



PRE BUDGET SUBMISSION 2016 - 2017

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Thankyou for the opportunity to provide you with the Northern Territory Council of Social Service Inc.(NTCOSS) Pre Budget Submission (PBS) for 2016 – 2017

NTCOSS is a peak body for the community sector in the NT and is a voice for people affected by social and economic disadvantage and inequality. The community sector in the NT is made up of community managed, non-government, not for profit organisations who work in social and community service delivery, sector development and advocacy.

The community sector plays a vital role in creating social wellbeing for all Territorians and in building safe and healthy communities by providing services that enable people to access and participate in health services, education, employment, economic development, and family and community life.

We welcome the NT Government's 'Strong Society, Confident Culture Strategy' as a framework for the future. NTCOSS has provided feedback on the draft. Some of the areas we have highlighted in this Pre Budget Submission have been highlighted in the NTCOSS Strong Society submission. Some have also been highlighted in previous PBS documents. At the core of all of our submissions is the need to invest now to change outcomes now and into the future for many vulnerable Territorians.

Change is not achievable without recognition that we are currently failing to meet the needs of so many, especially Aboriginal Territorians. The figures are stark and confronting – the NT has the highest rate of homelessness especially youth homelessness (this is around one in ten young people), we incarcerate more people (including Aboriginal people), the highest rate of teenage pregnancy, there are currently over nine hundred children and young people in out of home care (around 85% of these are Aboriginal) and we drink more alcohol per capita than anyone else in Australia.

If we are to truly 'Develop the North' and have a Strong Society where everyone can enjoy social participation, then we must ensure that we grow the NT fairly and ensure everybody reaps benefits from new projects and policies.

Wendy Morton
Executive Director

1. EARLY INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION

An increased investment in early intervention and prevention right across the social service spectrum just makes good sense both socially and economically. Youth detention, prisons, statutory child protection services, hospitals – they all place a heavy burden on the NT Budget. It makes good economic sense to ensure that families are supported so that their children do not end up in the child protection system. It needs to be mentioned that the link between the high number of child neglect and poverty can not be overlooked. It makes good economic sense to provide services to young people and their families who are at risk of entering the juvenile justice system or becoming homeless – as these support services usually cost far less than the alternative of detention. It makes good economic sense to ensure that individuals with mental health issues or disabilities and their families are supported with quality day programs and supported accommodation options as family breakdown or poor health outcomes will cost our community more in increased hospital stays or inability to maintain employment. Some key areas to prioritise a concerted early intervention approach include

Children and Families

The strengthening of already existing place based services in the NT, which have proven to be effective, is seen as a vital component to achieve environments which support families and children. Furthermore, these approaches need to be inclusive of any national strategies which provide an overarching framework. Approaches should have a strong focus on early intervention and prevention (as well as measures to better support children in care). The delivery of preventative and supportive child and family service delivery, particularly in remote communities, has been very limited, fractured, and without any community involvement in the design and delivery of services provided. The result is that many children and families do not have access to appropriate services. NTCOSS stresses that the lack of resourcing should not be a reason for leaving or placing children in harmful situations. Ultimately, all players have responsibility for the current ‘systems neglect’ and ‘societal abuse’ of children. The ‘systems neglect’ needs to stop and this can only be done if all stakeholders work in partnership, and are adequately resourced and informed. This includes a well resourced early intervention and prevention service system as well as a well resourced ‘out of home care’ system inclusive of a kinship system that provides continuity of relationships and high quality care.

The current focus of the Department of Children and Families appears to be aimed at the statutory end of Child protection and the out of home care system. Yet, our community is made up of children and families and government needs to provide strategies of universal service delivery, which in turn will strengthen the capacity of families to cope well. A well established and resourced continuum of service delivery is vital for all families and children in the NT. International research supports a system that provides services for all families,

rather than just a welfare oriented, targeted program of provision which particularly services the disadvantaged. Universal service delivery promotes social inclusion and ameliorates social and economic inequality.

The existence of child friendly spaces is equally important for children and families to feel and be part of a safe community. This would need to include places which children and families can access for recreational activities and play, such as play grounds with safe play equipment. Child specific playgrounds are important for early childhood development as well as provide a social meeting space. Especially Town camp residents and remote communities, who have limited access to transport, would greatly benefit from a shared child friendly environment. An investment in this area would greatly contribute to Territory children growing up in a happy, healthy and safe environment.

We must also ensure that we have services and supports available for those children and families who are 'at risk' of entering the child protection system. Failure to make this investment may end up in far greater resources being directed towards the out of home care system.

Young people

In the past 12 months, there has been recognition by government that additional resources needed to be directed to youth services across the NT (eg parenting programs in the Darwin area). We welcomed the re investment in an after hours youth service in Alice Springs. However a significant investment still needs to be made to ensure that appropriate services are available for all young people and their families particularly those most at risk. Research informs us that the investment in universal, early prevention and intervention outweighs the cost of implementing complex child protection, out of home care, detention, and victim compensation schemes. This includes resources in the area of mental health, alcohol and other drugs, housing and justice. Investment needs to support the development of mature, creative and responsible young citizens who are able to contribute to a healthy community. Yet, the current lack of diverse family support programs and therapeutic services clearly inhibits the reduction of young people entering the Child Protection, Mental health, AOD, and detention systems. Models which make imprisonment an option of absolute last resort like the Koori court are worth exploring as jailing young people appears to be ineffective in reducing recidivism.

The importance of considering the evidence regarding brain development and recognising cognitive impairment at an early age due to being affected by e.g. severe failure to thrive, FASD, trauma etc. is paramount. The implementation of subsequent appropriate and targeted management programs for young people and their families is a need which can not be ignored.

The provision of early intervention and prevention services and programs in the area of sexual and reproductive health for young people need stronger resourcing than is currently the case. Meaningful and culturally sensitive education and information programs for young people are vital to understand sexual health, potential adverse health effects on them or their children. Assumptions can not be made that young people are well informed and are literate around these issues. Nor can it be assumed that parents will have the skill and knowledge base to fulfil this role.

Alcohol and other drugs

While the NTG has committed significant resources to its Mandatory Alcohol Treatment regime, this only provides intervention services for a small number of people with chronic alcohol issues at the extreme end of the spectrum. More focus and resources are needed in the education and support and treatment services, particularly for young people and those outside of the urban centres.

Alcohol remains the number one issue but there has been a growing emphasis placed on the level and impact of methamphetamine use across the NT. This submission is written before NT Ice Taskforce has handed down its recommendations, however it is hoped there will be considerable focus placed on resourcing education, training and treatment services.

Early Intervention and Prevention: Recommendation

Commit to a greater focus and sustainable resourcing of preventative and early intervention services

2. BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF ABORIGINAL ORGANISATIONS

NTCOSS supports the need to build capacity of Aboriginal organisations throughout the NT. This could be through the continued development of existing Aboriginal controlled organisations, developing new Aboriginal controlled organisations or where appropriate, partnerships between Aboriginal and mainstream organisations. We believe that this approach will ensure communities can develop strong, sustainable relationships with the service provider, provide a culturally competent service and deliver better long term outcomes for Aboriginal people. This will entail greater resourcing for some organisations to provide literacy programs to assist with navigating organizational and service systems as well as targeted skill development to enhance employment outcomes.

Both the Northern Territory and Federal Government have a role to play. This can be through the wording/language and intent of funding contracts to work in Aboriginal communities (such as the inclusion of exit plans), not funding mainstream organisations to

work in communities where they have no current relationship, and a willingness to invest in true, long-term partnerships.

If we are to reduce the number of children in out of home care, strengthen families, improve health and housing options, local Aboriginal organisations are a key part of the solution.

This connects strongly to the need for better place based planning. A one-sized fits all approach rarely meets needs in the NT especially for those in remote and regional centres. Funding contract guidelines need to (better) allow for local communities to develop and implement local solutions.

The Northern Territory is one of the few jurisdictions which, does not as yet have an Aboriginal community controlled child and family services system. This is surprising considering the high number of Aboriginal children, young people and families involved with the Child Protection and youth justice system. The learnings from other jurisdictions show there are long term benefits for the children, young people, families and ultimately the community if an Aboriginal Community controlled Child and family services system exists.

Building the Capacity of Aboriginal Organisations: Recommendation

Develop and support building capacity of Aboriginal Organisations to deliver services across the NT

3. COST OF LIVING - REVIEW OF THE CONCESSION SYSTEM IN THE NT

The cost of living in the NT continues to have a major impact on those who are on low incomes. Access to and adequacy of concessions play a significant role in addressing affordability for many Territorians.

There are a wide range of concessions made available across the Northern Territory, with some more complex than others (e.g. utilities concessions with their variable components). There are different eligibility criteria for different concessions, with entitlements and eligibility not always easily understood by all, and concerns that some people are missing out on concessions for which they would be eligible. Housing, utilities, transport and health accommodation costs constitute a substantial and unavoidable weekly expenditure item for households, and the various concessions are part of a societal framework intended to address cost of living pressures for particular groups in the NT.

It seems clear that in several key cost of living areas, some of the concessions designed to help low income Territorians, are not keeping pace with the rising prices of the goods and services they have been designed to address and are therefore no longer providing the level of assistance they once were. Some concessions appear to be more effective than others in

keeping up with rising costs (e.g. the Commonwealth Mobility Allowance and Pharmaceutical Allowance).

Other concessions, however, are not keeping up with the cost of living, whether due to starting from an inadequate base rate or because indexation is non-existent or inadequate (e.g. Motor Vehicle Registration concession and Commonwealth Rent Assistance). For other concessions, such as those that fall under PATS, while there have been recent generous increases to some subsidies, over time their value will diminish, because there is no regular and adequate indexation system in place, and there will inevitably be the need to play catch up with these concessions again when prices rise.

Inadequate or no indexation has the effect of diminishing the value of the concession over time, raising questions of affordability for low income households and consequently access to these very basic goods and services that are essential to health and wellbeing and participation in society. These issues need to be addressed in order to provide a more appropriate level of assistance for low income households experiencing financial hardship and the resultant emotional stress as a result of cost of living pressures.

Some other concessions are a concern, because certain low income population groups are excluded from eligibility (e.g. Health Care Card Holders are excluded from the NTPCCS Utilities concessions). In addition, there are a number of concessions that can only be used in certain geographic locations, such as the concession fare on public buses, as only Darwin, Palmerston and Alice Springs have traditionally had a public bus service.

Reviewing concessions schemes to ensure they are effective is meeting the needs of those who are most disadvantaged will assist in helping low income and disadvantaged Territorians with rising costs of living, reduce the risk of people ending up in poverty, and reduce issues like the incidence of utilities disconnection, financial difficulties and rising debt. These issues are crucial to the wellbeing of low income and disadvantaged Territorians.

Cost of living - review of the concession system in the NT: Recommendation

We urge the NT Government to undertake a comprehensive review of all Territory based concessions to determine if the concessions are meeting the aims for which they were established, i.e. reducing cost of living pressures for lower income Territorians; and establish a consistent approach across all concessions in terms of reviews and indexation methods.

4. SOCIAL IMPACT

NTCOSS is concerned at the potential for social justice considerations to become marginalised in the Developing the North planning. It is crucial that the principles of social inclusion be honoured in policy initiatives designed within the portfolios of economic development, telecommunications, and mineral exploration. The philosophy of social inclusion requires a whole-of-government approach to ensure that the idea is not simply consigned to the traditional silos of health, education and housing. To ensure that the notion of social inclusion is not submerged beneath the weight of other policy considerations, NTCOSS strongly recommends that the government adopt a system of Social Impact Statements (SIIS) or Poverty Impact Statements to ensure that the interests of disadvantaged Territorians are not overlooked.

Poverty Impact Statements

'Poverty Impact Statements' are a key feature of the Irish Social Inclusion Strategy. They require government agencies and local authorities to assess policies and programs at the design, implementation and review stages. The process is designed to assess the likely impact that new policies and programs will have on poverty, and on inequality that are likely to lead to poverty. The Department of Health and Human Services in Tasmania, several years ago, identified the importance of Social Impact Statements in "providing the framework within which predictions can be made regarding the potential positive and negative impacts of a proposal while it is at the planning stage" so that desired outcomes will be maximised and the costs or losses to communities are minimised.

Social Return on Investment

At times the NTG provides funding to private sector businesses or for profit organisations as they believe this will strengthen the NT economy. Where this funding is provided in the future, we encourage the NTG to ensure that there is a social return on this investment. For example, providing funds to a local tourist operator may require them to employ a percentage of long-term unemployed, people with a disability, young people or Aboriginal people in return. It may also include a contribution to infrastructure in the NT – such as the development of housing, building, maintaining roads or the development of local social services.

Social Impact: Recommendations

- **Incorporate Social Impact Statements as part of all new Northern Territory Government policy and program design**
- **Develop Social Return on Investment strategies**

5. HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

The lack of available, affordable rental housing and the high rate of homelessness in the NT continues to have a significant impact on low income people. A lack of stable housing contributes to a range of other social issues such as poor health, AOD, child protection, mental health etc. NTCOSS supports the recommendations made in the NT Shelter Pre Budget Submission 2016 – 2017.

Housing and Homelessness: Recommendation

Adopt and implement the recommendations in the NT Shelter Pre Budget Submission 2016 - 2017