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Waiheke wipeout: What do housing and transport woes mean for island's future?

Erin Johnson · 05:00, Nov 20 2022

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Long-term Waiheke residents are finding it harder to cope with rising prices and a lack of affordable housing on the island in Auckland's Hauraki Gulf.

ticking. Erin Johnson reports.

When Aneka Phillips, 39, and her family settled into a new home a year ago, they thought their hassles of moving between rentals were finally over.

They had moved into an affordable housing project newly built by the Waiheke Community Housing Trust. But eight months later they moved out as compounding financial stress led the trust to quickly sell its new development.

Phillips is one of many long-term island residents who are finding themselves squeezed by a lack of affordable housing.

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It's become difficult for Waiheke schools and medical centres to attract staff, while unreliable ferry services, marred by delays and cancellations, add to the stress of what, from the outside, looks like a gentle island life.

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Housing limbo

Established in 2016 with the intention of applying a band-aid to the island's festering affordable housing sore, trustees of the Waiheke Community Housing Trust quickly got stuck into a three-unit project to accommodate nine people.

Things were looking promising when construction finished last November and Phillips moved into a four-bedroom home with her husband and three young children.

Trust chair Paul Carew said the project was funded by 22 private investors, "mostly Waiheke seniors trusting us with hefty chunks of their retirement savings".

But troubles mounted with cost overruns caused by Covid, consenting delays and difficulties with the builder, and as interest rates climbed and property values dropped, the trust found itself in a position of negative equity.

Concerned about investors' funds, the trust made the decision to sell its new development to Man O' War Vineyards which will use it for staff accommodation.

LAWRENCE SMITH/STUFF

Many long-term Waiheke Island residents are now relying on food banks to survive.

With the family's belongings in storage, Phillips is now on the hunt for a new home and staying "in between", which means sometimes sleeping in their van, a borrowed caravan or at her mother's place. But it's an exhausting, fruitless search.

"Every property is two bedrooms, nobody wants five people in there," Phillips said.

Septic systems that treat wastewater on site are consented for a maximum number of people in a property, and Phillips has found landlords don't want to risk more people staying in a house than the number for which it is consented.

Even for a two-bedroom rental, the cost is upwards of \$700. Finding a home is "proving to be a bit stressful", she said.

"I cry most days simply because it's tiring," said Phillips, who lives with diabetes and epilepsy, but tries to stay positive when out and about.

"Then I come home and I cry."

As the island's popularity as a tourist destination has risen, affordable housing has become increasingly scarce as property owners opt to tap into the lucrative holiday-maker market over residential tenancies.

Amelia Lawley, manager of Waiheke Budgeting Services Trust, said the dearth of options has pushed the price of available rentals "up and up and up" and wealth and poverty now live side by side.

"Some of our clients pay 80% of their income – be it benefit or wages - on their accommodation. This means they are in a constant loop of robbing Peter to pay Paul one week, and vice versa the next week to manage other essential costs," Lawley said.

LAWRENCE SMITH/STUFF

Amelia Lawley says struggling clients are spending 80% of their income on rent.

Although food is a basic human need, Lawley said that was where the cuts were made and there was increased reliance on foodbanks.

"This is intensely stressful and demoralising."

“Kids' birthday parties cause major stress. Basically, community and social participation is severely affected.”

Lawley said when she started working at the budgeting service around a decade ago, the foodbank was a tiny cupboard housing a few dusty tins.

“In the 2021-2022 financial year we spent \$164,000 on stocking the foodbank. I can't really put it more starkly than that,” said Lawley.

LAWRENCE SMITH/STUFF

There's no shortage of houses on the island, but one third were unoccupied at the time of the 2018 Census.

“The island is being economically cleansed and those on low incomes that are hanging in there are doing it very hard.”

The impact of the lack of affordable accommodation ripples through to employers who increasingly struggle to find staff for service jobs in the tourist industry.

Disappearing staff

Waiheke Primary School principal Nick Shaw said he works hard to make sure he doesn't lose any teachers.

“A beginning teacher starts on \$53,000 a year, but when you don't have any housing and the cheapest is \$700 to \$750 a week, it makes it almost impossible to attract talent.”

LAWRENCE SMITH/STUFF

Waiheke Primary School Principal Nick Shaw says it's hard to keep teachers on the island.

When he does hire new staff, it's his job to use his networks to find accommodation for the new hire.

Shaw hopes the Ministry of Education will look at providing school housing.

At Waiheke Medical Centre, kaitiaki (chief executive) Judy Davis said the practice has lost doctors because it doesn't have accommodation, and employing new GPs and nurses is difficult because they can't find anywhere to live.

Families are pitching tents to make do, she said.

LAWRENCE SMITH/STUFF

Judy Davis is the kaitiaki (chief executive) at Waiheke Medical Centre.

Davis would like to see Kāinga Ora get on board, but currently there are no Kāinga Ora options on the island despite the diverse population and lower income levels.

At the 2018 Census, the median income for those aged 15 and over on the island was \$32,300.

Housing distribution

Mark Goldsmith, Ministry of Social Development's regional commissioner, said the ministry is aware there is very little long-term affordable accommodation available.

The ministry provides grants for emergency housing at island motels from time to

But supply is tight.

“We do offer support with emergency housing in the city as an alternative,” Goldsmith said, adding that emergency housing is a last resort.

“We explore a range of other options for helping people avoid homelessness first.”

Those options include financial support to help people stay with family or friends, help with rent, paying bond for a rental, or help into transitional housing.

The homeless issue isn't new. A survey carried out in September 2018 found that the Waiheke Local Board area had the highest number of people living without shelter per capita across the Auckland region.

But there's no shortage of houses – of the island's 5910 private dwellings, 2079 were unoccupied at the time of the 2018 Census. The issue comes back to how the housing stock is being used.

Addressing a hui on the issue in September, the housing trust's Carew said a zoning bias favours visitor accommodation over residential housing.

“We don't have a housing problem on Waiheke, we have a distribution problem,” he said.

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Shaw believes the island provides a magnifying glass view of Auckland's future problems: “If you don't have the people living in your community who service your community, then your community will die.”

In the past year, Shaw has seen families move to other parts of the country. He worries that some still here and struggling are surviving but not thriving.

Travel woes

To take Waiheke children on the ferry to the city to access wider experiences like a visit to the museum, the zoo, or a sports event, a family of four won't get much change out of \$100.

Meanwhile, other kids in Auckland have free transport on weekends.

Adding to residents' stress is the unreliability of ferry services. Waiheke residents spoken to by *Stuff* said sudden ferry cancellations in recent months had meant they missed medical appointments and been late for work.

They also worried that a ferry delay or cancellation would cause them to miss coming medical appointments that had been scheduled months ago.

LAWRENCE SMITH/STUFF

Ferry delays and cancellations are causing Waiheke residents to miss appointments.

Paul Trotman, Fullers360 chief operations officer, said cancellations have been a result of unplanned crew sickness or unplanned engineering issues such as a vessel breakdown.

He said an industry-wide skills shortage means the ferry company can't provide backup vessels for when issues occur unexpectedly.

“If we had full crews available we'd be able to utilise backup vessels to get people to where they need to be when these unexpected incidents occur.”

Trotman said Fullers has provided alternative transport, either by bus, taxi or Uber for most cancelled services on other runs such as Gulf Harbour, which is heavily influenced by bad weather – but taking alternative road transport is not an option for Waiheke passengers.

Trotman said disruptions may continue through summer and passengers should plan for delays during busy travel times. On sunny weekend days, tourists can be seen queueing for ferries at the downtown Auckland terminal and at Mātiatia for the end-of-day return journey.

DAVID WHITE/STUFF

Passengers queue to take the ferry to Waiheke Island on Labour Weekend.

“We are actively encouraging Waiheke passengers to travel off-peak and/or arrive early for their preferred sailing, especially if we are anticipating busy days such as

It's little reassurance for Waiheke residents who already travel outside of the main tourist times for city appointments and work.

Trotman said the company is working to resolve its skills shortage including working with Auckland Transport on solutions, and targeting skilled workers from the Philippines, South Africa, Australia and the United States.

“However, there is no quick fix,” he said.

Lawley said as well grappling with steep transport and rental costs, residents are also feeling the pinch at the petrol pump. A litre of 91 petrol costs around 70 cents a litre more at a Waiheke petrol pump than in the city.

The cost of leaving

So why don't more people leave?

Lawley said many have, but it's not cheap to go. With repeated trips off island to look for housing and then the costs of the car ferry to transport moving trucks “it's very, very expensive”, she said.

LAWRENCE SMITH/STUFF

Amelia Lawley says for many Waiheke residents, it's too expensive to leave the island.

“Quite apart from the costs and logistics there are the psychosocial factors to consider - this community is home, not just a place to live. Children are born and grow up here, they go to kindy and then school, they form strong and lasting relationships.

“It makes me both sad, and incredibly angry - why should people have to leave their beloved home because of free market forces outside their control?”

Carew believes any change will have to come from central government. In the meantime, he's telling islanders they have to help themselves by learning to share the existing housing stock better.

“Nobody is coming to help us,” he said.

For Lawley, it's hard to bear witness to her clients' hardship knowing real change can only happen at a macroeconomic level.

“And no government of any stripe will affect the kind of seismic change that is required to relieve the raging inequality we now have in this country.”

Phillips is now planning to buy a caravan to house her growing family. She has

"we can't leave," she said.

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– **m64** 2 weeks ago

In other news researchers have discovered living on a boutique resort island is more expensive than living in suburbia on the mainland.

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– **The Town Cryer** 2 weeks ago

Waiheke is a big place, there's a lot of land there. Why has Kainga Ora not bought some of it to build social housing on? There are plenty of tradies on the island - they'd be happy for the work.

👍 Respect 1 ↩ Reply ↪ Share

– **vespa kid** 2 weeks ago

it's no differant to the rest of Auckland or in fact the rest of N.Z. I have a bach down here in the South, most of you would not want to stay the night, it's a fishing hut/converted 20' container but suits me. Everyone wants on-suits three loungers-TV room-5 toilets and showers-outside living, get the picture. I am sorry to hear the plight of people who are trying to make a go of life but I do remmeber Waiheke back in the 1970's-80's it was

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housing units not happening and maybe those who have invested have lost part of their cash? believing they were doing the right for the world. Sorry about my spelling I am dyslexic only taken 20 minutes to write.

Respect 2 Reply Share

– **RKHNS** 2 weeks ago

For “Consenting delays” read bureaucratic meddling, mindless pedantic “inspectors” and grossly excessive cost!

ie. Typical council intervention rather than support for common sense and a “how can we help” approach!

Respect Reply Share

– **Very Angry Man** 2 weeks ago

In reply to RKHNS

Heads roll when the thing starts leaking and council inspectors have signed it off. Standards and building code are to protect future homeowners.

Respect Reply Share

– **Old Salt** 2 weeks ago

Part of the solution has to be for employers like the Medical Center and School to build employee housing.

Constructing a waste water treatment plant that would allow properties to move off septic tanks and allow more persons per dwelling might help too.

Our old mates, the tiny house another part.

The cost of getting to and from Waiheke is a major challenge, the cost of living on an island I guess.

Respect Reply Share

– **Very Angry Man** 2 weeks ago

Can't afford it, just leave. Waiheke has always been an expensive place to live. West Auckland is cheaper and has vineyards so you'll hardly notice the difference.

Respect Reply Share

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[Log in](#)– **andy22** 2 weeks ago

A lot of the housing stock on Waiheke are bach style dwellings that do not meet criteria for Healthy Homes legislation. Therefore it is often cheaper for owners to derive income from AirBnB than upgrade their dwellings for long term rentals. There is growing tension on the island between letting the slim number of dwellings to locals versus young travellers from overseas.

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– **PAJE** 2 weeks ago

"There's no quick fix" hm, now where have I heard that before?

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– **Rastus** 2 weeks ago

↩ In reply to PAJE

Mmmm, probably the same place as the "systemic failures" and "independent revue" and after the talkfest nothing changes.

👍 Respect ↩ Reply ↪ Share

– **The Town Cryer** 1 week ago

↩ In reply to Rastus

Meanwhile all the bureaucrats get paid, the consultants take their cut, the fat cats sup on a sumptuous meal and the gravy train keeps on rolling.

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– **Jukesy** 2 weeks ago

Exactly why we left.

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– **Judgeme** 2 weeks ago

While I appreciate the problems people are facing on the island, it should be remembered that they choose to live there. If you choose to live on an island then of course you have to rely on a ferry service, a service which will always cost more than a bus service, and also have the possibility of being disrupted due to weather, mechanical or staff issues.

– **flyernzl** 2 weeks ago

So this is what happens when we villify and stamp out 'greedy' developers and 'greedy' landlords.

Previously, people could rent out the family Waiheke bach. Now, although that bach is perfectly sound and healthy when the family stays in it, it is a dangerous health hazard if tenanted. To bring it to the required Healthy Homes standard costs many thousands (as Kāinga Ora is right now finding out) which the family don't have or don't want to spend, so that bach now sits there unoccupied.

Dont blame property people, blame the Wellington politicians and bureaucrats for destroying the rental housing market.

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– **3360071** 2 weeks ago

R1100

This is a problem known euphemistically as gentrification, in which a place made attractive to the affluent quickly becomes unaffordable to its established residents. Is it gentlemanly to force people out of their homes?

Twenty years ago, I bought a car at a house in Plimmerton, a nice, comfortable-looking house on a roomy section with great views. This house was about to be demolished although there was nothing wrong with it other than it not looking expensive enough to fit with the (mostly ostentatious and vulgar) neighbouring houses.

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– **Megafish** 2 weeks ago

Perhaps the local ratepayers need to accept that if they want school teachers, nurses, etc in their community, they either need to collectively fund housing for these sorts of workers through rates, or collectively agree that having half the available housing stock turned into holiday accommodation is not compatible with a normal sustainable "community". Many cities around the world have put the brakes on the likes of AirBNB because of the problems it causes in the local housing market.

On the other hand, if you live on an island and want guaranteed transport back to the mainland, buy your own boat. Unfortunately there are lots of things I will never do, and places I will never be able to live in, because I can't afford it or choose to live well in a less exclusive location instead of struggling to put food on the table in paradise. Thus it

– **St40Kirwan** 2 weeks ago

Unfortunately, in life we often can't have our cake and eat it too.

At the society level, for example, we can't keep pumping our country full of more people with more enormous cars and rewarding consumerism and celebrating greed etc, while also having our idyllic non-overpopulated beaches, or island life, healthy environment etc.

No one is coming to save us, because why would they? As a society we've made this bed, now we have to sleep in it.

👍 Respect 4 ↩ Reply ↪ Share

– **TheBismarck** 2 weeks ago

Two points here... First, this is the free market... So if you're having trouble hiring staff, offer a bigger carrot and pay more - eventually pay people enough, and they will come... Yes, it will mean that a Latte on the Island might cost \$10 instead of \$7, but let us remember the primary demographic who lives on the island? Yes, wealthy people. Obviously that highlights the other issue in that unionised jobs like teachers and doctors can't just get higher pay as their pay is fixed by the unions agreed scale - This highlights the problem with unions then too which lack flexibility with being able to negotiate pay rates in different areas that have unique challenges. If cafe's and restaurants can't get the staff that keep them running, they'll close down, if that happens, then residents have nowhere to go which might lower the appeal and cost of living there... Thats how it works folks.

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– **Rastus** 2 weeks ago

↩ In reply to **TheBismarck**

Mmmm, maybe the point of the poor on the island was lost in the story - paying more and then putting up prices to recover seems like a decision which will backfire very quickly for the poorer ones.

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– **leigh72** 2 weeks ago

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right? Until you can't get a coffee because there's no workers, of course.

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– **Manawatu Turbo** 2 weeks ago

All the workers should have a few strike days and see how they get on without the people that actually make the island run.

👍 Respect 9 ↩ Reply ↪ Share

– **CoralSea** 2 weeks ago

↩ In reply to **Manawatu Turbo**

If I was struggling financially and could not find accommodation, I would move elsewhere. People move for economic reasons all the time. What makes those on Waiheke any different?

👍 Respect 3 ↩ Reply ↪ Share

– **machine4** 2 weeks ago

500+ AirBnb's on Waiheke, and currently only 5 rentals on Trademe...
A community being ruined through a lack of appropriate rules and regulations.

👍 Respect 13 ↩ Reply ↪ Share

– **Old Salt** 2 weeks ago

↩ In reply to **machine4**

Great suggestion, yeah let's have some more rules and regulations, that should do it.

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– **NgahereBadger** 2 weeks ago

↩ In reply to **machine4**

Rules? Rules? I thought the market was supposed to fix everything?

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– **m64** 2 weeks ago

↩ In reply to **machine4**

Ever thought it's the rules and regulations that push people to airbnb a property

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[Log in](#)[Respect](#) [Reply](#) [Share](#)– **Very Angry Man** 2 weeks ago[In reply to machine4](#)

Hmmm ...Looks to be a perfect place to buy a house for Airbnb.
Might look into it.

[Respect](#) [Reply](#) [Share](#)– **m64** 2 weeks ago[In reply to machine4](#)

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