



NTCOSS Pre Budget Submission 2023 – 2024

December 2022

FOREWORD

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 NT Government's (NTG) 2023/2024 budget will be delivered against a backdrop of rising prices, the possibility of global recession, continuing effects of the COVID pandemic and the impacts of climate change. These factors magnify the already high-level disadvantage and inequality in the NT.

The NTG must continue to provide funding to meet commitments made under formal agreements and frameworks, including Closing the Gap, the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, the NT Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (DFSV) Framework and the Climate Change Strategy.

To meet these challenges, NTCOSS urges the NTG to implement targeted measures that will help with the cost of living for Territorians doing it tough: people on low incomes, people on income support payments and people living in remote NT.

Many of the recommendations in this submission were in the 2022-23 NTCOSS 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.

The community sector is keen to work with the NTG to present a strong case to the Federal Government for needs-based funding provision for services and programs in the NT.

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THE NORTHERN TERRITORY SOCIAL OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK

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 promotes initiatives under the following Domains¹:

- Territorians are safe
- Territorians are able to live a healthy life
- Territorians have appropriate and secure housing
- The Territory has a natural and built environment that supports a high quality of life
- Territorians are financially secure and have material basics

THE VOICE OF OUR SECTOR

NTCOSS is an advocate for social justice, on behalf of people and communities in the NT who may be affected by poverty and disadvantage.

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.

Community services are underfunded, leading to reduced and/or disrupted service delivery. Community services in the NT have experienced three significant 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 dividend since 2019; and
3. Failure to fully fund the Equal Remuneration Order (ERO) related wage increases.

The community sector is the largest employer in the NT. With more than 20,000 Territory workers and volunteers, they provide 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 the National Wage Case 2022 increase and superannuation contribution guarantee increase, however have been advised that there will be no automatic indexation to NTG funding. In fact, community services that are not deemed frontline will receive a 0.33% funding cut thanks to the efficiency dividend, while those that are considered frontline will get a minimal 0.35% increase in funding.

An urgent boost in funding and inclusion of CPI in future funding contracts is essential to ensure these services remain open, accessible and fit for purpose.

¹ Northern Territory Government, (2021), Northern Territory Social Outcomes Framework

NTCOSS calls on the NTG to urgently provide additional funding to services to help cover the recent surge in prices of goods and services, on top of the impacts of long-term underfunding, and to revise the current funding formula to include the indexation linked to the NT CPI rate (as done in every other jurisdiction across Australia except South Australia). Formulas used to determine funding delivery should also ensure staff training and development, professional supervision, and service and program evaluations are included. All of these budgetary line items are essential to quality service delivery, staff retention and service planning.

NTCOSS recommends that NTG cease applying the efficiency dividend and provide an immediate 5.1% increase in funding to NT community services, and that future funding is indexed to the CPI.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Voice of our Sector

NTCOSS recommends that NTG cease applying the efficiency dividend and provide an immediate 5.1% increase in funding to NT community services, and that future funding is indexed to the CPI

Territorians are safe

- *Fully fund the implementation of the Generational Strategy Action Plan 1*
- *Ensure adequate, long-term funding provision for the implementation of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement*
- *Increase funding for youth diversion programs at a ratio of one case manager per ten young people*
- *Invest in crisis accommodation and support services (including social, emotional, legal representation and advice) for young people experiencing and using DFSV*
- *Reallocate funding from purchased home based care, which increased again in 2022, to funding early support for families and building capacity of foster and kinship carers*
- *Fully fund implementation of NTG frameworks, action plans and service systems introduced as part of the DFSV reduction reform agenda*
- *Maintain a coordinated response across the NTG that prioritises cross agency and Departmental approaches to DFSV*
- *Continue to resource long term initiatives that centre the lived experience and expertise of Aboriginal Territorians, and begin to invest in those that coordinate input from other intersecting populations, including CaLD communities, people/persons with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ people*
- *Invest in the development of a Theory of Change suite of documents, including a literature review and monitoring and evaluation framework, to support DFSV reduction in our communities (including the development of service delivery protocols)*
- *Invest in the delivery of specialist services (including social, emotional, legal representation and advice) to respond to violence in our remote communities*

Territorians are able to live a healthy life

- *Invest in community-based and holistic mental health care, co-designed and delivered by specialists (with an emphasis on Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services)*

Territorians have appropriate and secure housing

- ***Fund the development and implementation of a plan to meet energy efficiency commitments to new and existing buildings, including a program to assist low-income households to meet energy efficiency standards***
- ***Significantly increase investment in the maintenance of urban and remote public housing***

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***

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

NTCOSS acknowledges the NTG's provision of 5-year funding for the delivery of the Youth Voice NT project with NTCOSS in 2022, to enable in-depth and streamlined consultation processes with the youth sector across the NT; increased support for youth sector development and capability; strategic engagement with the youth sector and the NTG; representation of issues and opportunities relating to young Territorians at national forums and assist in changing the narrative around young Territorians.

Fully fund the implementation of the Generational Strategy Action Plan 1

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 first Action Plan will lay important foundations for the continued work in this space and appropriately resourcing these actions, including resourcing for community and sector participation, will be integral for achieving a new way of working in partnership to keep Territorians safe.

NTCOSS recommends that the NTG fully fund the implementation of the first Action Plan (2023-2025) for *Kids Safe, Family Together, Community Strong: 10-Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the NT* and commit to ongoing resourcing for the duration of the Generational Strategy.

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

NTCOSS recommends that the NTG continues to fund the implementation of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement and ensure funding is sufficient to achieve the vital goals of the Agreement. Of particular note, alternatives to custody, law and justice groups, Community Courts and the structural racism review can significantly change our justice system and community for the better and should be funded accordingly.

Increase funding for youth diversion programs at a ratio of one case manager per ten young people

As per NTCOSS' 2022-23 Pre Budget submission, the over-imprisonment of Aboriginal children and young people remains one of most significant human rights issues in the NT. Together with the sector, NTCOSS has made multiple policy recommendations to address this issue, which must be underpinned by evidenced and well-funded programmatic responses.

Across Australia, young people who participate in diversion programs have significantly better outcomes than those who go through detention. In the NT, 76% of young people returned to sentenced supervision within 12 months of being released from detention.² However, in many places

²AIHW, (2021), *Young people returning to sentenced youth justice supervision 2019-20*

diversion program providers are operating above capacity and are unable to appropriately meet the demand. Previous reports of remote service providers receiving insufficient funding to cover diversion for multiple communities across geographically large regions has not improved. With growing numbers of young people experiencing complex need and coming to the attention of service providers and police, the demand for diversion services is increasing.

Invest in crisis accommodation and support services (including social, emotional, legal representation and advice) for young people experiencing and using DFSV

Previous NTCOSS Pre-Budget Submissions have highlighted the lack of investment in the provision of services for young people experiencing and using DFSV, particularly in the crisis accommodation and service support area. The shortage of crisis accommodation available to young people experiencing DFSV, including young mothers and their children continues to be a major gap across the NT.

NTCOSS notes various NTG commitments to supporting young people through other measures, however, the lack of investment in DFSV specific crisis services is acute.

NTCOSS recommends identified funding for specialist providers and services to address this gap in provision. The need for such funding to be invested in multiple service regions is critical for increased access and program support for young people.

Reallocate funding from purchased home based care, which increased again in 2022, to funding early support for families and building capacity of foster and kinship carers

As previously highlighted in 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. In order 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 transferring 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.

Fully fund implementation of NTG frameworks, action plans and service systems introduced as part of the DFSV reduction reform agenda

NTCOSS acknowledges the breadth of work the NTG is aspiring to undertake in regard DFSV reduction in our communities, through the introduction and implementation of the various frameworks and actions plans introduced since 2018. The [NTCOSS Action Plan 2 NGO Consultation Report](#) (the Consultation Report) includes priority and focus areas to be included in the development of the next Action Plan, including program and training recommendations to meet the needs of the diverse communities across the Territory.

NTCOSS supports the introduction of the DFSV Interagency Coordination Reform Office (DFSV-ICRO) as a mechanism to coordinate and map DFSV needs and gaps across government and the community sector, including the development of a comprehensive budget cabinet submission aligning service responses to be delivered under Action Plan 2. NTCOSS notes that the NTG has already commenced investment into a small number of initiatives noted in the Consultation Report, however many are still unfunded.

The NTG must commit to fully funding all outcomes within Action Plan 2, as led by the work of the DFSV-ICRO. This increased investment, if matched by the Federal Government through continued advocacy to fund the Territory to meet need, not by population size, will assist us in accomplishing better outcomes in our communities. Ensuring adequate funding across the breadth of the reform process gives us the greatest chance to succeed in reducing the prevalence of violence in our communities.

Maintain a coordinated response across the NTG that prioritises cross agency and Departmental approaches to DFSV

The DFSV-ICRO is an innovative response to coordinating the Government's varied Departmental and agency responses in addressing DFSV. Ensuring that such a response is maintained, with input by the community sector on the develop of a long-term model, will benefit the Territory.

NTCOSS recommends investment in a long-term version of the DFSV-ICRO, to be determined in consultation with the specialist DFSV sector and broader community sector.

Continue to resource long term initiatives that centre the lived experience and expertise of Aboriginal Territorians, and begin to invest in those that coordinate input from other intersecting populations, including CaLD communities, people/persons with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ people

The investment in and commencement of the DFSV Aboriginal Advisory Board is a positive initiative taken by the NTG. Maintaining this investment and strengthening such an approach, in consultation and partnership with key stakeholders (particularly ACCO DFSV specialist organisations and other related peak bodies and community services) is important to accomplishing positive outcomes, in collaboration and partnership with communities and people impacted by DFSV.

Developing and supporting mechanisms that capture the experiences and voices of other minority and intersecting cohorts is also essential, including CaLD communities, people/persons with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ people.

Invest in the development of a Theory of Change suite of documents, including a literature review and monitoring and evaluation framework, to support DFSV reduction in our communities (including the development of service delivery protocols)

The need to capture the narrative of DFSV reform in our communities, gather evidence and evaluate programs across the spectrum of DFSV service delivery is critical. Building any such work within a strong evidence base, taken from literature, is central to this approach.

Service delivery protocols will create less over servicing of clients and ideally relieve pressure on services. The creation of service delivery protocols also aligns with principles established in the current National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032.

NTCOSS recommends that as part of this budget, the NTG directs investment into the creation of a comprehensive suite of documents that can be applied to both government and the community sector to address this current gap.

Invest in the delivery of specialist services (including social, emotional, legal representation and advice) 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 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 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 ARE ABLE TO LIVE A HEALTHY LIFE

The initiatives explained below will help to achieve the following outcome, which falls under the domain of 'Territorians are able to live a healthy life':

- Territorians have the best physical and mental health throughout their lives

Invest in community-based and holistic mental health care, co-designed and delivered by specialists (with an emphasis on Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services)

[Research](#) suggests that effective strategies that improve the mental health of First Nations Young people will reduce their criminalisation and in turn, their over-representation in the criminal justice system. There is need for access to ongoing care on a long-term basis, particularly in the mental health space, to appropriately address the impacts of trauma on young people and provide thorough care.³

NTCOSS recommends the NTG increase investment in culturally appropriate, community-based programs that provide holistic health supports for young people, such as specialist primary health care, social and emotional wellbeing support and obstetrics, particularly in remote areas of the NT.

³ A.Kerr and M.Pattison, Young Terrororians Report 2021
https://youthvoicent.org.au/information_clearing/young-terrororians-report/

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

Fund the development and implementation of a plan to meet energy efficiency commitments to new and existing buildings, including a program to assist low-income households to meet energy efficiency standards

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 for to develop a detailed plan for achieving low energy buildings in the NT and provide priority funding for community and public housing providers to upgrade existing housing to meet the required standard.⁴

As 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.

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

As identified in the Federal Government’s [Remote Housing Review](#), houses deteriorate quickly without ongoing maintenance and repairs⁵. Planned cyclic maintenance, with a focus on health related hardware and functionality of housing is essential to increasing the longevity of housing and improving health and wellbeing outcomes for people living in public housing.⁶ The current per-dwelling budget for repairs and maintenance on public housing in the NT is at roughly 50% of the equivalent per-dwelling budget for housing in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, in South Australia, which have similar social and environmental circumstances as in the NT.

NTCOSS recommends that the NTG doubles investment in the maintenance of urban and remote public housing, so that housing meets health and building standards, and will have the added benefit of improving local employment opportunities in remote areas.

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](#).

⁵ p2 Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, *Remote Housing Review: A review of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing and the Remote Housing Strategy (2008-2018)*, accessed at https://parliament.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/706683/TP-5-1.pdf

⁶ *ibid*

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 us in addressing this issue. NTCOSS calls on the NTG to develop and implement a plan (including specific plans for local and regional areas) to increase generation of and access to renewable energy across the NT.

NTCOSS also recommends that the NTG prioritise investment in a program to install rooftop solar photovoltaic (PV) panels on social and public housing dwellings. This would significantly benefit those on low incomes, providing savings on energy bills which can then be spent on other essential needs, and an increase in thermal comfort. The NTG can take inspiration from examples of successful models in other jurisdictions that are delivering positive social, economic and environmental impacts, including [South Australia’s virtual power plant](#); [New South Wales’ Solar for Low Income Households Trial](#); and [Western Australia’s Smart Energy for Social Housing trial](#).

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 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](#).

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.

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 centre public transport, as well as 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, and carbon emissions. 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).

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.