



Dear Chief Minister,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with the 2017 – 2018 Northern Territory Council of Social Service Inc (NTCOSS) Pre Budget Submission (PBS).

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

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

The past few months in the NT has seen a change of government, which has resulted in significant changes in regards to policy direction and the relationship between the Northern Territory Government (NTG) and the NGO sector. While we are in early days of policy and partnership development, there is expectation that election commitments made by the NTG will be implemented.

NTCOSS put forward four election asks in the lead up to the 2016 Northern Territory election. Of these, two were agreed to in entirety and parts of the other two were supported. It is on this basis that we are putting forward a slightly different PBS to previous years but one which links directly to the NTCOSS' election asks, as well as the election asks of the Making Justice Work coalition.

We acknowledge that commitments made in the lead up to the election will take considerable resourcing over the next few years. We believe, however, that prompt investment in areas such as Out of Home Care (OoHC) and an Aboriginal Justice Agreement will lead to far better outcomes for children, young people and their families across the NT. This will also decrease the long term pressure on areas such as our justice and health systems.

At the time of writing this PBS, the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory is underway. Because of this timing, we have made no direct reference to additional resources for youth justice. NTCOSS, like many, await the recommendations from this inquiry. We are hopeful of significant change in the youth justice space and will have expectation of appropriate resources being directed to this area to implement recommendations.

### **Resourcing the Out Of Home Care transition to NGOs**

The Northern Territory Government committed to outsourcing Out of Home Care to the NGO sector over a 7 year transition period. This commitment includes establishing an Aboriginal controlled OoHC sector.

NTCOSS understands that the NTG intends to begin this work in 2017. There will need to be considerable resources directed toward building the capacity of the Northern Territory NGO sector in order to prepare for this transition. This will need to include working closely with Aboriginal people and Aboriginal organisations to develop culturally appropriate services. There is currently only one Aboriginal controlled organisation in the NT funded for OoHC, yet close to 85% of children currently in care are Aboriginal.

As part of the transition process the NTG needs to work closely with the NGO sector to develop safeguards and quality management systems such as accreditation for the OoHC sector (no matter who is delivering the service) to ensure the safety of children.

While the transition will require additional resources in its initial stages, we anticipate savings will be made for the NTG when the reliance on private providers is reduced. With appropriate recruitment and support for foster carers and kinship carers, there will be a reduction in turnover of placements, resulting in better outcomes for children. Additional identification, recruitment, training and support of foster carers will also reduce the need for residential care which is an expensive and less preferred model of care. While we expect the financial costs to reduce over time, we believe the real benefit is in better outcomes for children in care.

### **Cost of Living**

NTCOSS welcomes the recent announcement by the new Northern Territory Government to undertake a review into the Northern Territory Pensioner Carer Concession Scheme (NTPCCS). NTCOSS believes it is imperative that the scheme is targeted to those households who are most in need. We note that NTCOSS has been invited to be a part of the Expert Reference Group guiding the review.

The electricity, water and sewerage concessions provided under the NTPCCS do make a difference for those who are eligible to access them. We have seen a rise in the cost of utilities in recent years, and utilities bills are unaffordable for many of the low income households that do meet the eligibility criteria for the NTPCCS, increasing the risk of disconnection of utilities and financial hardship.

Many low-income Territorians miss out on the utilities concessions because of the tight eligibility criteria (e.g. concessions not extending to all health care card holders). A single person on Newstart receiving \$524.40 (per fortnight) does not qualify for the NTPCCS. This inequitable approach to utilities concessions needs to be addressed as a matter of priority, to ensure people currently missing out receive the vital support they require.

The Northern Territory should follow that majority of Australian states which cover all health care card holders including those on Newstart and the Youth Allowance.

### **Aboriginal Justice Agreement**

We acknowledge the commitment from the NTG to develop and implement an Aboriginal Justice Agreement in the Northern Territory. This commitment was reinforced by Attorney General and Justice Minister Fyles in her address in parliament on 19 October 2016:

*"...the Aboriginal Justice Agreement should complement and enforce our government's commitment to a 10 year roadmap for returning local decision making and control to communities in many areas, including justice. The Aboriginal Justice Agreement must be driven by the Territory's Aboriginal community, not preconceived or political priorities."*

An inclusive and strong engagement process throughout all parts of developing, implementation and monitoring of an AJA are fundamental to the success of the agreement. There needs to be a resource commitment to the consultation, development and the implementation of the AJA. This commitment will need to be across several budget cycles.

### **Commitment to a review of past and current alcohol initiatives to inform a comprehensive, evidence based, long term Alcohol Plan for the NT**

We acknowledge the new NTG has already committed to phasing out Alcohol Mandatory Treatment facilities and re-implementing the Banned Drinkers Register. NTCOSS believes this is a positive start to reducing alcohol related harm across our community.

Harmful alcohol use across our community contributes to the significant burden on our health system, increasing imprisonment rates, as well as the instances of domestic and family violence, child abuse and neglect, and homelessness. Reducing harm is a key part of improving the lives of children and families in the Northern Territory.

The NT needs a bi-partisan approach to developing a long-term alcohol strategy to reduce the harm to our community. This must be developed from an evidence-based health perspective, be culturally appropriate, and have evaluation of effectiveness built into the design. The Strategy must include targets for the reduction of alcohol related harm and a commitment to resourcing them. It should also commit to implementing the recommendations of the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory Select Committee on Action to Prevent Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (2015) and the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs report on the harmful use of alcohol in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (2015).

Again these commitments require additional resources, however expenditure in areas such as health, homelessness, justice and child protection will be reduced if we can significantly reduce alcohol related harm.

We look forward to working with you on these key areas of reform and would be happy to discuss in more detail.

Yours sincerely,



Wendy Morton  
NTCOSS Executive Director