NTCOSS
Northern Territory Council of Social Service

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9 November 2026

Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development
Northern Territory Government
Via email: DHLGCD.Consultation@nt.gov.au

To the Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development,

Re: Submission to the Proposed Amendments to the *Residential Tenancies Act 1999*

The Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Proposed Amendments to the *Residential Tenancies Act 1999* (the Act).

As the peak body for the NT's social and community sector, NTCOSS represents a diverse membership of over 120 community-managed, non-government, not-for-profit organisations, peaks and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). NTCOSS supports the work of NT Shelter, as the housing specific peak body, and endorses their submission to this process.

The following submission responds to the NT Government's proposed changes to the Act that are intended to strengthen the management of anti-social behaviour in social housing.

Background and Context

Given that the proposed reforms are intended to support safer communities and a fairer, more sustainable social housing system, it is important to consider the current state of the Northern Territory's social and affordable housing system. As the peak body for the social and community sector, NTCOSS offers the following context.

For many people, social housing is the only alternative to homelessness

Social housing is a crucial component of the NT's housing system that provides many vulnerable and disadvantaged Territorians with safe, secure and affordable homes. Social housing is of particular importance in the NT, as the Territory not only has the highest private rental prices in the country (the average weekly rent for a three-bedroom house in the NT is $800)[1], but also the highest rates of poverty (nearly one-in-four Territorians live below the poverty line).[2] Without

[1] REIA (2026) Housing Affordability Report: June Quarter 2026, pp.6 and 10-17 (national/state tables).
[2] Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), Rate of people in poverty by location, Poverty and Inequality Partnership, https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/data/poverty/rate-of-people-in-poverty-by-location, viewed 19 October 2026.

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adequate social housing, people on low incomes have no other option but to rent in the increasingly unaffordable private market or face potential homelessness.

NTCOSS' recently released report on the cost of living in the NT highlights that renting in the private market is unaffordable for most low-income Territorians, including people living on income support payments or minimum wage.[3] In all major regional centres in the NT, renting a three-bedroom house would place a family reliant on income support payments or the minimum wage in rental stress. In Darwin, renting a three-bedroom house would require a sole parent on JobSeeker to use at least 78% of their weekly income on rent, leaving less than $200 per week for all other expenses.[4] Many social housing tenants are reliant on income support payments due to issues such as health comorbidities, disabilities, or experience of multiple stressors (such as mental health issues and experience of domestic violence) which prevent them from working a full-time job.[5] For these Territorians experiencing disadvantage, social housing is often the only feasible option through which to keep a roof over their heads and avoid becoming homeless.

Social housing shortages contribute to the high rates of homelessness in the NT

Despite the importance of social housing for disadvantaged Territorians, there are severe social housing shortages across the NT. As of 30 December 2025, there was a total of 5,413 outstanding applications for social housing across the NT, up 36.7% since 2017. Over the same period, the NT's social housing stock increased by only 3.9%, and consequently, wait lists for social housing now average 8-10 years for general applicants and up to 8 years for priority applicants.[6] Many low-income Territorians on waitlists for social housing have no option but to stay with friends and family or sleep rough on the streets, contributing to the NT's high rate of homelessness (which is almost 12 times the national average).[7]

For those who are evicted from social housing, the likelihood of becoming homeless is even greater. The NT Government's Homelessness Strategy for 2025-2030 highlights the clear link between people leaving social housing and entering homelessness, which is "*often due to a*

[3] Harding, Mollie, & Pilbrow, Jonathan (2026) Cost of Living in the Northern Territory: A Ten-Year Comparison 2016-2026. Northern Territory Council of Social Service. Available at: ntcoss.org.au/cost-of-living-reports
[4] Ibid.
[5] Freund et al., The health and wellbeing of Australian social housing tenants compared to people living in other types of housing, BMC Public Health, vol. 23, 2023; Freund et al., The wellbeing needs of social housing tenants in Australia: an exploratory study, BMC Public Health, vol. 22, 2022.
[6] Harding, Mollie, & Pilbrow, Jonathan (2026) Cost of Living in the Northern Territory: A Ten-Year Comparison 2016-2026. Northern Territory Council of Social Service. Available at: ntcoss.org.au/cost-of-living-reports
[7] Northern Territory Government Department of Children and Families, Northern Territory Homelessness Strategy 2025-2030: Background paper, 2025.

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failure to sustain at risk tenancies".[8] The Strategy goes on to say that this high-cost cycle of homelessness "*may be prevented through aiming to reduce exits from social housing*"[9], suggesting that the focus of policy reform should be on keeping vulnerable tenants in social housing, rather than streamlining the processes to evict them as the proposed amendments do.

The NT has the weakest rental protections of any jurisdiction in Australia

Australia's National Cabinet in 2023 agreed to the "Better Deal for Renters" – a set of nationally coordinated reforms that aim to make renting safer and fairer in all states and territories. The most recent review of state-by-state progress against these reforms, released by National Shelter and the National Association of Renters' Organisations (NARO) in November 2025, shows that the NT has made less progress towards implementing the reforms than any other jurisdiction, and that renters in the NT have the weakest protections in Australia. In particular, the NT:

- is the only jurisdiction that lacks any retaliatory eviction protections and allows rent increases every six months
- is one of only two jurisdictions (along with WA) that allows no grounds evictions and has made no progress towards implementing minimum quality standards for rental properties
- is one of only four jurisdictions (along with the ACT, Tasmania and WA) that does not restrict the collection of information from social housing tenants[10]
- is the only jurisdiction in the country without an independent bond board.[11]

It is against this context that the NT Government's proposed changes to the Act should be considered.

[8] Northern Territory Government Department of Children and Families, Northern Territory Homelessness Strategy 2025-2030, 2025, p. 15.
[9] Ibid.
[10] National Shelter and NARO, The Rental Report: A 2-year performance report on the progress of A Better Deal for Renters, 2025.
[11] Darwin Community Legal Service, Bond Disputes, viewed 20 October 2026, available at: https://www.dcls.org.au/factsheets-tenancy/bond-disputes.

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Recommendations for Additional Changes to Housing Policy and Legislation

The Background and Context section of this submission highlighted that the NT has severe social housing shortages and has the weakest rental protections in Australia. To address these issues, NTCOSS urges the NT Government to implement the following changes to housing policy and legislation.

NTCOSS recommends:

1. Amend the *Residential Tenancies Act 1999 (NT)* to ensure all Territory renters have at least the same rights and protections as other jurisdictions as per the Better Deal for Renters, including:
    - Establish an independent Residential Tenancies Bond Board.
    - Implement minimum standards in rental housing.
    - Increase protections against rent increases.
2. Introduce a rental affordability scheme to replace the now expired National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS).
3. Set NT-specific targets for social housing developments, developed through transparent needs assessments.
4. Apply inclusionary zoning mechanisms to embed affordable and social housing within new developments.

Comments on Proposed Amendments to the Act

The proposed amendments are intended to 'strengthen the management of anti-social behaviour in social housing'. The key change is to allow administrative terminations of tenancies, that is, allowing social housing landlords to terminate certain social housing tenancies without first obtaining an order from NTCAT.

NTCOSS acknowledges that there are situations where termination may be necessary, such as when there has been severe harm caused to neighbours, staff or co-residents. The department and community housing organisations should have the tools and pathways available to them to effectively manage tenancies, including when things go wrong. However, we are concerned that by focusing on the process of termination, opportunities are missed to strengthen preventative supports and 'upstream' approaches that can assist before a tenancy reaches crisis point. Preventative approaches reduce the high cost impact on 'downstream' crisis responses such as homelessness services, the health system and justice responses.

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The NT Government has indicated a strong intention to proceed with these amendments. As such the discussion below highlights areas of particular concern to NTCOSS and recommendations that would help mitigate the negative impact on tenants if the amendments are to proceed as proposed. For detailed discussion of proposed amendments, please refer to NT Shelter's submission.

The proposed amendments would shift the responsibility for obtaining independent scrutiny onto the tenant after a termination notice has been issued.

While there is the option to appeal to NTCAT, this is not likely to be an option that is easy to access for many social housing tenants. Tenant support services are already strained, and tenants may not have the resources or knowledge of the NTCAT system to lodge an independent appeal.

Further, the consultation paper provides insufficient detail on the avenues through which tenants can challenge or avoid eviction, and the support services they will have access to following eviction. The reasons to evict are detailed with a lot of specificity (pages 6-7 of consultation paper), but the ways in which people can be supported to sustain their tenancy, or be supported after leaving, are left vague (pages 9-10 of consultation paper). If the proposed amendments are to go ahead, then further detail should be included in the support services offered to tenants.

In addition, the list of factors which decision makers are required to consider (page 7 of the consultation paper) should be expanded to include the tenant's personal circumstances, and the hardship that eviction would cause to the tenant.

The proposed amendments will increase demand for support services that are already strained.

Placing the burden of engaging with NTCAT with tenants, who may not have the capacity, resources or knowledge of the NTCAT system to lodge an independent appeal, will increase demand for legal and tenancy support services.

Further, the proposed changes will likely lead to increased evictions, which will increase demand for short-term housing and homelessness services. If the NTG is committed to introducing the proposed amendments to the Act, the funding for support services must be increased to account for this expected increase to demand, and to ensure that disadvantaged Territorians are not pushed into further hardship.

Any changes to the Act should be accompanied by transparent reporting and review of outcomes.

The stated aim of these reforms is to support safer communities and a fairer, more sustainable social housing system, and strengthen tenant accountability while continuing to support tenants

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to sustain their tenancies wherever possible. An independent review of implementation and outcomes should be conducted to assess the impact of these amendments against these stated aims. Public reporting should include response times, support provided, tenancies sustained, termination and review outcomes, repeat incidents and the housing outcomes of displaced households.

NTCOSS recommends:

1. Retention of independent scrutiny before a tenancy is terminated.
2. Include specific and clear grounds for termination, evidence thresholds and consideration of proportionate responses. This includes explicit safeguards for vulnerability and circumstances outside a tenant's reasonable control.
3. Ensure appropriate levels of support services are available. This includes ensuring adequate resourcing and workforce capacity within the Department to provide timely early intervention and tenancy management services, as well as resourcing for non-government support services, including specialist legal and tenancy advice services and specialist homelessness services.
4. Publicly report on data points related to this legislative change and conduct an independent review of implementation and outcomes.

Thank you for considering our submission.

Yours sincerely,

Trish Connolly

CEO NTCOSS