



NTCOSS Pre Budget Submission 2021 – 2022

December 2020

Foreword

The 2021 – 22 Northern Territory (NT) Budget will be delivered in a time of economic uncertainty and an ongoing global health crisis. The pressure on the NT social and community sector to provide support for people experiencing extreme disadvantage has never been greater. While this is a time of extreme challenge for the Territory, it is also a time of opportunity to build safe, resilient and prosperous communities for all Territorians.

This submission recommends initiatives to ensure the best outcomes for our community. A strong social service system will aid our economic recovery and preserve jobs, but more importantly, will provide social benefits beyond economic stimulus. Investing in social capital makes both good policy and good economic sense.

The Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) commends the NT Government on primarily maintaining funding to frontline service providers in the 2020 – 21 Budget, and on the JobMaker Booster initiative to help create jobs for eligible Territorians. As we move our focus towards economic recovery, investing in people and in social services is more critical than ever.

The following initiatives to build community and individual wellbeing, alongside stimulus to the economy and long term sustainability will deliver opportunities for all Territorians to participate in the economy and community.



Deborah Di Natale
NTCOSS CEO

The voice of our Sector

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

NTCOSS represents 115 members, including peak bodies, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOS), large charities, small grassroots organisations, and individual members. NTCOSS consulted with a broad range of members to prepare this submission for the NT Government's 2021 – 22 Budget. The following initiatives build on work undertaken for NTCOSS' submission to the Economic Reconstruction Committee, and take into consideration the current social, political and economic context.

The value of the Sector in its ability to collaborate, work agilely and respond rapidly to community need has never been more apparent than during the peak of the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020. In the context of the NT Government's 'Jobs First: Recover, Rebuild, Rebound' approach, the relevance and importance of the social and community Sector is paramount. Not only does the Sector employ more than 10,300 people, but community services also play a vital role in creating social wellbeing for all Territorians. Our Sector is central to 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.

Key Recommendations

Taking Care of our Children and Young People

Increase investment in prevention and family support programs

Prioritise and increase investment in culturally appropriate child and family support services

Invest in community-based generalist and intensive youth support programs

Invest in crisis support and prevention services for young people experiencing and using domestic, family and sexual violence

Develop and implement an NT-wide plan to ensure free access to menstrual hygiene management for young women in partnership with schools, youth programs and community organisations

Aboriginal Justice

Invest in strengthening Aboriginal Territorians' knowledge and use of complaints mechanisms

Invest in the establishment of Law and Justice Groups and community courts across the NT

Invest in Alternative to Custody models across the NT

Climate Justice Matters

Fully fund the Three-Year Action Plan

Invest in transitioning to solar energy across the NT

Cost of Living

Invest in extending the NT Concession Scheme to all Commonwealth Health Care Card holders

Invest in social housing to ensure health hardware can achieve safety and the 9 healthy living practices

Invest in improved energy efficiency of social housing

Invest in a review into transport networks across the NT

Responding Early and Effectively to Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence

Increase investment in initiatives that stop violence at the start

Invest in developing a strong, sustainable and capable workforce

Invest in the delivery of specialist services to respond to violence in our remote communities

Taking care of our children and young people

Increase investment in prevention and early family support programs

As outlined in the Productivity Commission's [report](#), the largest proportion of funding for services directly relevant to the prevention of harm to children in the NT is allocated to statutory child protection services. The 2020 - 2021 budget showed another slight decrease in funding for family support, while funding for child protection and out-of-home care (OOHC) largely stayed the same.

NTCOSS welcomes the NT Government's commitment to phasing out the [financially unstable and unsuitable](#) purchased home-based care for children in out-of-home care by December 2021. The NT Government continues to spend a considerable amount of money on these services, with 359 children placed in purchased home-based care in 2019 – 2020.

The new National Agreement on Closing the Gap commits governments to work in partnership with Aboriginal people to achieve a target of reducing Aboriginal over-representation in OOHC by 45% by 2031. In order to achieve this target in the NT, it is critical that the NT Government increases investment in prevention and early family support programs, so that it matches the investment in child protection services.

NTCOSS commends the NT Government on the 2020 [election commitment](#) to transferring the purchase of private providers to family based kinship and foster carers, into family support and early intervention services. Increased investment in family support programs will support children to grow up safe and cared for by family, in community and connected to culture.

Prioritise and increase investment in culturally appropriate services

Where children enter the care and protection system, NTCOSS calls for investment proportionate to the engagement of Aboriginal families in this system. This is in keeping with the NT Productivity Commission's recommendation that when commissioning children and family services primarily targeting Aboriginal people, governments should give preference to service providers that have the capacity to deliver culturally appropriate services. Where ACCOs are not available or identify as not having current capacity to deliver these services, adequate and additional funding must be allocated to build capacity, and provide implementation and recruitment support to providers in addition to their service delivery contracts, to ensure long-term transition to Aboriginal control.

NTCOSS acknowledges that the NT Government has made significant improvements in supporting culturally competent service delivery, and has increased expenditure to ACCOs from less than \$1 million in 2016, to more than \$11 million in 2019. Continued, increased investment in ACCOs and Aboriginal family-led decision making such as family group conferencing is essential in building a system where all families have access to quality, culturally safe support services, and in building strong and safe communities, where children can thrive. NTCOSS commends the Government on its [election commitment](#) to work collaboratively with Aboriginal and non-government organisations to progress, as a matter of priority, the transition of OOHC to ACCOs. NTCOSS also commends the Government on its

election commitment to further developing family centred decision making processes, including implementing family group conferencing.

Reinvesting the substantial funding from purchased home-based care to the ongoing recruitment and support for kinship and foster carers, and embedding ACCO-led service delivery in the OOHC system is needed to ensure that Aboriginal children's safety and wellbeing is at the heart of this system.

Invest in community-based generalist and intensive youth support programs

NTCOSS recommends increased investment in operational responses, such as Back on Track, to put in place the necessary programs that will facilitate raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility. Any responses must be flexible, responsive to community need and family focused.

Given the lack of generalist services and early support services for young people who do not fit the threshold criteria for intensive support, or who require more than recreation services, it is recommended that the NT Government invest in generalist services across the NT. NTCOSS commends the Government on its election commitment to continue investment in regional and after hours youth programs and services, targeted at prevention and early intervention. Generalist youth programs are a key component of early intervention and prevention.

Invest in crisis support and prevention services for young people experiencing and using domestic, family and sexual violence

There is a lack of investment the provision of services for young people experiencing and perpetrating domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV), and for primary prevention and early intervention programs in the NT. This is of particular concern in remote locations, where there are limited generalist support services for young people. The shortage of crisis accommodation available to young people experiencing DFSV, including young mothers and their children, is a major gap across the NT.

NTCOSS recommends identified funding for specialist providers and services to address this need. By supporting young people to address behaviours and get support early on, positive benefits will be experienced in education, care and protection and other social determinants of health.

Develop and implement an NT-wide plan to ensure free access to menstrual hygiene management for young women in partnership with schools, youth programs and community organisations

Menstrual hygiene management for girls and young women across the NT is a key area of need, particularly for those living in remote communities. A lack of products, facilities and knowledge, combined with overcrowding and the lack of access to functioning health hardware, and the high cost of hygiene products have been identified as barriers that can

prevent young women from attending school and other services for several days each month during menstruation.

The development and implementation of an NT-wide plan to ensure free and non-stigmatising access to menstrual hygiene products in schools and other services, along with resources and culturally safe education, will help to break down barriers to accessing school for many girls and young women living in remote communities and other locations.

Aboriginal Justice

NTCOSS commends the NT Government [election commitment](#) to fully resourcing the Aboriginal Justice Agreement (AJA), to ensure fair justice outcomes for Aboriginal Territorians and to reduce incarceration of Aboriginal people in the NT.

Invest in strengthening Aboriginal Territorians' knowledge and use of complaints mechanisms

The AJA provides a road map for the NT to ensure that Aboriginal Territorians live safe, fulfilling lives and to be treated fairly, respectfully and without discrimination, and for Aboriginal offenders to have the opportunity to end their offending. In order to achieve the stated aims to reduce reoffending and imprisonment rates of Aboriginal Territorians; engage and support Aboriginal leadership; and improve justice responses and services to Aboriginal Territorians, a significant investment must be made.

NTCOSS recommends an increased investment in strengthening Aboriginal Territorians' knowledge and use of complaints mechanisms including the police complaints process, Ombudsman NT, Office of the Children's Commissioner, Independent Commission Against Corruption, NT Anti-Discrimination Commission, NT Consumer Affairs and the Health and Community Services Complaints Commission. This will require more effective communication and increased visibility of existing complaints mechanisms.

Invest in the establishment of Law and Justice Groups and community courts across the NT

The AJA consultations clearly heard that there is insufficient involvement of Aboriginal leaders in decision making. Many Aboriginal people feel alienated from the justice system that is intended to serve all Territorians equally. NTCOSS recommends immediate investment in the establishment of Law and Justice Groups and community courts to work towards addressing this human rights issue.

Adequate investment in the AJA is essential to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the NT justice system.

Invest in Alternative to Custody models across the NT

NTCOSS commends the NT Government on the introduction of the Alternative to Custody facility for Aboriginal women in Alice Springs. Directed initiatives that focus on therapeutic

and holistic support for women who are (or have been) incarcerated is essential to addressing the drivers behind offending behaviours. NTCOSS recommends that the NT Government invest in further Alternative to Custody programs across the NT, including rehabilitation programs that allow women access to their children, as there is an identified lack of services that allow clients' children to reside with them, or have appropriate access to their children.

Climate justice matters

[Climate change is a social justice](#) issue, with the most severe impacts on people who are already experiencing disadvantage. People and communities with fewer resources have less money, choice and power to cope, adapt or recover to events such as cyclones, heatwaves, fires, floods and storms.

The transition to a low carbon economy presents an opportunity to address inequality and poverty in the NT at the same time as reducing carbon emissions.

Fully fund the Three-Year Action Plan

In order to implement its [Climate Change Strategy](#) and the related three-year Action Plan on climate change, NTCOSS recommends the NT Government take effective action to support people, communities and social and community sector organisations to become more resilient to extreme weather and natural disasters. Priority initiatives include funding for a process to work with the Sector to develop climate change risk adaption and response frameworks; funding to establish community adaptation planning; funding to establish regional and industry/sector specific climate adaption frameworks; and funding for community awareness program aimed at specific communities/sectors, as well as community wide messaging.

Invest in transitioning to solar energy across the NT

The NT has a target of 50% renewable energy by 2030 but does not yet have a comprehensive plan to achieve this. Investment and leadership are required, with benefits including reduced energy costs over time and significantly reduced carbon emissions.

NTCOSS recommends that the NT Government increase investment in development of generation and distribution of solar power in the NT.

NTCOSS recommends that the NT Government ensure solar energy is built into all new NT Government buildings, and that all existing NT Government buildings including public housing dwellings are retrofitted with solar energy. This would help the NT meet its carbon reduction target and demonstrate leadership in the transition to renewable energy.

Cost of Living

Statistical summaries paint a rosy picture of the NT, with relatively high incomes and relatively low unemployment. But these statistics hide the [real story of the NT economy](#), which is highly segmented in terms of employment, income and access to services.

Food insecurity, energy poverty, overcrowded housing, and limited access to services is the reality of many people's lives in the NT. People living in remote NT and Aboriginal people – who make up 30% of the NT population – bear this burden most heavily.

Invest in extending the NT Concession Scheme to all Commonwealth Health Care Card holders

The NT Concession Scheme provides meaningful assistance to people unable to pay their bills. The NT is now the only jurisdiction in Australia not to offer electricity and other concessions to all Commonwealth Health Care Card holders. Extending the eligibility for the NT Concession Scheme to these excluded groups would be a big step towards addressing inequality in the NT and providing appropriate social supports to those who need it most.

NTCOSS recommends that the NT Government extend the NT Concession Scheme eligibility to include people with a Commonwealth Health Care Card – this includes people on JobSeeker and Youth Allowance, who are currently excluded from the scheme.

In recognition of the significantly reduced health outcomes and life expectancy of Aboriginal people, membership of the NT Concession Scheme, the NT Seniors Recognition Scheme and NT Seniors Card should be open to Aboriginal people 55 years old and over.

Given the [lower than expected](#) take-up of the NT Concession Scheme, NTCOSS recommends that the NT Government work with community services to ensure all eligible Territorians are aware of and have ready access to the Scheme.

Invest in social housing to ensure health hardware can achieve safety and the [9 healthy living practices](#)

The NT has Australia's highest rates of overcrowding and homelessness. Safe, secure and affordable housing is essential to family and community health and wellbeing. In its 2020 – 2021 pre-Budget [submission](#), NT Shelter recommended that preventative maintenance be doubled in order that more [Housing for Health](#) programs could be rolled out, to ensure more Territorians have access to safe and healthy housing. Preventative maintenance is cost effective in reducing future repairs and maintenance, while maintaining the value of the NT's social housing stock and ensuring dwellings meet current standards for health and wellbeing.

Invest in improved energy efficiency of social housing

Residential electricity in the NT is cheaper than everywhere else in Australia due to NT Government subsidies, yet the NT has the highest rate of energy poverty in the country. Poor

quality or inappropriate housing and the reliance on old and inefficient appliances are the primary causes of energy poverty in the NT. Access to safe, affordable and secure energy is [essential](#) for participation in the community and economy.

Improving the energy performance of existing housing stock through minor and major works, and the installation of energy efficient appliances, improves health and well-being of the residents, reduces greenhouse gas emissions, and creates jobs.

[Energy efficiency is smart stimulus](#) and governments around the world – including in Australia – are recognising the twin benefits of economic stimulus and improved health and wellbeing.

NTCOSS commends the NT Government on the election commitment to consider in the budget process to continue investment in upgrades to existing public housing to increase energy efficiency, and to ensure all new public housing is built with energy efficiency in mind. Along with investment in energy efficient improvements and renovations to all social housing in the NT; NTCOSS recommends the establishment of a program to subsidise purchase of energy efficient appliances to improve the energy performance of dwellings; ensure that air conditioners and heaters in social housing have high energy efficiency rating and are climate appropriate, and retrofit all social housing in the NT with solar energy. NTCOSS recommends that the NT Government develop and implement a model for the delivery of opportunities for public housing tenants to benefit from cost effective power purchasing agreements between the tenants and the Territory.

NTCOSS recommends that the NT Government develop and implement a transition plan for the extension of Building Control Areas to include remote areas of the NT. The proposed extension would ensure that the standards outlined in the National Construction Code and the Building Regulations would apply across the NT.

Invest in a review into transport networks in the NT

Improving public transport and regional and remote transport networks across the NT would significantly ease [cost of living pressures](#) and food security across the NT, particularly for low income residents. NTCOSS commends the Government on the election commitment to review current available funding for regional and remote transport services.

NTCOSS recommends that the Government conduct a review to identify and address gaps in regional centre public transport, to facilitate an informed response to transport issues in the NT.

[Responding early and effectively to domestic, family and sexual violence](#)

Increase investment in initiatives that stop violence at the start

The number of care and protection notifications received by the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities with a contributing factor of domestic violence increased

significantly by 25.9%, from 6788 in 2018–19 to 8545 in 2019–20, however despite this increase there has been no additional funding for DFSV reduction services.

NTCOSS acknowledges that the NT Government did not reduce funding to front-line DFSV services in 2020-21. However, the current allocation of \$27.9 million is not sufficient to adequately fund the 32 crisis accommodation support services across the NT, as well as program supports for women and children escaping violence, and perpetrator intervention programs to help reform offending behaviours, along with the implementation of the *Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Framework 2018 – 2028 - Action Plan 2*.

Through commitment to the [National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022 – Fourth Action Plan](#), primary prevention and early intervention is a key priority of governments and service providers across Australia. While the NT Government has committed to a broad reform agenda within the Framework, including increased provision of therapeutic supports and primary prevention programs, there is no specific allocation of funding for the increased implementation of such programs. Increased investment in this area is essential for successful implementation of the Framework.

The specialist DFSV court pilot model in Alice Springs includes the provision of therapeutic supports for the perpetrator of family violence as well as court advocacy and support work for the victims of family violence. However, to date, no additional funding has been allocated for victim support services and resources, or for the provision of Men’s Behaviour Change programs and Women’s Safety Workers. Further, there is a lack of funding for the necessary training for a multidisciplinary team to transition from an adversarial to therapeutic model. With the physical infrastructure for the specialist DFSV court now in place, dedicated investment in initiatives that allow for the provision of such services should be prioritised.

NTCOSS recommends investment in primary prevention, early intervention initiatives and therapeutic supports, while maintaining crucial funding to crisis support services, to assist people impacted by domestic, family and sexual violence.

Invest in developing a strong, sustainable and capable workforce

NTCOSS commends the NT Government on the [election commitment](#) to place priority on training and developing the capacity of frontline Government and non-government workers to identify and respond appropriately to sexual violence, and to consider options to deliver best practice and consolidated workforce training. NTCOSS also commends the Government on its commitment to consider establishing an independent DFSV resource centre.

The comprehensive DFSV Workforce Sector Development Plan (WSDP) has the support of the specialist Sector, however, ensuring the appropriate resources and funding are put in place for effective implementation is crucial. In order to ensure successful implementation, it is necessary to identify the actual cost of developing the Plan in its entirety, and how this will be resourced. It is essential that this does not come at the detriment of service providers and their current resources and ability to maintain programs.

NTCOSS recommends that the Government identify the entire cost of the implementation of the WSDP and related initiatives, including a DFSV resource centre, and increase investment accordingly.

Invest in the delivery of specialist services to respond to violence in our remote communities

Challenges in addressing rates of DFSV in the NT are impacted by geographical factors. Effective service responses to support victims and perpetrators of DFSV in remote areas are a unique and complex challenge.

While there is funding allocated to safe houses and for some non-government organisations to provide DFSV reduction services in some remote communities, there is an undersupply of preventative and specialist service responses.

NTCOSS recommends that the NT Government increase investment to enhance the provision of preventative services in remote communities, as well as greater investment in remote service delivery models relating to DFSV, including to provide for service continuity and expansion to address the therapeutic needs of clients.