

Bega By-election 2022 Interview Questions

Responses from Dr Michael Holland – Labor Party

1. Housing and Homelessness

Housing costs in the Bega electorate are skyrocketing. Specialist homelessness services cannot meet demand and there is a shortage of social housing in the electorate. Secure, safe and healthy housing is the bedrock of mental and physical wellbeing, especially in the middle of a pandemic.

How do you think we can support local communities in the Bega electorate to access affordable housing and prevent homelessness?

Everywhere I go across the electorate, people tell me about the crunch that is happening in housing – no availability, rent and house prices going through the roof.

Rents have gone up 14% in one year across Bega and Eurobodalla shires, or almost 50% in five years in some parts. Meanwhile house prices are up almost 30% just this year.

The housing shortage is exacerbated by the high proportion of short-term rentals – locally 19% of homes in the shire are short-term rentals. This is further exacerbated by a slow rebuild after the bushfires. Across both Eurobodalla and Bega Valley LGAs, almost 1,000 homes were lost, and barely 7.5% of survivors have finished rebuilding.

Meanwhile there are over 600 people on the social housing waiting list, with some wait times over 10 years.

Currently, we need to build 42,000 new homes every single year (or one new home for every two current homes for the next 40 years), just to keep up with population growth across NSW. The NSW Government is woefully behind that. Less than 30,000 new homes were built in 2020-21.

We need a big build in social housing across Sydney and regional NSW – creating jobs and getting more people into homes. We have called on the Government to fast-track their urgent social housing repair and maintenance works. It's one of the most practical steps a state government can take to help people rebuild their lives – particularly after COVID.

2. A Strong Social Sector

Over the continuing COVID-19 crisis, the social services sector has risen to the challenge and continued to support vulnerable children, young people, families, and communities across the state. But the sector is stretched to capacity, under-funded and experiencing difficulties recruiting and retaining staff because of low pay, poor conditions, a lack of affordable rental housing, and the stressful nature of the work.

If elected, how will you champion the work of the sector in the Bega electorate, including local First Nations organisations, and ensure they get the resources, recognition and support required to meet demand?

It's thanks to the social services sector and community organisations that we've made it through the last two years. Local community groups stepped up and have gone above and beyond in their work to keep our community safe, fed and housed throughout the pandemic.

Many shifted their focus to provide thousands of food hampers to those in need or provided a place to help with the vaccine rollout.

Community groups and social services need more staff, more funding and more certainty in their future. 10 years of this Government has left them struggling to meet demand – even before the pandemic hit. The sector deserves more support for the vital work they do to keep our community running.

Addressing the housing crisis will help the sector too – both for the people they're supporting and to assist organisations that are losing good staff because they can't afford to live in the area.

3. Building Women's Economic Security and Safety

The Bega electorate has a high proportion of women in employment and a reliance on female dominated industries yet women continue to suffer greater impacts from Covid including job loss and a spike in domestic violence of 9.8% (over NSW).

What measures would you put in place to build women's economic security and independence?

Safe and stable housing is critical. Women over 55 are the fastest growing cohort of homeless Australians, and women and children fleeing domestic and family violence situations accounted for 42% of people seeking specialist homelessness services.

Giving these women a safe, secure and stable place to live is a critical first step in helping them build economic security and independence.

What will you advocate for to better support women and children in the electorate and prevent tragic outcomes for women and children escaping domestic violence?

There are gaps in domestic and family violence services throughout the state – particularly on the South Coast.

Staying Home, Leaving Violence is a program that helps women and children stay safely in their own home or a home of their choice after leaving a violent relationship. Unfortunately, the Eurobodalla LGA doesn't have funding for an SHLV provider. This is a gap that must be addressed to ensure women and children in Bega can reach out and receive help.

There needs to be a return to specialist domestic violence refuges for women and children.

This will help services identify need, and provide case workers who are properly trained and experienced with working with the most vulnerable women in our community - women from CALD backgrounds, First Nations women, and women with disability.

4. Supporting Families

There is a large proportion of children growing up in poverty in this electorate - in some areas such as Eden and Batemans Bay, a third of children are living in poverty. Children growing up in families experiencing financial hardship are more likely to miss out on effective parenting and to be at risk of abuse and neglect.

What are your/your party's policies to support parents and promote children's wellbeing and keep them safe from harm?

Every day, teachers, doctors and nurses submit reports about vulnerable children who are at risk of being abused and neglected, but in 2020 more than 70% of those reports were never followed up by FACs.

We can't protect our kids from harm if they're never seen by caseworkers. Unless we increase the number of caseworkers, and provide them with adequate support in a tough job, they'll remain at risk of abuse and neglect.

5. Emergency Responses

Research is showing more and more that emergency responses built from the top down suffer from a lack of local knowledge; and from inappropriate funding and resourcing – too much too soon, too little too late, or disappearing just when communities need them most.

What do you think are the key issues in developing disaster preparedness and emergency management systems that work?

NSW Labor supports a more collaborative approach to disaster preparedness and emergency management. This includes greater community and sector engagement in planning for the prevention, preparation, response and recovery. Greater engagement from the outset, ensures greater input to, and awareness of, such plans. It also ensures that local emergency management plans reflect the communities that they are designed to serve.

Eurobodalla and Bega were the hardest hit areas in the country by the bushfires. It was an incredibly devastating time and we cannot ever let anything like that happen again.

We have announced State and Federal Labor would spend \$25 million to build an Emergency Operations Precinct in Moruya, including a much needed Emergency Operations Centre.

I've heard the strong advocacy from Eurobodalla Council, local stakeholders and emergency services agencies about the need for this. This will ensure the community is better prepared and protected from future bushfire risks, and recognises the learnings from the Black Summer bushfires.

The Moruya RSL Hall served admirably as a make-shift Operations Centre, but as a long term plan that's simply not good enough. It's clear that a dedicated Emergency Operations Centre and Precinct would have helped in those tragic weeks and months. This aligns with recommendations from the Commonwealth Royal Commission, and the NSW Bushfire Inquiry.

A brand new Emergency Services Precinct would co-locate the NSW RFS, NSW Ambulance, NSW Fire and Rescue, and NSW SES. It's been over two years since the bushfires. Enough is enough. People here need to know that the NSW government has their back.

6. Covid and Climate Change

As the world approaches its limit to growth we are seeing more and more natural disasters including this current pandemic, droughts, floods and bushfires. All of which have greater impacts in rural communities including lower vaccination rates for First Nations communities; fragmented and inadequate health infrastructure; inability to attract and house allied and mental health professionals; and a health workforce that is largely exhausted...

What needs to happen to ensure that our local health systems and related programs are better able to cope with these challenges?

Climate change is a serious threat to the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of our communities. NSW Labor believes taking action on climate change is urgent. Talking about it is not enough.

That's why we're committed to legislating emissions reductions targets of 50% by 2030, and net zero by 2050.

Housing needs to be up to standard to deal with the impacts of climate change. A significant proportion of NSW's social housing was built before 1970. A huge number of homes are no longer fit for purpose to meet the needs of older people who live in them today.

More than half our social housing is draughty in winter, impossible to cool in summer, and exposed to unhealthy heat and cold extremes. They are not safe to live in. A wide-scale social housing repair and maintenance program that upgrades housing to reach modern energy efficiency standards means we can cut carbon emissions and costs.