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Cost of living pushing long-term Waiheke locals off the island

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Cost of living pressures are pushing some long-term Waiheke residents back to the mainland, while others desperate to leave are trapped in paradise - unable to afford food, let alone the relocation expense.

The island's support services are under the pump as residents grapple with steep rises in rent, rates, fuel and food costs, and no reprieve to the cost of ferries (<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/463365/50-percent-off-public-transport->

fares-not-for-all-commuters).

Sue Douglas said she moved from a rental house so damp it had mushrooms growing out of the carpet into a portable tiny home.

She has found herself struggling to cover the essentials, and visiting the island's foodbank for help.

"I've just been made redundant so everything's really hard at the moment. I'm just wondering what I'm doing next," she said.

Up to 50 households are visiting the foodbank weekly for groceries, including 10 regular clients and 30 to 40 visitors on an ad hoc basis. That's the most residents it has ever supported.

Another client, who has lived on Waiheke for 25 years, told RNZ at her house "there's no staples in the cupboard".

"Normally you'd have eggs, flour and cans ... now there's nothing. When it runs out, there's nothing," she said.

"We don't even eat. I'm so thin at the moment. My little girl - she's nine - she's on the Asperger's spectrum so she likes her food a certain colour and all this strange and wonderful stuff. She's like 20 kilograms, because often we can't get those things. Last week I was \$90 overdrawn just because I had to keep going to the supermarket."

Foodbank and Waiheke Budgeting Services manager Amelia Lawley Photo: RNZ / Marika Khabazi

House prices on Waiheke jumped 70 percent between July 2020 and 2021, according to RealEstate.co.nz, and renters have told the foodbank they are spending 60 - 80 percent of their income on rent.

The island has the second most expensive fuel in the country behind Great Barrier Island, at \$3.19 a litre, while food generally costs 15 percent more than the mainland.

A drought means many residents are paying \$250 to refill their water tanks.

Then, there's the ferries that about 1500 residents catch to Auckland city and back each day, which are among the most expensive public ferries in the world at \$372 for an adult monthly pass.



They do not qualify for the government's public transport discount that started today.

Waiheke Local Board chair Cath Handley explained locals also tend to earn less.

"Our average household income on Waiheke is \$25,000 less than the average household in the whole of Auckland."

The ferries do not qualify for the government's public transport discount. Photo: RNZ / Marika Khabazi

So why not simply leave the island?

Resident Chloe Barker said she knew of a few people who had made that decision recently.

"I've noticed more people moving off the island because either they can't afford to be here, or it's just going to be cheaper for them to live elsewhere. A lot of people who are looking to retire find they can't retire here. And I find that's pretty sad, because we're a close knit community here," she said.

"I think when people have been on the island for such a long time, sometimes for generations, and they're having to move off, they actually lose all of their



community. For older people that's a really big deal."

But others who want to leave are finding they can't.



The cost of relocating from Waiheke Island is out of reach for many. Photo: RNZ / Marika Khabazi

Manager of the foodbank and Waiheke Budgeting Services, Amelia Lawley, said "while there is a will and a desperate urge to get off the island, it's not practical".

"Over the last few weeks I've heard the statement 'oh, I think it's time I left here' a lot, but then quickly followed by 'well, (a) where will I go?' and (b) how will I afford to do it?' It's becoming financially untenable for a lot of people to be on the island but the alternatives are what? Auckland's no cheaper, and the regions are no cheaper any more either."

She said the actual cost of relocation was also out of reach for many - in the thousands for an average family.

"You can get a relocation grant but only if you've got a [new] full time job and you have to prove it with a contract."

Cath Handley said she did not understand the "complete lack of equity in government decision making," that led to Waiheke being left out of the public transport discount scheme.

She hoped there would be some reprieve for islanders doing it tough.

"People have the right to live in an economy that has balance," she said.