

THE NORTHERN RIVERS HOUSING CRISIS

ELEANOR BRADSHAW FOR SHELTER NSW
STUDENT INTERNSHIP ISSUES PAPER

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I acknowledge the Arakwal people of the Bundjalung Nation as the traditional owners of the unceded lands about which this paper is written.

I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging across Australia and recognise the strength and resilience of the First Peoples of this land.

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THE ISSUE

The last 12 months have borne witness to unprecedented social, political and economic upheaval, with repercussions felt far and wide. In Far North NSW prior to the pandemic, conversations about gentrification and the Byron Shire's over-development were always on the periphery. As 2020 rolled along, this discussion ramped up in tempo and is now pervasive, as an increasing number of Northern Rivers residents have lost access to suitable, safe and affordable housing. Manifested as a result of high rates of short-term (holiday) rental accommodation, combined with the underlying issues of housing quality and affordability have pushed local residents to live in unauthorised dwellings on the rural fringes of the Byron Shire.

This issue paper will firstly contextualise the situation, looking at the socio-political landscape of the region. It will then discuss external impacts and other contributing factors and how they have exacerbated the crisis. We will hear from the community by summarising the ethnographic research carried out between October – December 2020, giving a voice to the people affected by or working on this issue. After examining some international and local case studies, this paper will provide brief recommendations on how to work with and walk alongside the community, to advocate for future change.

THE CONTEXT

The Byron Shire is a unique part of Australia, yet invariably faces the same issues as many small communities up and down the Eastern seaboard. It is a spectacular part of the world, with a reputation that often precedes it. Like many rural and coastal regions, there is strength in the community and high social capital.¹ However, in recent years, it has undergone a rapid period of 'social decapitalization', following a similar trajectory to that which is described by Robert Putman in the USA during the latter half of the 20th Century.² The region has experienced significant gentrification, as housing prices have risen drastically in desirable neighbourhoods, pushing more people into rental stress, increasing displacement and decreasing the proportion of public housing available.³ This is, in effect, 'the displacement and replacement of people for profit'.⁴ This is exacerbated by the systematic and prolonged lack of state funding for public housing that leaves the Shire with less than half the state average (3-4% in NSW).⁵ The local housing market has been

¹ Carrington, K., & Scott, J. (2008). Masculinity, rurality and violence. *British Journal of Criminology*, 48(5), 641-666
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azn031>

² Putman, R. (1995). Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), pp.73.

³ Chamberlain, C., Johnson, G., & Theobald, J. (2007). *Homelessness in Melbourne: Confronting the Challenge*. Melbourne: RMIT University Press.

⁴ Matthew, Z. (2019, April 1). You've heard of NIMBYs – but who are the PHIMBYs? Meet the latest fraction in California's housing wars. *Los Angeles Magazine*.

⁵ Chamberlain, C., Johnson, G., & Theobald, J. (2007). *Homelessness in Melbourne: Confronting the Challenge*. Melbourne: RMIT University Press.

especially impacted by the spike in Short-Term Rental Accommodation (STRA), the 'Hollywoodisation' of Byron, and a pervasive NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) attitude which limits the community in developing effective solutions.

There have been some attempts within the Shire for increased residential development, but these have been far from the multilateral approach needed to stymie the crisis. As [Paul Spooner](#), the local councillor explained in his interview; the Council acknowledges the need for new and affordable housing. As it now stands, this is currently unattainable as the Council sold off much of their land in the 70s and can no longer afford the prohibitively high market prices of any suitable, vacant land. The *Byron Shire Council Draft Residential Strategy* is supposedly meant to serve the area for the next decade and facilitate the additional 6,400 added residents (up to 37,950 by 2036) = a need for 3,150 more homes.⁶ The *Draft Strategy* does acknowledge that 15% of households are under housing stress, the highest in the state. To avoid housing stress, the mean household income needed is \$102,267, whereas it currently sits at \$63,336 a mere two-thirds of that. It also describes the market stressors of high rents, lack of long-term houses due to STRA, supply/demand and lack of diversity in dwelling types as contributing issues. Its recommendations talk little of affordability and suggest that what is needed is infill housing and new land release. However, the question is, where will the Council get then land and if they do, how with they afford it?

We can look to some examples of recent developments in the Shire, to give further context, although this is far from an exhaustive list. For example, Lot 22 in Mullumbimby is an example of a poorly designed future housing project. An attempt to rezone 22 hectares of council land, on the outskirts of Mullumbimby to create a diverse range of unit types and affordable housing.⁷ Community backlash was intense. Submissions against the project were received from the Office of Environment and Heritage and the SES, who stated; 'a high number of residents did not support affordable housing built on flood prone land'.⁸ There is widespread distrust for the Council's flood modelling which has proved ineffective in the past and does not consider the projected effects of rising sea levels due to climate change.

Another example, and probably the most infamous, is West Byron (also known as Villaworld) is a hotly contested development on the last remaining urban residential land release area in Byron. Loathed by the community and refused by the local government it was taken to the State, and in December 2020 the NSW Land and Environment Court ruled that it could go ahead with 149 lots (half the original plans).⁹ The local community has reluctantly taken this as a win, with the rather pessimistic view that it could have been

⁶ Byron Shire Council. (2019a). *Byron Shire draft residential strategy: Public exhibition version 2019*.

⁷ Byron Shire Council. (2021). *Lot 22 Mullumbimby - future housing*.

⁸ Byron Shire Council. (2019b). *Planning meeting*.

⁹ Land and Environment Court NSW. (2020). *Villa World Byron Pty Ltd v Byron Shire Council*. New South Wales Caselaw

worse. There is a provision that owners cannot create dual occupancies, but can construct a small secondary dwelling; this will undoubtedly become an area of prime Airbnb real estate. The ecological impact of West Byron is still a significant concern due to the impact on the local koala population and critically endangered Wallum Sedge-Frog and Wallum Froglet, on top of the inevitable pollution of the Belongil Estuary. It is important to note that another, more extensive West Byron development application from Site R&D is currently before the courts.

On top of poor development options, towards the end of 2020, the council sent out robo letters as part of the *Main Arm Unauthorised Dwellings Draft Policy*. They state, 'Council has identified unauthorised development at the above-mentioned address'¹⁰ without conducting inspections or having any proof. Many of the residents targeted pre-dated Council records, requiring residents to admit to having built said dwellings. Since the letters were delivered, no action has been taken. As [Duncan Dey](#), the president of Main Arm Rural Residents Association (MARRA) pointed out the stark contradiction here is that 'the most affordable housing is where there is already a roof'.¹¹

INTERVIEWS

From October – December 2020, interviews were collected from a range of local community members affected by or working within the housing market. Some interviews were formal, other informal, sought out via social media and others from more organic sources. This research helped construct a detailed 'map' of the current situation. The interviews covered a range of people actively suffering from the crisis, such as service industry workers, people living in intentional communities, local activists, as well as real estate agents, film industry workers, and local councillors. Summaries of all interviews are in [Appendix 1](#)

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Using an ecological systems theory perspective to investigate the *chrono*, *macro*, *exo*, *meso*, and *micro*, gives better insight into the complex symbiosis of these contributing factors.¹² Using the interviews as a point of reference, we can explore this through the community's own words.

¹⁰ Shand, A. (2020, September 16). Byron council staff target Main Arm residents over unauthorised dwellings. *The Echo Daily*. <https://www.echo.net.au/2020/09/byron-council-staff-target-main-arm-residents-over-unauthorised-dwellings/>

¹¹ [Interview with Duncan Dey](#) (26 October 2020).

¹² Tilbury, C., Osmond, C., Wilson, S. & Clark, J., (2007). *Good Practice in Child Protection*. Pearson Education Australia.

Dominant discourse

The racial and classist elements of the crisis are evident as those who do not fit within the dominant discourse of what it means to be 'Australian', are disproportionately affected. Policy is orientated towards the acquisition of the 'Australian Dream', consisting of a 3-bedroom house on a quarter-acre block, occupied by a white Christian family, who got there through 'a fair go'. Excluded in this (not exclusively) are First Nations people, migrants, single parents, women, POC, over 65s, low-income households, all of which are at a greater risk of homelessness due to this crisis. As [Phil and Christine](#) experienced during their time running an intentional community, the Byron Shire was once a haven for many people who fit into the latter demographics.¹³ Recent years has seen rapid gentrification, exponentially sped up since the COVID-19 pandemic. Many middle, two-income families and service industry workers can no longer afford housing.¹⁴ Increased visibility of the crisis within these more 'traditional' families and the gainfully employed might be needed for change to come.

NIMBYism

Talking to [Paul Spooner](#), the Byron Shire councillor,¹⁵ shifted the focus onto how the community has become a contributing factor in this crisis. Cllr. Spooner bemoaned what Yglesias in 2017¹⁶ explained as a defensive approach to development prolific in Byron Shire. A classic case of NIMBYism. This has been the attitude in Bryon ever since the first surfers found waves and arguably seen as a way for locals to preserve the unique character of the area. However, the proverbial cat is out of the bag. Byron, especially after COVID-19, is more desirable than ever and preserving a tough anti-development stance, leaves market-rate developers and affordable housing projects, locked into a zero-sum game over the scare buildable land left.¹⁷ Using NIMBY in this way treads the line of what Morgan termed 'the more colloquial image of a uniformed, selfish agitator'.¹⁸ This has long been a trope employed by the Council to denounce local, organised community actors as irrational busybodies, creating derision.

Short Term Holiday Rentals (STRA)

Council acknowledges the disproportionate amount of non-hosted STRA in Byron Shire compared to other Local Government Areas in NSW contributes to the housing shortage. An amendment to the *Byron Local Environmental Plan 2014*¹⁹ recommends reducing listing to

¹³ [Interview with Phil and Christine Biggar](#) (10 November 2020)

¹⁴ Interview with [Tania](#) (3 November 2020) and [Fernanda](#) (29 October 2020)

¹⁵ [Interview with Paul Spooner](#) (11 November 2020)

¹⁶ Yglesias, M. (2017). *A promising new coalition looks to rewire the politics of urban housing*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/7/24/16010720/dc-comprehensive-plan>

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ Morgan, A. (2016). *Using the NIMBY label to discredit the housing justice movement*. Progressive City. <https://www.progressivecity.net/single-post/2020/02/25/USING-THE-NIMBY-LABEL-TO-DISREDIT-THE-HOUSING-JUSTICE-MOVEMENT>

¹⁹ Byron Shire Council. (2020b). *Planning proposal for short term rental accommodation*.

no more than 10% of the overall housing stock. The *NSW State Code of Conduct*, which came into effect on 18 December 2020, also incorporates a 'two strikes' rule of unruly guests. The Byron Council want to restrict non-hosted STRA to 90day terms, as an attempt to get properties back into the rental pool and reduce housing stress.

Out of the Shire's 15,540 dwellings,²⁰ 3,500 are listed on Airbnb, 79.2% of which are entire homes. This is an astonishing 22% of stock and 57.4% of these are owned by hosts who have multiple listing.²¹ ROI for an Airbnb host is 170% of private rental income.²² In addition to this, house prices increased by 72% between 2014 and 2018, up from an average of \$530,000 to \$910,000,²³ making not only renting but buying, prohibitive to all but the wealthiest.

The Covid-Changers

It would be impossible to discuss anything in 2020 without taking into account the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been a massive increase in urban to rural migration. Previously termed a tree or sea-change, is now coined a Covid-change. Inequalities present in the housing market have been expedited by the pandemic, due to changing priorities and work habits. The *Regional Internal Migration* estimates released in November 2020 showed that capital cities had a net loss of 10,500 people in the April – June period, the largest quarterly net loss on record.²⁴ This equates to the largest net move on record and is more than double the last decade's average. Australia's first *Population Statement* from the new Centre for Population (CfP) estimates that in the next decade capital cities will see a 5% decrease in population, with regional areas only reporting a 2% decrease.²⁵ Preferences and priorities have changed, and anecdotally, and in Byron, we have seen a dramatic increase of people moving from Sydney and Melbourne, which has had a significant impact on an already saturated rental market. The NHFIC noted that in the September quarter, house prices in Melbourne fell 3.3% and Sydney by 1.6%, but regional centres like Dubbo and Noosa had rises of 8.7% and 6.4% over six months.²⁶

²⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2016). *2016 census quick stats*.

https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/LGA11350?opendocument

²¹ Inside Airbnb. (2020). *Northern Rivers*. Retrieved January 4, 2020, from <http://insideairbnb.com/northern-rivers/?neighbourhood=BYRON%20SHIRE%20COUNCIL&filterEntireHomes=false&filterHighlyAvailable=false&filterRecentReviews=false&filterMultiListings=false>

²² White, L. (2020, August 4). Byron Bay region's 'hidden' homelessness issues made worse by Airbnb and holiday-letting. *ABC News*.

https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-04/byron-bay-hidden-homeless-worsened-by-airbnb-holiday-letting/11485572?utm_source=abc_news_web&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_content=link&utm_campaign=abc_news_web&fbclid=IwAR242neEc8f5tX85h0lBoDrc3PTYs495cuirrkCBGQxj0wJ_XOOk1CKegLo

²³ Byron Shire Council. (2020b). *Planning proposal for short term rental accommodation*.

²⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2020). *Regional internal migration estimates*.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/regional-internal-migration-estimates-provisional/latest-release>

²⁵ Center for Population (CfP). (2020). *Population statement: December 2020*.

https://population.gov.au/docs/population_statement_2020_overview.pdf

²⁶ National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation (NHFIC). (2020c). *State of the nation's housing: Executive summary*.

<https://www.nhfc.gov.au/media/1588/executive-summary.pdf>

The Hollywoodisation of Byron Bay

The pandemic put filming in Hollywood on hold, and due to the relative safety of working in Australia, the film industry has come to Byron. Its proximity to studios on the Gold Coast and the so-called Hemsworth effect has seen three big productions in the Shire during the latter half of 2020. These productions, *Nine Perfect Strangers*, *Eden* and *Bosch & Rockit*, saw an estimated 600 crew descend on the Shire, with most technical staff and actors coming from overseas or the capital cities, all of which had to be accommodated when they came to town.²⁷ Many were in local hotels and some sharing the STRA, which were massively discounted due to the pandemic. As described in the interview with Louis Coles, a lighting technician working on *Nine Perfect Strangers*, he was sharing an Airbnb with two others, that was rented by the production company for \$5,000 a week, for a total of 20 weeks.²⁸ This now consistent demand for accommodation is driving up rental prices to higher than pre-pandemic levels, making locals utterly unable to compete.

Many locals praise the film industry for bringing jobs to town, during a uniquely challenging time. It is true to say that some locals did find employment onset (approximately 15%),²⁹ but the social impacts of having hundreds of itinerant workers in a relatively small community is profound. We can look at FIFO as a case study of its effect. Carrington and Scott's research³⁰ examines how regional towns that often have high social capital levels are disrupted by large groups of strangers that unbalance the equilibrium of community function. There is also a perception that workers contribute to the local economy. However, many choose to go home to their families at the weekends rather than staying (and spending) within their temporary communities, creating a phenomenon known as 'leakage'.³¹ Should we learn from the missteps of FIFO and demand an impact statement as was carried out in WA by the Regional Development Council, to assess the economic and social impacts of this *Hollywoodisation*?³²

CASE STUDIES

There are successful case studies to suggest that one can reframe the debate and alter suspicion of new development. PHIMBY or Public Housing in My Back Yard, a progressive offshoot of YIMBY (Yes in My Back Yard) discourse, looks to 'resurrect the idea of public

²⁷ Interview with [Louis Coles](#) (6 December 2020)

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ Carrington, K., & Scott, J. (2008). Masculinity, rurality and violence. *British Journal of Criminology*, 48(5), 641-666
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azn031>

³¹ *ibid*

³² ACIL Tasman. (2009). *Fly-in fly-out and regional impact assessments: A Regional development impact assessment framework for fly-in fly-out projects*. http://www.drd.wa.gov.au/Publications/Documents/Fly_In_Fly_Out_and_Regional_Impact_Assessments.pdf

housing'.³³ Natalie Rayment, the co-founder of YIMBY Qld, explains that instead of continually battling carte blanche against new development, maybe look upon them as potential neighbours. An example of this in action is, Homeless Healthcare Los Angeles, where they successfully built permanent supportive housing for \$100,000 USD, less than a quarter of what the state government claimed it would cost.³⁴ Minneapolis took the view that planning should be long-term and community-driven, resulting in the *Minneapolis 2040* policy. A fundamental tenant was a commitment to educating residents about the terms of development while rezoning the city for high density, especially along transit corridors.³⁵

Closer to home, we have the impressive work of Housing Matters Action Group, a grassroots group committed to advocating for safe, secure and affordable housing across the Bellingen and Nambucca Shires (about 3 hours south of Byron Shire) since 2017. They have created positive change and helped create innovative housing strategies that informed the *Bellingen Shire Council Local Housing Strategy 2020 – 2040*. These examples highlight the need for intersectional YIMBYism. The interconnectivity of race, gender, class, gender, religion empirically needs to be reflected in any social advocacy and community activism.^{36,37}

The *State Environmental Planning Policy Amendment (Rural Land Sharing) 2018* under the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* has been utilised to good effect in a few instances, in the north of the State. These should be better encouraged by Byron Shire council, as allow for multiple dwellings on a single lot, without needing to subdivide. Rural Land Sharing aims to create communities at a reduced cost and clustering housing in this way helps to reduce environmental impact. Some effective and existing examples are:

[Black Bulga Community](#) near the Barrington Tops National Park³⁸

[Goolawah Co-operative](#) located between Port Macquarie and Crescent Head³⁹

[Nightcap on Minjungbul](#) in the Nightcap National park near Nimbin⁴⁰

³³Matthew, Z. (2019, April 1). You've heard of NIMBYs – but who are the PHIMBYs? Meet the latest fraction in California's housing wars. *Los Angeles Magazine*. <https://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/who-are-the-phimbys/>

³⁴*ibid*

³⁵Mae, F. (2019). How to beat affordable housing's NIMBY problem. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/sponsored/fannie-mae-2019/how-to-beat-affordable-housings-nimby-problem/3190>

³⁶Imbrie-Moore, W. (2020). *A call for intersectional YIMBYism*. Harvard Political Review. <https://harvardpolitics.com/a-call-for-intersectional-yimbyism/>

³⁷Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, Feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139-167.

³⁸Black Bulga. (n.d). *Home*. <https://blackbulga.tumblr.com>

³⁹Goolawah Co-operative. (n.d). *The Co-op*. <https://goolawah.org/>

⁴⁰Nightcap on Minjungbul. (2020). *Nightcap Village*. <https://nightcaponminjungbul.com/>

WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY

The housing crisis in Byron Shire is being replicated in communities up and down the East Coast. How can we work with the community to enact change? Utilising a community development perspective, allows us to come from an asset-based as opposed to a deficit-based approach, that recognised the strengths already present within the community.

Community development approaches call for grassroots advocacy to bolster activism and deconstruct paternalism. As Connors & Kenny explain in their comprehensive guide to community development practice and theory, 'activism is based on the divide between existing dominant power structure and opposition of these power structure'.⁴¹ Coordinated, creative and directive action is needed, one that takes risks, in order to challenge the dominant discourse and structures.

Working with the community in Mullumbimby as a focal point would be an appropriate starting point as geographically, and demographically it straddles the affluence of the coastal regions and the more alternative Hinterland. Working in collaboration with the Shire's very engaged community and local governments needs to be rooted in mutuality, shared communication and respect for persons. It will be necessary to fight against the toxicity of 'TINA' (there is no alternative) thinking while harnessing a mild scepticism to utilise what Connors & Kenny describe as the 'myopia' of those dedicated to their cause.⁴² This reorientates an individual's self-interest to encourage community involvement, slowly absorbing the 'I' into a 'we', imbibing the community with a defined self and a collective empowerment.

From a radical perspective, community development, utilising a Kropotkinian ideology of mutual aid, takes a 'democratic-humanist' approach that allows for everyone's opinions to be heard and considered.⁴³ This horizontal form of action breaks down the barrier between the helper and the helped to prohibit pathologising. We need to ensure that in any advocacy work, Shelter NSW walks alongside the people of Byron Shire.⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

There has been a paradigm shift across Australia's regions, one that was on its way prior to 2020 but has come to fruition since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This issues paper has discussed the impact this has had on the local community, through the eyes of an ethnographic research project carried out at the end of 2020. Through this, a range of

⁴¹Connors, P., & Kenny, S. (2017). *Developing communities for the future* (5th ed.). Cengage Learning Australia, pp.444.

⁴²*ibid* pp.446

⁴³Steinberg, D. M. (2014). *A mutual-aid model for social work with groups* (3rd ed.). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

⁴⁴Chenoweth, L., & McAuliffe, D. (2017). *The road to social work & human service practice* (5th ed.). Cengage Learning Australia.

influences were exposed, uncovering a range of issues contributing to the current housing crisis in Byron Shire, ranging from the rise of STRA, a widespread NIMBYism, the *Hollywoodisation* of the Shire and a lack of coordinated local council policy. It is only working from a radical strengths perspective to empower community development that will spearhead a grassroots movement for change. And as a member of this community myself, I can't wait to be part of it.

Thank you.

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APPENDIX 1

Duncan Dey - President of the Main Arm Rural Residents Association (MARRA)

Interview date – 26 October 2020

- He is horrified with what is going on and was super excited to have Shelter on board
- Quote ‘the most affordable housing is where there is already a roof’
- He doesn’t understand how a council that is advocating for more affordable housing is looking to remove the most adorable housing in the Shire
- Emailed me a copy of MARRA’s submission to the council
- Put him in contact with James from Shelter

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Dan - Friend and Main Arm Resident

Interview date – 27 October 2020

- Grew up around the Shire and lived here most of his life, other than a couple of years in London etc
- Has a young family of two boys (9 and 2) and lives with his partner in an unauthorised dwelling on a mate’s land
- They pay \$500 a week for a 3-bedroom house that does not have planning permission
- It is the only house his youngest son has ever lived in
- Noticed last year that the road out to Main Arm was paved and presumed it was for better access for locals
- When he saw the Council’s draft policy, he realised was not for him and his family but for wealthier people that would no doubt end up here when he can no longer afford it
- If the council do start searching properties, his home will not make regulations and he cannot afford to bring it up to code
- His family is a middle-income earning family but would be made homeless due to this policy as they cannot afford the enormous rents and short term rental competition
- He would have to move from the area he grew up in

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Fernanda - Colleague and Ewingsdale resident

Interview date – 29 October 2020

- Living in a bungalow paying \$350 per week for 2 years
- Had a good relationship with her landlord
- When COVID hit, there was a rush of people from Sydney looking for leases in the Shire
- Many of these were not for permanent rental but more in case Sydney went into another lockdown and a place to spend holidays as we can no longer travel overseas
- Started to get complaints from her landlord about having breakfast outside etc
- Got a notice of eviction and was told it was because her parents needed a place to stay when then came up to visit
- She then saw a couple looking over the fence at her property and recognised them from a post of the [Byron Bay Rental Sleuth Facebook Page](#) as they were offering \$600 per week for a bungalow in the area
- They now live in her home and they only place she could find to rent short term is in the Discovery Caravan Park
- She says this place feels super temporary because she can't put her own stuff in because its too small, everyone else is transient and cabins are poorly constructed, so she is disturbed often
- She has been looking for suitable affordable housing but the only units she can find are 30mins north on the freeway from her full-time employment as a Café Manager and Head Cook in town
- This commute would make her housing unaffordable due to the extra petrol money

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Kerry - Real Estate Agent Byron Bay

Interview date – 30 October 2020

- Senior Property Manager at real estate agents in town
- My share house in Byron Bay we were fortunate enough to get out lease renewed for another year, mainly because our landlord lives next door and we have a relationship with him
- When I went to resign the lease spoke to the property manager Kerry
- Our lease signing was pushed forward a couple of weeks as she was completing the last couple in town that week and then after that, every single property she had was leased, which was unprecedented in all her time as a property manager
- She stated she had been busier than ever, but it was slowing down now, because there simply was nothing left

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Tania - Facebook local community board moderator and Burringbar resident

Interview date – 3 November 2020

- A couple that I met on Facebook buying some furniture because they were moving
- We got talking about the housing situation in the Shire
- They were in Burringbar but had moved 10 times in 13 years on living up this way
- They have moved further and further away from the coast and her stepchildren.
- They were surprised they had to move this year but due to COVID the landlord realised they could get more for the property and did not renew their lease
- Tania works for an NGO and her partner is a Head Chef so they are upper middle-income earners
- Having looked around the area they were living in, it became obvious that they were being priced out
- Houses they could afford were being paid for a full year in advance by people moving to the area from the cities or people who were illegally offering agents double the weekly rent to secure the lease
- Tania and her partner confronted the agents they were dealing with and were 'blacklisted' and could not find a rental in the area
- They were 2 weeks away from being homeless
- It was only through friends in the area that they were able to get a short term (insecure) rental on the Splendor in the Grass site, as it had been cancelled this year
- They explained that as soon as their children have finished high school they will move out of the Northern Rivers because they can't take it any more

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Hans Lovejoy - Editor-in-Chief local newspaper

Interview date – 5 November 2020

- He sees the issue as starting off with the 'state captured' politicians, who are not interested in changes in the law
- Can the council do anything? Are the council doing anything?
- Byron Shire is a small council that only pays \$20,000 a year so doesn't attract professional counsellors, so they often simply don't have the knowledge, experience or time to garner great change
- Legislation isn't strong enough and is mired by wealth divide between locals and newcomers and those in positions of power
- Questions arise... who do you give the affordable housing to? Who is worthy? As it is becoming an increasing issue for not just low income, but more and more middle-income earners
- Same thing is happening in Noosa
- People forget that Byron is geographically constrained and loved to death
- Instead of massive mega developments and big suburbs i.e. West Byron why not create little suburbs or hamlets in the hinterland in the Mullum to Byron region
- The pressure is on rezoning, that is the only way to make big change
- Definition is needed as to what constitutes affordable housing and a national strategy

- 'Money is the driver of policy not ethics'
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Doug - President of local advocacy group against STRA

Interview date – 10 November 2020

- Big change in STRA since 2003, where it initially started out as people renting out a spare room to help pay the bills or offering up the whole house when they took a break for the school holidays
 - Now has become whole year letting and people buying multiple properties for the sole purpose of STRA
 - Byron Shire has close to 3,000 STRA which is 18% of the housing stock and nearly every Sydney council has no more than 200
 - Permanent rentals are becoming more and more sparse in the Shire and the ones that are around are becoming increasingly unaffordable
 - High property prices have pushed out all middle-income earners and essential workers being able to live close to their workplace
 - Byron Shire has over 2,000,000 visitors a year, but due to its geography (between two wetlands and the ocean) it cannot support continued growth
 - Growth that has been exponentially speeded up the impacts of COVID
 - Have asked for State Government intervention, which has been minimal as has rested on the local, incredibly underfunded and under resourced Shire council
 - Local residents are already at a disadvantage as STRA companies such as Airbnb have the capacity and the cash to lobby Ministers, Planners and the like
 - San Francisco and Barcelona are other like examples, but Byron has a population of just 36,000 people
 - His recommendation is to restrict to 90 days, which allows for the mum and dad renters to stay but takes the load off the community
 - Also for the council to register all STRA and charge a fee to cover admin, inspection and compliance costs
 - Host must be Owner/Manager and be present overnight and within 30mins in the day
 - Limit of 2 adults per bedroom and a cap on total number of occupants
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Phil & Christine Biqqar - Previous owners of informal intentional community

Interview date – 10 November 2020

- Currently live out in Yibbi, drove to meet with them on 10.11
- [Andrew](#) (below) is currently living with them and lived at Myocum
- Lived there for 11 – 12 years and were closed down 4/5 years ago

- 20-acre property with a \$1.1 million mortgage, 20 caravans (rented at no more than \$90-5 p/w), sheds, laundry, spa and toilets/ showers provided
- Originally started as a nudist community but not sustainable, when P.H got injured they needed an income to help with the mortgage
- They also wanted to help people who couldn't afford to live in the region any more
- It was a natural progression, met people through friends of friends or hitchhiking
- In the end created an informal intentional community of about 15 people, demographic was a lot of people with dogs, the elderly (especially women e.g. 'Pearl' aged 71), survivors of domestic violence, single parents
- They often had community dinners and many of the people helped in the collective raising of their son Seth
- It became their "family of choice" because their biological families were in WA and VIC and of different mindset to them, here they were surrounded by like minded community
- They wanted to start it as an experiment to feed back to the council, of how we can house the 200 homeless people in Byron
- [Paul Spooner](#) who was well connected with the homeless breakfast etc, he was well aware of what they were doing and seemed to be supportive of the experiment
- Council understood that Phil & Christine had planted 4,000 trees and were filling a much-needed gap in affordable housing in the Shire
- So had no issues until about 2015 when compliance officers began paying visits
- First two were happy to turn a blind eye, but the second hit them with a non-compliance order and \$1.2million fine
- Council also claimed that they had a bar, but it was a miscommunication... they had a spa but refused to correct this on their documentation
- So, P.H decided 'stuff you Byron Bay, your loss' and they sold up and left
- Once they left many of the very vulnerable women over retirement age went into temporary emergency housing or other unauthorised dwellings
- This lack of permanent solution of any of the people that had to leave their property means many are in similar or even more precarious position

- Some excellent recommendations and opinions about the situation having gone through that process
- There are 200 homeless in Byron and many of them suffer from mental health and other social issues which are exacerbated through living in large and absolutely inadequate temporary shelters outdoors
- If they were spread out on people's land then this could ameliorate their situations bettering the social health of the whole community
- They do admit that they think they had too many people in the end, because people started to take ownership of it when it was not theirs
- One council compliance officer told one of the occupants (a single father of 3 that they picked up hitchhiking) that he could get all his rent back because it was an unauthorised dwelling, Phil & Christine spent \$10,000 fighting him and was thrown

- out by the judge as they had proof he had viewed the dwelling before agreeing to pay rent
- They also had issues with the septic being able to cope with that many people
 - But the bottom line of the experiment is that if you have to set dwellings up to code it cannot be affordable

 - Other issues as they see it and their recommendations:
 - A distain for the local homeless population is pervasive and only getting worse, in his work with the RFS they attended multiple fires started at Sandhills, rumoured to be set by a wealthy lawyer who recently purchased land in the area and didn't want the homeless as his new neighbours
 - 'Money is behind it, either the elite who don't want the homeless in their back yard or the compliance officers who want to keep their jobs'
 - 3x film crews currently working in the Shire and another 3 in for next year that is 150 per film (total approx. 450) people taking up approximately 100 houses both permanent rentals and STRA that were available due to Covid
 - 'Where do they go?' – council is telling people to move out to cheaper areas, but you lose and integral part of the community from hospitality and services to essential workers and without these people, how do you service the 2million tourists that visit each year?
 - The council either support the homeless and if they don't, they are on the developers side
 - They need to make the route to compliance easier or allow people to take temporary occupation on private land (i.e. sleeping in vans on people's property)
 - Maybe have different levels of compliance?
 - They also highlighted the mental health impact on those facing compliance orders from the council is damaging as you fight bureaucracy that you can never beat
 - Phil posed the question, how much money could council save if they stopped having to enforce and move people on from homeless camps if they just allowed for them to legally reside on private property

 - Their old farm is now owed by a multimillionaire, who put on several compliant dwellings and is now charging (an affordable for many) \$350 p/w

 - Phil and Christine have recently purchased the 75 acre block next door to their 25 acre property and plan to create a MO of like-minded nudists

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Andrew – Moderator of Facebook local housing group

Interview date – 10 November 2020

- Used to live at [Phil & Christine](#) (above) informal intentional community in Myocum

- Runs a Facebook group for short term (1week to 3 months) affordable accommodation forum and a job site
- Currently 5/6 people a day asking to join the accommodation site, the demographic of which 'spreads the gamut'
- He constantly has to remind people of the 'rules' i.e., 'affordable' is \$630 p/w max of 3 bed house or \$270 p/w for a room and what minimum wage is
- This is exemplary of the situation now, there is not enough well-paid work and accommodation is overpriced

- His recommendation is when developers are looking at a 30% - 70% affordability split, why not make this net retail value or floor space rather than number of abodes??

- Also suggested I look at Nightcap Village MO where they are currently having issues with some people trying to get out but apparently the money isn't there

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Paul Spooner - Byron Shire Counsellor

Interview date – 11 November 2020

- People's concept of affordability in contrast to what informs policy surrounding affordability are stark
- From a policy point of view, it is usually based around market rents with 80% in some states constitutes as affordability legislation
- 'that definitinal (sic) stuff is a barrier to discussion'
- The terminology changes across the world i.e. many places call it homes for key workers or local housing
- Main issue in Byron Shire is that jobs and incomes have not kept pace with market values, so people find it increasingly challenging to live in the area.
- His experience in 2003 when he first moved here, was that people worked 3 days a week as they moved here for the lifestyle and not it has totally flipped with young people working up to 3 jobs to afford it, it crossed that barrier a couple of years ago.

- An important issue raised by Paul was that from a policy point of view it is hard to separate social housing out of the affordable equation
- For example Germany has strong social housing and Australia has divested from social housing
- The lack of social housing means there is 'no hand break' or 'suspension' that softens the levels between the housing accessibility
- State average for social housing is 3-4% but in Byron it is half that

- About 20 years ago people started to get kicked out of the area (especially in town) in preference to short term holiday rents over permanent leases
- Then came Airbnb which was a disruptor to the real estate market in Byron
- 'It put the market rentals on steroids'
- From a policy level, in Byron people were resistant to tourist accommodation, for example the backlash against Club Med at Elements, but he thinks that this is the reason we now have the issues surrounding STRAs
- At the same time as all this change in Byron the property market in Australia was going through the roof, with city money investing in Byron
- 'the perfect storm developing'

- So, what is council going to do?
- 'People came to Byron because they didn't like development on green fields and they didn't want suburbia and everyone is in agreement'
- So, then you have to infill but there is always a big outcry 'not in my backyard'
- And council doesn't want to raise building heights
- Council's hands are tied 'Can't go out, can't go in or go up!'

- From a policy point of view, the cost of land is a huge barrier and the fact that council doesn't have any land
- He claims they are trying with North Coast Community Housing next to the council building in Mullum is still being developed
- Council has been looking at planning laws to mandate new zoning for housing development at the standard 70% - 30% affordable
- They are thinking on developing the old Mullum hospital site
- 'Whatever you put up you can't beat the market' that's the harsh reality that the \$\$\$ wins out
- There are lots of rungs missing from the housing ladder

- He tried to create a community land trust
- Which is essentially housing outside the housing market
- Where you can rent for life there have been examples in USA and UK but no successful examples in Australia, mainly due to taxation issues

- On the *Main Arm Unauthorised Dwelling Policy*, he states 'there was no focus on Main Arm, it is a state-wide issue, that's just where it was started,

- There have been illegal dwellings in the areas for 40 years and have pretty much been ignored
- Council is usually reactive, not active and used to let people get away with things
- But the situation is now that the amount of illegal dwellings is now huge and with that comes exploitation
- Paul claims that this draft policy is a way for people to get some legality, especially if they want to sell

- 'You can't look at housing in isolation, it is a spectrum'
- Can't sort it out unless state government steps in i.e. changes to tiny house regulation
- Identify that social housing needs ongoing investment from the state
- In Byron what happens is that lower income live in substandard housing or move out, which means you are losing the fabric of the community
- Council needs to argue the case to have more development in Byron or prices will just be pushed up and up
- Need diversity in housing e.g. for older people
- Byron is very different to the rest of the country and need to lobby the state government for regulations around STRAs.

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Louis Coles – Lighting technician for film and tv

Interview date – 06 December 2020

- Lives in Sydney, was working on a film shoot in Byron Shire for 20 weeks at the end of 2020
- Was receiving per diems which meant he had more disposable income to spend and missed creature comforts so was more likely to spend his money in Byron, eating out etc
- This changed towards the end of the shoot (last 6 weeks) when days are so long they don't have time and get catered for at work
- He estimated the local people on set made up less than 15% of the total workforce
- It surprised him that it was so low, as when you work in Sydney or the Gold Coast, the majority of people are locals
- The reason is probably unique to Byron's demographic and being a much smaller pool of trained workers
- The production company do not care about upskilling the locals as they are only worried about their bottom line
- They are also not concerned with the effect it has on the community they are working in
- An estimated 600 crew for the three shoots at the end of 2020, *Nine Perfect Strangers*, *Eden* and *Bosch & Rockit*
- The house he stayed in was an Airbnb that had 3 people in it that was rented by the production company for \$5,000 per week for 20 weeks
- There is a destructive nature of this work, you take people, away from their families and make them work really long hours, there are 'so many divorces, so many affairs, so much booze and too many drugs'

