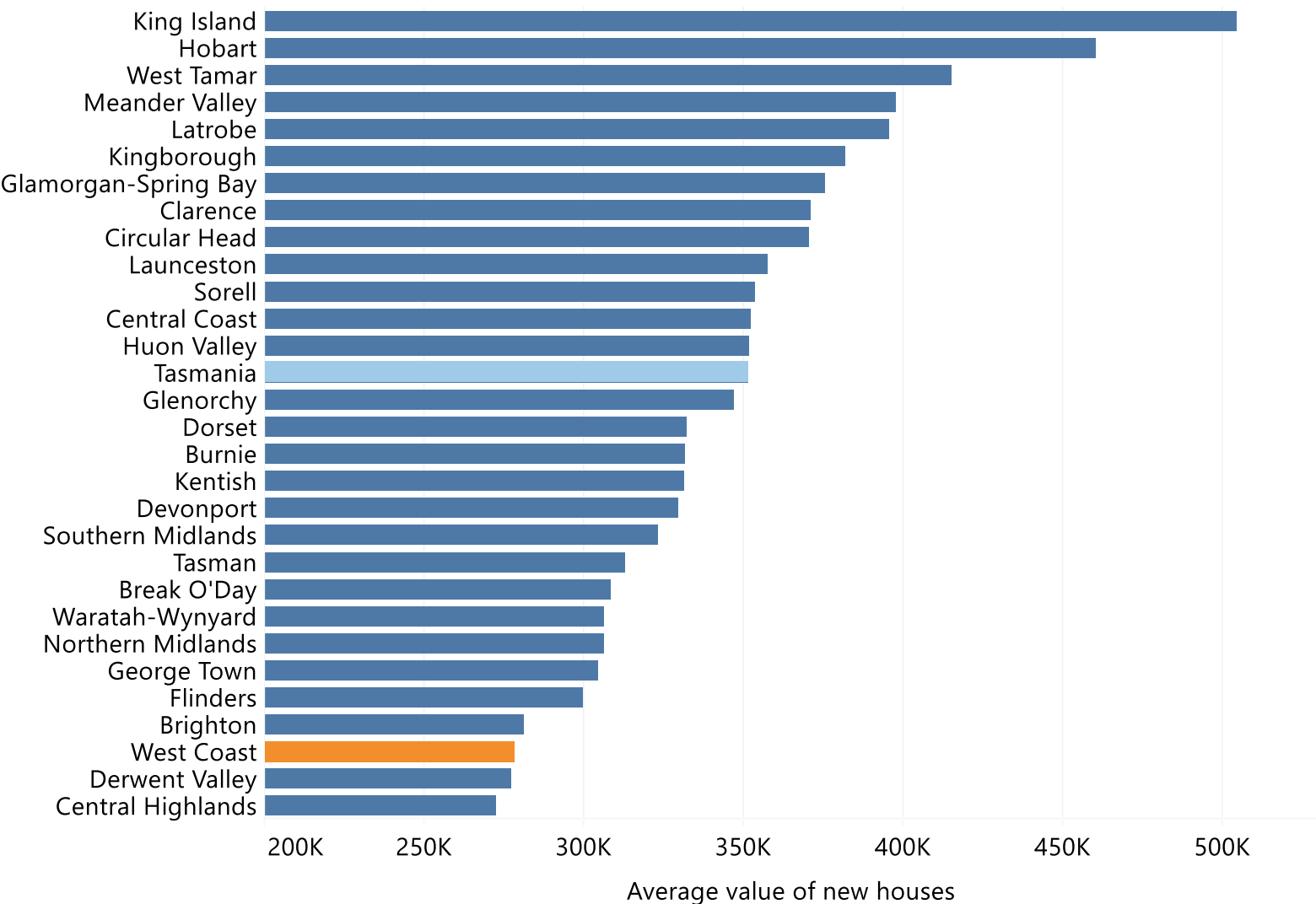
Reflecting lower incomes and affordability challenges, development that is taking place on the West Coast is typically at the low-value end of the spectrum relative to the rest of the state.

The average value of new dwelling approvals on the West Coast over the past three years has been \$278,000 – the third lowest in the state – with 21 new dwellings approved.

Key Insight

With only two LGAs in Tasmania having dwellings of lower average value than the West Coast, those drawn to lower cost housing, for a number of reasons, may be tempted to the area.

Average value of new dwelling approvals by LGA, 2021 to May 2023



The housing paradox: the West Coast has an abundance of unoccupied dwellings but almost no rental vacancy

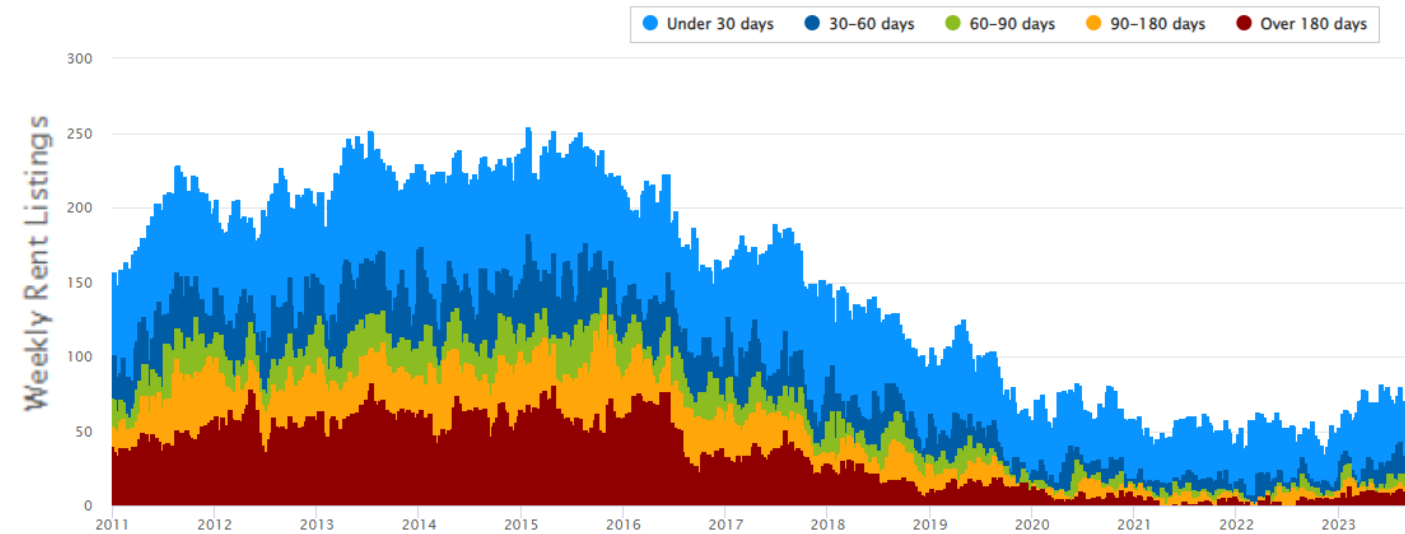
The West Coast has a significant share of vacant properties, the highest share of lone person households in Tasmania, relatively cheap house prices, and relatively low new dwelling approvals, despite available land. All of these factors could be interpreted to indicate low demand to live in the region.

However, the data also reflect significant rental demand: in October 2022, just 0.6% of rental properties were vacant on the West Coast, and unit rents have increased by over 100% in the last decade.

Key Insight

- Further social research is needed to understand why strong rental demand isn't translating into greater demand for houses, land, and new dwelling approvals.
- It could be that a significant portion of the housing stock is lower quality and therefore undesirable or unsuitable to live in. It could also be that demand for rentals is driven by DIDO or shorter-term workers who may not intend to live on the West Coast in the long-term.

Weekly rent listings on the West Coast, 2011 to 2023



Source: SQM Research, <https://sqmresearch.com.au/total-rent-listings.php?region=tas-West%20Coast&type=r&t=1>

A scenic view of a coastal town, likely on the West Coast of Tasmania. The image shows a harbor with several boats docked at a pier. In the background, there are buildings, including a prominent white building with a red roof, and a hillside covered in trees. The sky is blue with some clouds.

Part 4: Housing utilisation and mobility

This report analyses whether the availability and suitability of housing is constraining the growth of the resident population on the West Coast. Two questions are key to understanding whether and how housing impacts the decisions of local residents to leave the West Coast or of residents from other places to move there:

1. What housing is available on the West Coast and how does it compare to other parts of the state?
2. What types of housing do people moving to (or away from) the West Coast access?

Using the available data utilised in this report, we can definitively answer the first question, but not the second.

Nevertheless, it is possible to gain some new insights into how the population and demographic dynamics discussed in this report's first two sections impact housing demand. This final section of the report presents some preliminary evidence that will help shape more targeted statistical (data linkage) and social research.

However, and while some interesting patterns are evident, it is clear from the data presented here that housing is just one factor in a broader suite of interconnected liveability issues that are limiting population growth on the West Coast.

Housing is used differently by the two distinct new arrivals cohorts

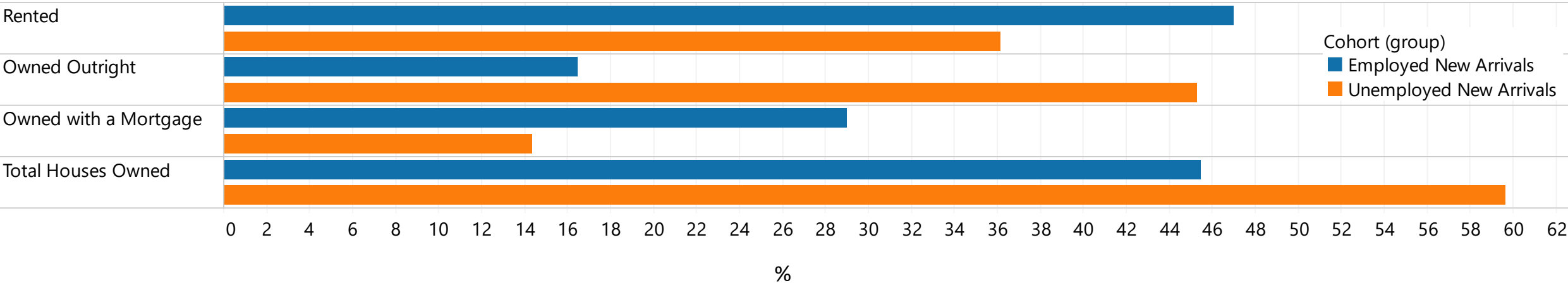
As noted, there are two distinct cohorts of new arrivals to the West Coast – younger, employed residents and older, unemployed residents.

Not only are employed new arrivals more likely to rent (47%) than unemployed arrivals (36%), but they are also more than twice as likely to rent than the West Coast population as a whole (18%). The high rental demand from employed new arrivals may indicate that there are a lack of appropriate purchase options for this cohort, or alternatively, that they do not intend to remain residents in the long-term. Further social research is needed.

Most employed new arrivals work in the accommodation and food, mining, and education and training sectors (see page 17), which are also the sectors where employees are most likely to be living in lone-person households. Therefore, it’s likely that employed new arrivals working in these industries both live alone and rent. Perhaps greater availability of small rental properties – particularly in key locations like Rosebery and Zeehan – would benefit this cohort, reduce the strain on the rental supply, and create opportunities for more of this cohort to move to the West Coast.

Unemployed arrivals are purchasing houses without a mortgage at a much higher rate than employed new arrivals. Unemployed arrivals include fixed-income recipients of government benefits (Newstart/Jobkeeper, the Disability Support Pension and the Age Pension) who may be attracted to the West Coast due to relatively low-cost housing.

New Arrival Cohorts - Housing Tenure, 2021



Housing is being utilised slightly differently by new arrivals and residents



There are more new arrivals with no extra bedrooms needed or spare than long-term residents. Long-term residents are more likely to have two or more spare bedrooms.

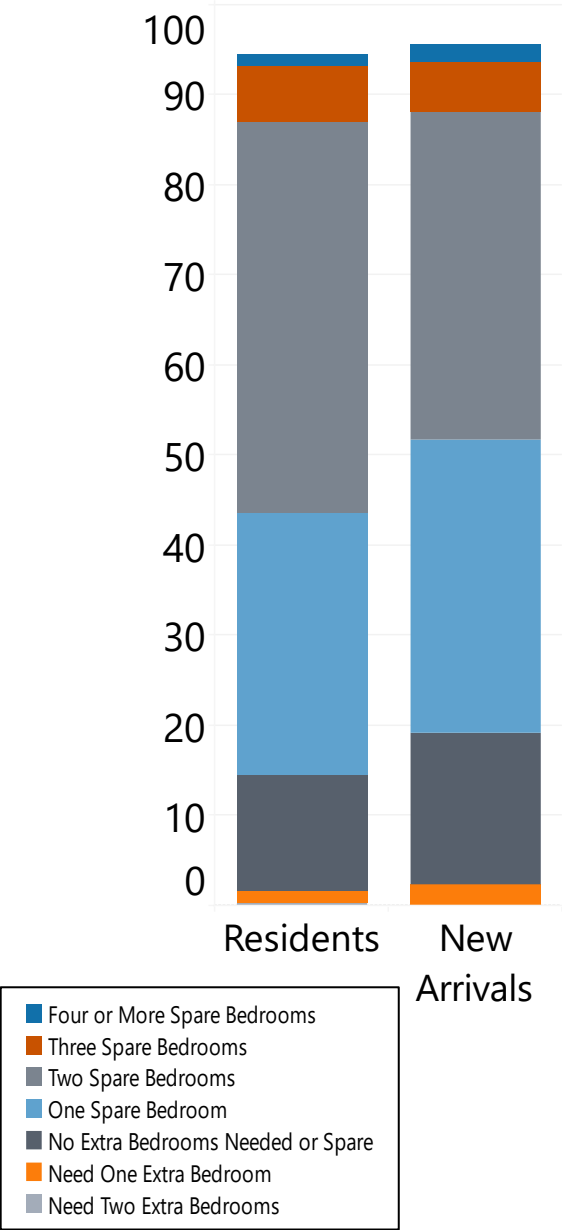


This may therefore support the hypothesis that the occupation of multi-bedroom homes by single individuals or couples (primarily retirees and mine workers) may be limiting the availability of suitable housing for families to move to the area.

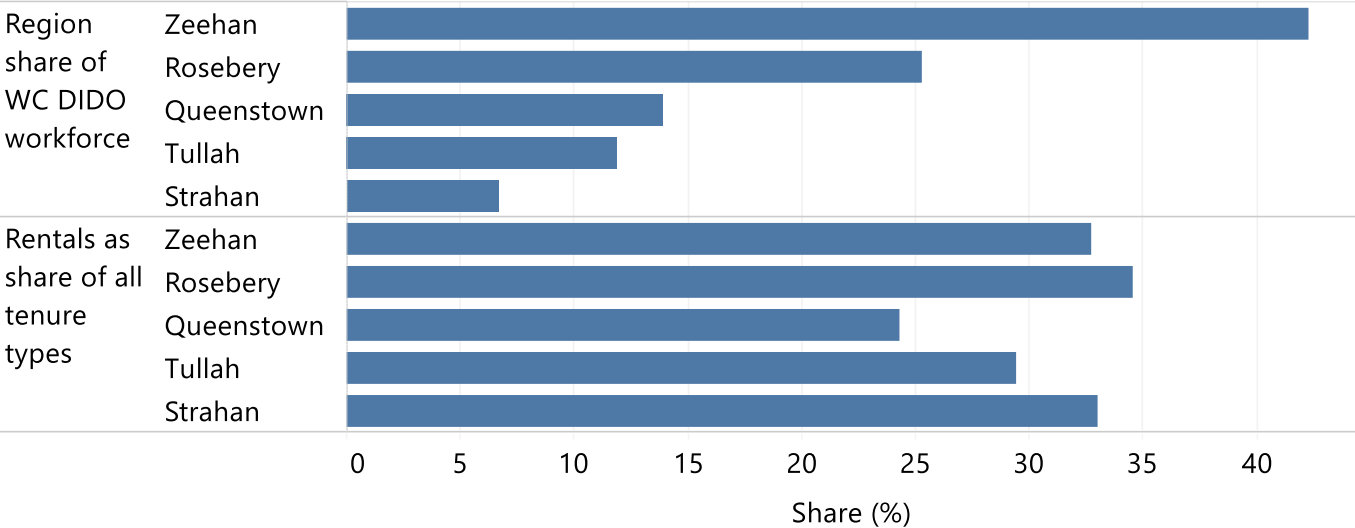


To understand the different use and housing requirements for the two distinct new arrival cohorts, further analysis combining data linkage and targeted social research will be required.

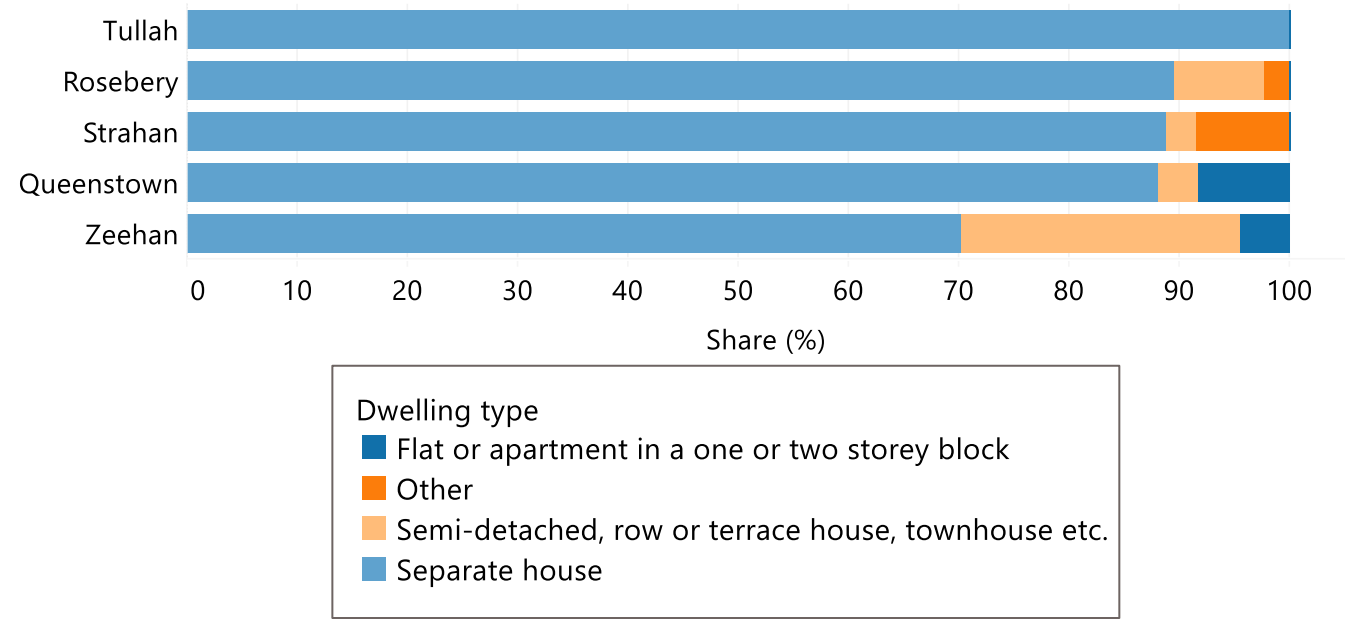
New Arrivals and Current Resident's Housing Suitability, 2021



Location of DIDO workers and tenure types, 2021



Local rental stock by dwelling structure, 2021



Housing needs of long-distance commuting workers

Our previous research highlighted that the West Coast’s workforce hosts a greater share of non-resident DIDO employees (31% of the workforce) than any other in the state.

Most – though not all – of these workers are employed in the mining industry. Consequently, two thirds of the West Coast’s DIDO workforce is located in the region’s mining centres, Rosebery and Zeehan.

Rosebery, Strahan, and Zeehan have the highest share of rental properties on the West Coast, likely reflecting DIDO worker accommodation needs. Zeehan hosts three times as many smaller semi-detached rental properties as Rosebery. Given their similar worker profiles, this means Rosebery may have fewer appropriate housing options for those working in mining than Zeehan.

Further research is required to accurately determine the composition of the significant share of ‘other’ rental stock in Strahan.

Key Insights

Zeehan and Rosebery host two thirds of the West Coast’s DIDO workforce and have the greatest share of rental properties in the region (except for Strahan).

Part 5: Demographic insights

This report has provided detailed analysis of the changing demographics of the West Coast and revealed several important patterns:

Population change and ‘churn’: The West Coast population is dynamic and subject to a high level of churn, with almost 40% of residents having lived in the region for less than five years. Residents leaving the West Coast are almost 7 years younger than those arriving, likely due to the number of families with school-aged children leaving the area.

New arrivals are not a single, homogeneous group: There are two distinct cohorts of new arrivals to the West Coast – younger, employed arrivals (37%) and older, unemployed arrivals (36.5%). Employed new arrivals tend to work in more highly skilled and specialist roles than long-term residents or departures, indicating the importance of skills demand in continuing to attract workers to the region.

In comparison to our benchmark communities – Scottsdale and Smithton - the West Coast has a high number of recent arrivals. The new arrivals to the West Coast are also less likely to be wage-earners, and more likely to be receiving government benefits, have chronic health conditions and have lower median incomes.

Long-term industrial and sectoral change: The employment and education characteristics of new arrivals may represent a broader change in the structure of the West Coast economy. The hospitality and education sectors are dominated by new arrivals, whereas departures in retail, health care, construction, and public administration significantly outweigh arrivals and long-term residents.





Part 5: Housing insights

Housing vacancy: The West Coast's high rate of unoccupied dwellings (28.5%) may be indicative of the number of shacks or holiday homes in the area. However, it may also indicate that a proportion of the housing stock is unsuitable, or undesirable, for residents and potential arrivals.

Housing underutilisation: Almost half (42.5%) of occupied dwellings only contain one person. This could indicate an underutilisation issue. This is likely due to a lack of suitable (smaller) housing for those who are retired or work in mining, accommodation and food, and education and training industries. One solution to this may be providing better multi-occupancy accommodation – such as through apartment/unit style housing – and for older residents, smaller and possibly assisted-living options.

Price growth and affordability: House and rental prices have increased from a low base but remain relatively affordable at well below the Tasmanian median. This indicates that while there is some demand for housing on the West Coast, it remains lower than other areas of the state. The median price of existing dwellings remains cheaper than new builds. This is likely contributing to a lack of new investment in residential construction and highlights broader issues with the quality of the available housing stock.

Static stock and long-term underinvestment: The housing stock on the West Coast only increased by 180 dwellings between 2016 and 2021, and actually fell by 85 dwellings between 2011 and 2021. Relative investment is at the second lowest level in the state. New development is made difficult by shortages of skilled labour and other costs (including utilities and headworks).

Rental supply: On the West Coast, 18.2% of dwellings are rentals, which is high for a regional area. Rosebery has the highest rate of rentals (26.1%), likely indicating the link between mining employment and rental accommodation.

Insufficient suitable stock: There may be insufficient suitable housing stock to accommodate an increase in the number of resident workers on the West Coast, which is a constraint on population and economic growth (see next page).

Part 5: Demand and utilisation insights

When considering the big picture of housing stock on the West Coast, it appears there is an adequate supply of housing available - largely because a high proportion of dwellings on the West Coast are currently unoccupied. However, questions remain regarding the suitability of this housing.

High demand for suitable rental accommodation: There may be a mismatch between the tenure of housing available and the needs of new or prospective arrivals. Employed new arrivals are twice as likely to rent as the population at large. This raises two key questions: is there a sufficient supply of appropriate rental housing? And is the lack of appropriate housing, or services in the area, a driver in the choice of employees to become part of the DIDO workforce?

Misalignment between stock and utilisation trends: The underutilisation of housing on the West Coast (as is the case in many other communities) is at least partly caused by the lack of suitable, affordable housing for older, single residents, many of whom occupy large family dwellings. Availability and quality of stock could be better aligned to the needs and household structures of long-term West Coast residents (i.e., more options for assisted living or serviced retirement housing to allow for comfortable ageing in place).

Pressing need for investment and a strategic, coordinated policy response: The analysis presented here offers preliminary insights into the complex housing dynamics of Western Tasmania and provides evidence of long-term underinvestment and market failure, both characteristics typical of resource-dependent regions. Addressing the housing needs of both long-term locals and prospective new residents will require a strategic policy response focussed on attracting investment and retaining skilled workers.



Next steps

Further research

Many of the preliminary findings from this desktop analysis need to be tested through targeted social research or data linkage. Priority questions for this research include:

- What are the housing experiences and preferences of the two identified cohorts of new arrivals (employed and unemployed)?
 - How does this compare with the experiences and preferences of potential arrivals? That is, what is different about potential and actual arrivals which results in only some moving to the West Coast? Particularly, is the lack of suitable housing a barrier to professionals moving to the West Coast and to what extent?
- How influential is housing in the decision of families identified in the study to leave the West Coast?
- What are the housing needs and preferences of older sole residents?
 - Does this differ from the housing that is currently being accessed by these residents? If so, this may indicate scope for current housing to be freed up for families and other new arrival groups.
- What are the motivations and needs of DIDO workers?
 - What type of housing stock and services would be required to encourage these workers to move to (or stay in) the West Coast long term?

Housing solutions for consideration

There are several potential housing solutions that could be considered pending further analysis. These include:

- Exploring regional housing authority models that can drive targeted investment and flexible provision of housing for purchase or rent for key cohorts.
- Increasing the supply of quality rentals for priority professionals (including teachers and health care workers), potentially as part of a salary package. This would increase housing supply, the resident population and the quality and availability of services for West Coast residents, thus helping to make the area more attractive overall.
- Investigating rent-to-buy models for long-term, low-income residents. This could involve some or all of rent paid on a government-owned rental property to go towards a mortgage deposit. The resident could then apply for a mortgage through a loan provider using this deposit. Such a scheme is being implemented successfully by Bulloo Shire Council in the small rural Queensland town of Thargomindah.
- A reverse equity or carefully designed grant scheme could be utilised to help fund upgrades to existing properties that are owned, and likely to be continued to be owned, by older, low-income residents. In exchange, the regional housing authority could be bequeathed either whole or part of the property. This would enhance wellbeing of older residents and help raise the quality of housing stock on the West Coast available for purchase or rent in the future.



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