



NTCOSS

Northern Territory Council of Social Service

NTCOSS Pre-Budget Submission 2024 – 2025

19 December 2023

For more information about this submission, please contact:

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Foreword

The Northern Territory Council of Social Service' (NTCOSS) vision is for a fair, inclusive, and sustainable Northern Territory (NT) where all individuals and communities can participate in and benefit from all aspects of social, cultural, and economic life. NTCOSS is the not-for-profit member-based peak body for the NT's community and social services sector (the community sector).

The community sector is made up of community managed, non-government and not for profit organisations which work in community service delivery, sector development and advocacy. NTCOSS represents over 130 members, including peak bodies, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), large charities, small grassroots organisations and individual members.

The Northern Territory Government (NTG)'s 2024-25 budget comes after a big year of both social and economic challenges. Significant cost of living increases, a national rental and housing crisis, and critical levels of domestic and family violence and increased public understanding of the vital role of specialist frontline services, have impacted our communities and organisations across the Territory.

Many of the recommendations in this submission were in NTCOSS' 2023-24 pre-Budget submission. Repeat recommendations have been included in areas of outstanding need. The community sector in the NT has consistently called on the NTG to address long entrenched disadvantage and inequality in the Territory, including working in genuine and meaningful partnership with First Nations communities at all stages of the Budget development process.

NTCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide this pre-budget submission and looks forward to an ongoing collaborative relationship to support better outcomes for all Territorians,

Yours sincerely,



Wendy Morton

Acting Chief Executive Officer

19 December 2023

Summary of recommendations¹

Community sector sustainability

- Revise the current funding formula to include appropriate indexation measures and ensure the sustainability of the sector.

Territorians are safe

- Fully fund the ongoing implementation of Kids Safe, Family Together, Community Strong, the 10 Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the Northern Territory.
- Reallocate funding from purchased home based care, to funding early support for families and building capacity of foster and kinship carers.
- Ensure adequate, long-term funding provision for the implementation of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement.
- Increase funding for youth diversion programs, prioritising programs that are developed and operated by Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations.
- Allocate \$180 million over five years to the implementation of the NTG's Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Framework 2018-2028.
- Invest in the delivery of community-led and place-based specialist services (including social, emotional, legal representation and advice) to respond to violence in our remote communities.

Territorians have appropriate and secure housing

- Fund the development and implementation of minimum energy standards in rental accommodation.
- Significantly increase investment in the building and maintenance of urban and remote housing
- Commit to allocating 50% of the new housing in the NT from the Housing Australia Future Fund to victim-survivors of DFSV to aid in their recovery.

The Territory has a natural and built environment that supports a high-quality of life

- Invest in transitioning to the equitable and affordable generation, distribution, and retail of renewable energy across the NT.
- Fully fund the NTG's Climate Change Response Three-Year Action Plan.

Territorians are financially secure and have material basics

- Expand the NT Concession Scheme to include more low income Territorians.
- Identify and implement a suite of measures to improve transport affordability for people on low incomes in the NT.

¹ In recognition of the Northern Territory Social Outcomes Framework and the opportunity it provides to drive better outcomes by articulating shared goals for Territorians, this submission provides recommendations structured by the domains of the Framework where relevant. The full Framework is available at: <https://cmc.nt.gov.au/children/northern-territory-social-outcomes-framework>

Community sector sustainability

The community sector has been struggling with underfunding in recent years, leading to reduced and/or disrupted service delivery. Community services in the NT have experienced three key challenges over the last 5 years that have placed significant pressure on an already stressed sector. These are:

1. Lack of adequate (or any) indexation;
2. Application of the budget repair efficiency and savings dividends;
3. Failure to fully fund relevant wage increases.

The community sector is a major employer in the NT. With more than 20,000 workers and volunteers, the sector provides frontline services for Territorians experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability, including in remote areas where limited other service provision exists. It is vital that organisations keep their doors open, ensuring that the people of the NT can continue to access critical services.

Staff costs typically account for around 70-80% of organisational running costs. Community service providers are obliged, and acknowledge the importance of, remunerating their employees in line with recent relevant wage increases, and superannuation contribution guarantee increase. However, have not received additional funding to cover these increased costs. With the current cost of living crisis and increased costs across the board, an urgent boost in funding and the development of a longer-term sustainable funding model that recognises the need for services to keep up with demand, community needs, and inflation is essential to ensuring Territorians receive the support they need.

NTCOSS welcomes the recent commitment from the NTG to provide a base indexation increase of 5% to key frontline services sectors in the 2023-24 budget and a further 5% in the 2024-25 budget. Whilst this does not address the entire funding shortfall and will not apply to all community sector funding agreements, this is a welcome first step.

NTCOSS recommends that the NTG continue to work with the community sector to revise the current funding formula to include appropriate indexation measures and ensure the sustainability of the sector.

Territorians are safe

The initiatives explained below will help to achieve the following outcomes, which fall under the domain of 'Territorians are safe':

- NT children and young people have safe environments
- Territorians are safe from abuse and violence
- The justice system meets the needs of Territorians

Fully fund the ongoing implementation of Kids Safe, Family Together, Community Strong, the 10 Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the Northern Territory.

The Generational Strategy provides the framework for the NT's important reform work to improve the child and family system to help keep Territorian children and young people safe. The public release of Planting the Seeds, Action Plan 1 in this financial year was an important step to laying the foundations for the continued work in this space. Appropriately resourcing these actions will be integral for achieving the long term aims of Kids Safe, Family Together, Community Strong over the next 10 years.

NTCOSS recommends that the NTG, in partnership with the Commonwealth Government, commit to ongoing resourcing for the duration of the Generational Strategy.

Reallocate funding from purchased home based care to funding early support for families and building capacity of foster and kinship carers.

As highlighted in previous NTCOSS Pre-Budget Submissions, 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. Despite commitments to phasing out purchased home-based care for children in out-of-home care (OOHC), the NTG continues to spend a considerable amount of money on these services.

The 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% in 2031. To achieve this target in the NT, it is critical that the NTG increases investment in prevention and early family support programs, so that it matches the investment in child protection services.

The NTG's 2020 election commitment to transfer the purchase of private providers to family-based kinship and foster carers, into family support and early intervention services has still not been realised. Increased investment in family support programs will support children to grow up safe and cared for by family, in community and connected to culture.

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

Ensure adequate, long-term funding for the implementation of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement.

NTCOSS recommends that the NTG continues to fund the implementation of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement (AJA) and ensure funding is sufficient to achieve its vital goals. Of particular note, Alternatives to Custody (ATC), Law and Justice Groups (LJGs), and Community Courts (CC) programs and processes can significantly change our justice system and community for the better and should be funded accordingly.

To match the lifespan of the AJA, funding for LJGs and CCs should be extended until 2027. With a sustained financial commitment, the Aboriginal Justice Unit anticipates enhanced capacity for establishing and evaluating LJGs and CCs, proposing an accelerated rollout of 5 LJG and CC each year for the next 4 years, incorporating thorough evaluative analysis.

Recognising the proven success of the ATC program in Alice Springs in reducing recidivism and fostering positive social outcomes, we urge a strategic investment to expand this program. Allocation of both capital and operational funding will not only extend the existing program but also establish additional ATCs, with a specific focus on addressing Domestic and Family Violence (DFV).

To meet this commitment, NTCOSS proposes an investment of a minimum of \$40 million for ATCs over the next three years, aligning with recent funding for the Northern Territory Corrections Service.

Increase funding for youth diversion programs, prioritising programs that are developed and operated by Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations.

The over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the NT's criminal justice system remains a critical human rights issue, as highlighted in NTCOSS's 2023-24 Pre-Budget submission.

Successive royal commissions and inquiries have consistently recommended increased diversion from the criminal justice system as a strategy to address this over-representation.

The Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the NT specifically recommended that youth diversion programs in remote communities be established and managed in partnership with, or by, Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). This recommendation aligns with the findings of a review, which identified nine key principles for diverting young Aboriginal individuals away from the criminal justice system. The intrinsic alignment of these principles, including self-determination, cultural safety, and family-centred holistic support, with ACCO-led services underscores their instrumental role in realising a best-practice approach.²

Despite the proven effectiveness of diversion programs, such as significantly improved outcomes for participating young people compared to detention³, service providers often operate beyond capacity, unable to meet the growing demand driven by an increase in young individuals with complex needs. The Royal Commission found that this lack of resources has also inhibited the full and effective use of diversion by courts in the NT.

NTCOSS recommends that the NTG urgently increase its investment in ACCO-led youth diversion programs.

Allocate \$180 million over five years to the implementation of the NTG's Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Framework 2018-2028.

NTCOSS acknowledges the breadth of work the NTG is aspiring to undertake in regard domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) reduction in our communities, through the introduction and implementation of the various frameworks and actions plans introduced since 2018.

The NTG DFSV Action Plan 2 (2022-2025) contains important actions from prevention to response and healing. Unfortunately, DFSV Action Plan 2 was only funded with an additional \$20 million over two years from NTG and some further funds from the National Partnership Agreement.

In the ongoing Coronial Inquest into the deaths of four Aboriginal Territorian women at the hands of their intimate partners, evidence demonstrated that the DFSV Interagency Coordination and Reform Office (DFSV-ICRO) estimated that \$180 million over five years was the bare minimum amount of funding required from NTG begin to effectively prevent and reduce DFSV. Further, short term funding commitments do not enable sustainable outcomes and contribute to workforce challenges. The DFSV sector continues to work collaboratively with NTG in advocating to the Commonwealth Government for needs-based funding.

In the interim, NTCOSS recommends the NTG allocate \$180 million over five years to the implementation of the NTG DFSV Reduction Framework. Over the long term, ensuring adequate and secure funding across the breadth of the reform process gives us the greatest chance to succeed in reducing the prevalence of violence.

² Chris Cunneen, Sophie Russell & Melanie Schwartz (2021) *Principles in diversion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people from the criminal jurisdiction*, Current Issues in Criminal Justice

³ AIHW (2023) *Young people returning to sentenced youth justice supervision 2021-22*

Invest in the delivery of community-led and place-based specialist services (including social, emotional, legal representation and advice) to respond to violence in remote communities.

Challenges in addressing rates of DFSV in the NT are impacted by geographical factors. Effective service responses to support victims and users of violence in remote areas is a unique and complex challenge. While there is funding allocated to safe houses and for non-government organisations to provide DFSV reduction and crisis services in some remote communities, there is an undersupply of preventative and specialist service responses.

NTCOSS recommends that the NTG increase investment in community-led preventative services in remote communities and in specialist remote service delivery models, to ensure service continuity and capacity to meet the therapeutic needs of clients, including investment in adequate specialist legal representation for victim-survivors and users of violence to engage in Bush Court in remote locations.

Territorians have appropriate and secure housing

The initiatives explained below will help to achieve the following outcomes, which fall under the domain of ‘Territorians have appropriate and secure housing’:

- Territorians are living in the right home for the right time in the right location
- Housing costs do not put Territorians in financial stress

NTCOSS recognises NT Shelter’s specialist expertise in relation to housing and homelessness, and as such endorses their pre-budget submission.

Fund the development and implementation of minimum energy standards in rental accommodation.

Housing must be fit for purpose, including thermal comfort. Improved energy efficiency of all dwellings will enhance the health and wellbeing of residents, reduce energy bills, create jobs, reduce the NT’s carbon emissions, reduce demand for energy, and improve equity across the whole of the NT.

NTCOSS recommends that the NTG allocate funding to develop and implement a detailed plan to achieve minimum energy standards in rental accommodation in the NT and provide priority funding for community and public housing providers to upgrade existing housing to meet the required standard.⁴As part of a staged implementation plan, it is suggested that the NTG allocate funding:

- For the establishment and implementation of a detailed plan for achieving low energy buildings in the NT (the NT Low Energy Buildings Plan), including fulfilling the commitment to ensure all rental accommodation meets minimum energy efficiency standards;
- For community and public housing providers to do energy efficiency upgrades to existing dwellings and ensure new dwellings are built and maintained to ensure ongoing energy saving benefits;
- To establish a fund for low-income homeowners to undertake energy efficiency upgrades.

⁴ Note: Such work is consistent with NTG policy, work undertaken in other jurisdictions, the [Federal Government’s](#) commitment to work with all jurisdictions to increase energy efficiency standards across Australia and commitments made through the Building Ministers Meeting Trajectory For Low Energy Buildings and the Addendum to the Trajectory for Low Energy Buildings – Existing Buildings.

Significantly increase investment in the building and maintenance of urban and remote public housing.

NTCOSS supports proposals put forward by Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory (AHNT) Aboriginal Corporation, including to:

- Restore homelands recurrent funding to at least 2016-17 levels at a minimum
- Restore homelands capital funding to at least 2016-17 levels at a minimum.
- Work with AHNT, Land Councils and the Australian Government to re-establish Commonwealth Government funding for new homes on homelands.
- Work with the Australian Government and Land Councils to ensure remote Aboriginal people living with disability can access the NDIS.

Commit to allocating 50% of the new housing in the NT from the Housing Australia Future Fund to victim-survivors of DFSV to aid in their recovery.

DFSV is the main reason women and children leave their homes in Australia. 56% of clients presenting to homelessness services in the NT present due to DFSV compared to 36% nationally.⁵ Without access to safe and affordable housing, victim-survivors of DFSV must choose between homelessness and remaining with the abusive partner. Women and children affected by DFV are a priority cohort under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA).

NTCOSS recommends allocating 50% of the housing built under the Housing Australia Future Fund to be allocated to victim-survivors of DFSV. This would offer increased safety and autonomy to victim-survivors.

The Territory has a natural and built environment that supports a high-quality of life

The initiatives explained below will help to achieve the following outcomes, which fall under the domain of ‘the Territory has a natural and built environment that supports a high quality of life’:

- Territory communities are resilient to climate change
- NT infrastructure has no barriers to social inclusion

Invest in transitioning to the equitable and affordable generation, distribution, and retail of renewable energy across the NT.

Households on low incomes are often locked out of the clean energy market across Australia. The NT has unlimited solar resources that can be utilised to assist in addressing this issue.

NTCOSS calls on the NTG to implement a plan (including specific plans for local and regional areas) to increase generation of and access to renewable energy across the NT. This plan should include implementing a program to install solar on all social housing in the NT.

Fully fund the NTG’s Climate Change Response Three-Year Action Plan.

Climate change is one of the most significant issues facing people, communities, economies, and our planet. People experiencing disadvantage and poverty are the most vulnerable to its impacts and will

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2022-23, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/state-and-territory-summary-data-and-fact-sheets>.

become more so if the transition to a clean energy future does not specifically address existing inequalities. A well-managed transition to a cleaner economy is an opportunity to create a stronger, more just, equitable and sustainable NT. NTCOSS urges the NTG to embed equity and justice at the centre of emissions reduction, mitigation, and adaptation planning.

NTCOSS calls on the NTG to fully fund its Climate Change Response Three-Year Action Plan. Specifically, to provide funding to meet Priority 2.5 of the 3 Year Action Plan: Support Territorians to respond and adapt to the impacts of climate change. This includes prioritising the identification of risks to human health associated with climate change, with funding provided to a community health organisation(s) to work on this action. It is also recommended that the NTG work with the sector to develop climate change risk adaptation and response frameworks, and fund services to work with communities to develop adaptation plans, policy, and mechanisms to build resilience, and to achieve equity, as per Deliverable 2.5.2 of the Action Plan.⁶

Territorians are financially secure and have material basics

The initiatives explained below will help to achieve the following outcomes, which fall under the domain of 'Territorians are financially secure and have material basics':

- All Territorians can participate in the money economy
- All Territorians have affordable and secure food, water and energy

Expand the NT Concession Scheme to include more low income Territorians.

As in previous Pre-Budget submissions, NTCOSS reiterates our call for the NTG to invest in extending the NT concession scheme to all Commonwealth Concession Card holders and increase the availability of energy payment vouchers.⁷ This will assist households on low incomes and those living in poverty to meet cost of living pressures, and will address the adequacy and equity of concessions in the NT.

NTCOSS recommends that, in addition to this, the NTG works in partnership with the community sector to ensure all eligible participants are enrolled in the Scheme. The requirement for annual renewal should be changed, and NT Concession scheme members who receive permanent entitlements such as the Aged Pension and the Disability Support Pension, receive life-long membership of the scheme.

Identify and implement a suite of measures to improve transport affordability for people on low incomes in the NT.

Transport options, especially in regional and remote NT, are limited and expensive, and the cost of fuel in remote areas of the NT is exorbitant. Affordable and accessible transport services are essential for households experiencing vulnerabilities to access essential services, seek and hold employment, and to access affordable, fresh, and nutritious food.

⁶ Available at: https://depws.nt.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0004/904774/northern-territory-climate-change-response-3year.pdf

⁷ Note: this includes expanding eligibility to include people receiving JobSeeker and all people eligible for a Centrelink Health Card; ensure more eligible people are enrolled on the scheme; index available entitlements under the scheme; and, allow multiple NT Concessions Scheme members to apply their concession to the cost of electricity in the dwelling they are residing in.

Improving public transport and regional and remote transport networks across the NT would significantly ease cost of living pressures and improve food security across the NT, particularly for residents on low incomes. The creation of place-based transport plans for geographically different areas across the Territory, based on principles of access and equity, would assist in addressing this.

NTCOSS recommends investment in a review of regional and urban public transport in the NT, including the establishment of consultation and planning processes that encourage local engagement for the development of local and regional transport plans to facilitate an informed response to transport issues in the NT. Based on best practice approaches, the review should consider accessibility, affordability, equity, safety and carbon emission reduction. The review should also consider how to ensure Territorians in regional and remote areas can harness the benefits of low and zero emissions vehicles (LZEVs).

In addition, NTCOSS recommends the following proposals:

- NTCOSS calls on the NTG to remove what is effectively a surcharge on short term vehicle registrations, thus allowing low income Territorians to spread out vehicle registration costs across a full year.
- Fund on-demand transport services in remote NT and establish on-demand services to link areas to existing transport hubs.