



PRE BUDGET SUBMISSION

2015 - 2016

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Thankyou for the opportunity to provide you with the Northern Territory Council of Social Service Inc.(NTCOSS) Pre Budget Submission for 2015-2016

NTCOSS is a peak body for the community sector in the NT 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 who 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.

NTCOSS shares the Northern Territory Government's (NTG) vision of a prosperous economy, strong society, balanced environment and a confident culture as highlighted in 'Framing the Future'. The NTCOSS pre-budget submission focusses on elements that we believe are crucial if we are to achieve this vision. At the core is the need to invest now to change outcomes for many vulnerable Territorians.

Change is not achievable without recognition that we are currently failing to meet the needs of so many, especially Aboriginal Territorians. The figures are stark and confronting – the NT has the highest rate of homelessness especially youth homelessness (this is currently one in ten young people), we incarcerate more people (including Aboriginal people), the highest rate of teenage pregnancy, there are currently over nine hundred children and young people in out of home care (around 85% of these are Aboriginal) and we drink more alcohol per capita than anyone else in Australia.

If we are to truly 'Develop the North', then we must ensure that we grow the NT fairly so everybody reaps benefits from new projects and policies. One idea put forward by NTCOSS over the past few years is for the NTG to commit to the development of social impact statements. This is one way to ensure that the NTG consider the impact on those who are most vulnerable at every stage of new developments.

The 'Framing the Future' vision of a strong society identifies three key components for supporting the most vulnerable in the NT. The community sector has long supported the need to focus on integrated, responsible services, strong collaboration and early intervention and prevention. This submission has a focus on these areas as well as some other key items for supporting those on low incomes such as recommendations for lowering the cost of living.

Wendy Morton
Executive Director

Table of Contents

Prevention/ Early Intervention	4
Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD)	4
Child Protection	5
Homelessness	5
Domestic and Family Violence	5
Prevention/ Early Intervention: Recommendation	5
Services to the most vulnerable that lead to long term outcomes and self sustainability	6
Building capacity of Aboriginal organisations	6
A vibrant non-government sector	7
Service integration including flexible contracts, longer term contracts.....	8
Services to the most vulnerable that lead to long term outcomes and self sustainability:	
Recommendations	8
Social Impact	9
Poverty Impact Statements	9
Social Return on Investment.....	9
Social Impact: Recommendations.....	9
Cost of Living.....	10
Provide mechanisms to enable low-income households to improve energy and water efficiency. 10	
Research and trial potential market reforms that create incentives for the provision of water and energy service models.	10
Ensure all Territorians eligible for utilities concessions can access those concessions.....	10
Research on the expenditure pattern of households who use pre-payment meters	11
Consumer Advocacy resourced in the NT.....	11
Cost of living: Recommendation	11
Housing	12
Housing: Recommendations	12
Transport.....	13
Transport: Recommendations	13
Health.....	14
Health: Recommendation	14
Bibliography	15

Prevention/ Early Intervention

While government has a clear role to assist those who are at the tertiary end of the spectrum such as providing statutory child protection services, hospitals and prisons, there must also be a strong focus on providing prevention and early intervention services. Research clearly shows the economic, health and social benefits of prevention of such circumstances as family breakdown, alcohol and drug misuse, homelessness and preventable diseases. We know, from the evidence in the field that no single approach works for all. Changing policies, regulations and laws to alter community environment can work to reduce problems with sensitivity to and inclusion of cultural values of the target community to enhances effectiveness.

Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD)

While the NTG has committed significant resources to its Mandatory Alcohol Treatment regime, this only provides intervention services for a small number of people with chronic alcohol issues at the extreme end of the spectrum. There is an urgent need for an overarching alcohol strategy that addresses comprehensive supply, harm and demand reduction measures. The key is for new policies and programs to be developed through evidence-based policy and legislation.

We support an increased focus on the three pillars of the National Drug Strategy, in particular demand reduction by working to change the culture around drinking for the whole population of the NT. This could be achieved by working from a public health model to raise awareness and through developing and implementing demand and harm reduction strategies along side supply reduction measures. Demand reduction focuses on changing a culture around tobacco, alcohol and drug consumption and could include promoting key messages at territory level and local events, especially in partnership with key stakeholders and non-government agencies.

There is a need for more to be done to create supportive physical and social environments such as encouraging smoking, alcohol and drug free community and social events and embarking upon long-term health promotion campaigns.

Given the social determinants of health, health inequalities and risk and protective factors NTCOSS consider young people, women (especially with regard to pre-pregnancy, pregnancy, and through motherhood), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and socially and economically disadvantaged people as the priority population groups to be targeted for AOD prevention.

Child Protection

The Department of Children and Families has narrowed its focus to the statutory end of child protection. While we support the need to provide services, for children and families at the crisis end of the continuum, this will not prevent further children from entering the system. As Framing the Future highlights, we need strong collaboration between the NGO sector, government and other key stakeholders in the design and delivery of services to the most vulnerable that lead to long-term outcomes and self-sustainability. Outcomes that ensure children are safe, healthy and achieving social, emotional and cultural wellbeing.

Homelessness

The NT has the highest rate of homelessness in Australia including the alarming statistic that one in 10 young people are homeless. A recent NT Homelessness Summit called for the NTG to address factors that contribute to homelessness through increased investment in prevention and early intervention services and to support 'at risk' households in both social and private housing to maintain their tenancies.

Further to this, the NTG needs to increase consultation with stakeholders, monitor the impact of policy and consider the impact of long-term poverty, incarceration and violence in order to better inform policy direction. The Summit called upon the NTG to support a 'whole of government' response to address gaps in current social service provision and meet the needs of vulnerable people and at risk populations through preventative measures.

Domestic and Family Violence

NTCOSS congratulates the NT Government for the launch of the Domestic and Family Violence Reduction Strategy. Inclusion of the Family Safety Framework and the integrated referral system, SupportLink, is welcome. It is hoped that the strategy will place high priority on, evidence base, prevention of domestic and family violence programs as well as providing a response to victims when an assault has occurred. Part of the framework should also include the establishment of a Domestic and Family Violence Fatality review process. Acknowledgment of the impact of violence on children and creating a cultural shift in community attitude towards violence is essential. NTCOSS believes the NT has the opportunity to be a leader in our response to domestic and family violence.

Prevention/ Early Intervention: Recommendation

- **Ensure a greater focus and sustainable resourcing of preventative and early intervention services**

Services to the most vulnerable that lead to long term outcomes and self sustainability

Whilst there are specific funding needs in most sectors, we support the development of overarching, whole of government plans to inform key areas for investment. The plans should articulate clear goals, strategies and funding priorities over time, which, in turn, provide clarity, guidance and a shared understanding of the roles of all stakeholders. Last years PBS also prioritised this need and identified some specific sectors in greatest need.

We acknowledge that since then, some of the sectors identified beginning work on developing a strategic plan including alcohol and other drugs, domestic and family violence, housing, suicide prevention and mental health. We look forward to contributing to the development of these plans and urge the NTG to develop overarching strategic plans in other key areas including child and family well being, disability, justice reinvestment and dementia.

Building capacity of Aboriginal organisations

NTCOSS supports the need to build capacity of Aboriginal organisations throughout the NT. This could be through the continued development of existing aboriginal controlled organisations, developing new Aboriginal controlled organisations or where appropriate, partnerships between Aboriginal and mainstream organisations. We believe that this approach will ensure communities can develop strong, sustainable relationships with the service provider, provide a culturally competent service and deliver better long term outcomes for Aboriginal people.

NTCOSS and the Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT (APONT) have been working together for 2 years on a project to improve the relationship between mainstream and Aboriginal organisations with the intent of mutually building the service delivery of aboriginal and mainstream organisations. The project developed a set of principles that many organisations have acknowledged a commitment to.

Both the Northern Territory and Federal Government have a role to play. This can be through the wording/language and intent of funding contracts to work in Aboriginal communities (such as the inclusion of exit plans), not funding mainstream organisations to work in communities where they have no current relationship, and a willingness to invest in true, long-term partnerships.

If we are to reduce the number of children in out of home care, strengthen families, improve health and housing options, local aboriginal organisations are a key part of the solution.

This connects strongly to the need for better place based planning. A one-sized fits all approach rarely meets needs in the NT especially for those in remote and regional centres. Funding contract guidelines need to better allow for local communities to develop and implement local solutions.

A vibrant non-government sector

The Framing the Future Blueprint document acknowledges the need for a vibrant non-government sector as a partner to strengthen the delivery of services. This is strongly supported by NTCOSS as the sector can deliver flexible, quality and cost effective services.

Not for profit, social and community sector organisations, as valued partners of the NT Government, play a vital role in providing services for the most disadvantaged as the basis of a resilient society. For organisations to deliver services that strengthen individual and community well-being, service contracts must meet the full cost of service provision, including wages, administration, evaluation and implementation of reforms and staff recruitment. Unfortunately, the ERO was closely followed by reduced funding from the Department of Health, with no indexation, for organisations to undertake client work during the 2013-14 financial years. There remains a lack of clarity about whether indexation will automatically be paid annually by all departments.

Another area in which improved partnership with the 'not for profit community sector' is required relates to the ever increasing challenge of 'reform and compliance'. While effective regulation and processes provide opportunities to improve the structure and outcomes for 'not for profit community sector organisations', it must be recognised that it takes time and investment to realise benefits in terms of real accountability and transparency. The NT Government can assist the sector to implement reforms and compliance measures by funding supports that provide advice, resources and information on a range of reform initiatives, including strategic management, change management, evaluation, standards and policy development. Accreditation and compliance with standards are becoming increasingly common throughout the sector yet the assistance required by organisations to meet these standards is not always recognised through support or additional funding.

'Not for profit community sector organisations' in the NT have a significant number of mature age workers who will retire from the workforce in the near future, a transient workforce in a competitive environment, and in a growing economy drawing workers out of lower paid occupations. One way to address this issue is to grow our own local workforce, in particular, an Aboriginal workforce. This will improve cultural safety for clients, increase local ownership of service provision, provide local employment, and support economic independence and emotional wellbeing. Providing support to meet the extra complexities faced by Aboriginal workers, such as trauma, living conditions, and competing loyalties

when working with families, cultural obligations, flexible training, and acknowledgement of professional boundaries requires long-term investment and commitment.

NTCOSS believes that a strong NGO sector is vital to achieving a strong civil society and a prosperous economy as outlined in 'Framing the Future'.

Service integration including flexible contracts, longer term contracts

An ongoing frustration for many NGO's is the short-term nature of funding contracts. This impacts significantly on organisations' ability to recruit and retain a quality workforce and more importantly, it impacts on the quality of service provision to clients. Short-term contracts also often fail to recognise the long-term nature of change and complexity of work. There is also a need to better establish a whole of government approach to issues and to include, the NGO sector in this process with the aim to work more effectively together. This will improve service delivery to clients through improved referral processes and improve service integration.

Services to the most vulnerable that lead to long term outcomes and self sustainability: Recommendations

- **Develop overarching strategic plans in all key policy areas**
- **Develop and support building the capacity of Aboriginal Organisations**
- **Fund the full cost of service provision so that organisations can deliver services that strengthen individual and community well-being**
- **Increase the whole of government approach, including the NGO sector on key issues and where appropriate increase service contract timeframes**

Social Impact

NTCOSS is concerned at the potential for social justice considerations to become marginalised in the Developing the North planning. It is crucial that the principles of social inclusion be honoured in policy initiatives designed within the portfolios of economic development, telecommunications, and mineral exploration. The philosophy of social inclusion requires a whole-of-government approach to ensure that the idea is not simply consigned to the traditional silos of health, education and housing. To ensure that the notion of social inclusion is not submerged beneath the weight of other policy considerations, NTCOSS strongly recommends that the government adopt a system of Social Impact Statements (SIIS) or Poverty Impact Statements to ensure that the interests of disadvantaged Territorians are not overlooked.

Poverty Impact Statements

‘Poverty Impact Statements’ are a key feature of the Irish Social Inclusion Strategy. They require government agencies and local authorities to assess policies and programs at the design, implementation and review stages. The process is designed to assess the likely impact that new policies and programs will have on poverty, and on inequality that are likely to lead to poverty. The Department of Health and Human Services in Tasmania, several years ago, identified the importance of Social Impact Statements in “providing the framework within which predictions can be made regarding the potential positive and negative impacts of a proposal while it is at the planning stage” so that desired outcomes will be maximised and the costs or losses to communities are minimised.

Social Return on Investment

At times the NTG provides funding to private sector businesses or for profit organisations as they believe this will strengthen the NT economy. Where this funding is provided in the future, we encourage the NTG to ensure that there is a social return on this investment. For example, providing funds to a local tourist operator may require them to employ a percentage of long-term unemployed, people with a disability, young people or Aboriginal people in return. It may also include a contribution to infrastructure in the NT – such as the development of housing, building, maintaining roads or the development of local social services. An example where the NTG is supporting the private sector for a social return is through the Real Housing for Growth initiative where lower cost housing is being developed to increase the housing affordability and availability for lower income Territorians.

Social Impact: Recommendations

- **Incorporate Social Impact Statements as part of all new Northern Territory Government policy and program design**
- **Develop Social Return on Investment strategies**

Cost of Living

The cost of living continues to impact on those in the Northern Territory on low and middle incomes. For employers in the NGO sector, the cost of living in the NT is at times the reason that staff leave the sector to go and work in higher paid government roles, they leave the sector altogether or they leave the NT. For those living on low incomes, it is almost impossible to afford to rent and pay the associated costs. NTCOSS has been producing Cost of Living reports over the last 12 months that show the rise in everyday essentials. There are many recommendations in the reports that the NTG could implement to alleviate financial stress.

Provide mechanisms to enable low-income households to improve energy and water efficiency.

This could take a number of forms and include initiatives such as:

- Incentives for private and public housing landlords to improve energy and water efficiency;
- The establishment of low-interest loans and/or more rebates for solar power, solar hot water - which need to be targeted in a way to be accessible to low income households; and
- Access to information, education and workshops to enable households to take control of their energy and water usage, including increasing the ability of tenants to advocate to landlords to report damage that may contribute to higher living costs. This could also include education for landlords.

Research and trial potential market reforms that create incentives for the provision of water and energy service models.

The development of partnerships with utility providers, appliance retailers and finance companies to create bundled water and energy services that improve affordability could be one way to move forward in this area. For example, the development with the Power and Water Corporation an appliance retailer and a credit union working jointly to provide a 'bundled refrigeration service' consisting of an energy efficient fridge with electricity and maintenance, all for a fixed cost per month.

Ensure all Territorians eligible for utilities concessions can access those concessions

The development of a comprehensive marketing strategy and support for customers, including prepayment customers, to access concessions they may be eligible for is critical. This would need to include information and resources in a number of local and other languages – both oral and written.

Research on the expenditure pattern of households who use pre-payment meters

The Household Expenditure Survey (HES) data for electricity does not disaggregate for standard meters vs. prepayment meters. It is important to determine if there are significant differences in expenditure patterns by prepayment customers that might adversely impact on low-income households in the Territory. This would help determine if there are any differences as a result of climatic conditions (in remote areas), household composition, and types of housing, comparing prepayment meter users with standard meter users.

Consumer Advocacy resourced in the NT

If disaggregation occurs as a result of Government decisions around the splitting up of the Power and Water Corporation, funding for consumer advocacy must be established to ensure the necessary consumer protections are put in place to accompany such reforms. Such advocacy would include incorporating consumer perspectives on network price determinations (transmission and distribution), and consumer engagement in the power of choice recommendations relating to the introduction of smart meters, amongst other measures, to find the best solutions for the Northern Territory. The electricity industry is well resourced to provide their perspective on the myriad of issues in the energy space, but it can be easy for consumer interests to be overlooked. The consumer must have a legitimate voice in a civil society.

Cost of living: Recommendation

- **Any policies aimed at assisting Northern Territory households with utilities bills should be targeted primarily at low-income households.**

Housing

A number of policy and operational changes are required as a matter of urgency to address issue of housing availability and the cost of housing – particularly rental properties. In this light NTCOSS supports the recommendations contained in the NT Shelter Pre-Budget Submission to the NT Government, “Key Messages from NT Shelter 2014/15 ‘Opening doors in the housing system’”; and highlights a number of these recommendations and others here

Housing: Recommendations

- Invite broad stakeholder input to an NT Housing Strategy which provides a framework to manage the public housing portfolio as well as for the growth of alternate social housing models provided by the NFP housing sector.
- Establish a revised framework for the Tenancy Support Program which includes an embedded trauma informed and culturally appropriate client centred system for the provision of living skills as well as a range of required support services
- Lobby the Federal Government for a new long term Homelessness Funding Agreement where funding is based on the NT having homelessness rates that are 15 times the national average.
- Support one new youth homelessness project which is implemented as a best practice ‘Housing Plus’ approach.
- Ensure that the ‘Real Housing for Growth’ target of 2000 affordable dwellings for the NT is met by 2016 and a centralised registration portal for prospective affordable housing tenants is provided.
- That the Northern Territory Government and mainstream housing providers genuinely engage with Aboriginal communities to develop appropriate housing and support models to address issues of overcrowding, sustaining tenancies, managing visitors and greater Aboriginal control of housing and associated services in their communities.
- Introduce home loan schemes which support home ownership opportunities for lower income households and extend the Stamp Duty Concession for first home buyers of existing homes.
- Incentivise levers that generate affordable housing through the planning system.

Transport

A range of solutions are required to address the high expenditure on transport costs borne by Territorians facing transport disadvantage, which are exacerbated by the significant transport issues experienced by the Northern Territory. NTCOSS provided a recent submission to the Northern Territory Government Transport Roadmap consultation that has discussed the following recommendations.

Transport: Recommendations

- **Review of public bus routes, timetables and off peak concessions to facilitate a more effective service to reduce the significant reliance on taxis and minibuses for many low income Territorians.**
- **Alter requirements for minibuses, so that fares are regulated in order to reduce the cost burden on low income Territorians. Consideration needs to be given to establishing a fare structure based on a set rate per kilometre, which all minibus companies are subject to.**
- **Provision of consumer education regarding the use of taxis, so that consumers are aware of the tariff rate system.**
- **Continue to support commercial bus services to ensure existing services remain, and can expand to increase regularity of services and establish services where none currently exist.**
- **Work to improve disability accessibility on all commercial buses to make them a more viable option for people with disability.**
- **Explore options to open up the Ghan as a more viable transport option for Territorians**
- **Consider development of a light rail system in the Northern Territory.**
- **Improve access to plane services across the Territory**
- **Support the development of self sustainable community transport options by looking beyond public bus systems and commercial transport to address the transport needs of Territorians.**
- **Make improvements to road infrastructure and provision of community vehicles (for services) which are appropriate to meet the road conditions.**

Health

That the NT Government needs to work with the Federal Government to find alternatives to its proposed budget measure which will see increases in user charges for essential health services, including GP payments, medicines and tests.

It is vital to make further amendments to the Patient Assistance Travel Scheme to improve access to health services, including the coverage of dental services.

But most importantly NTCOSS believes that early intervention and prevention education and strategies are the key to reducing the high costs borne by the medical and health system.

Health: Recommendation

- **Northern Territory Government to increase health funding towards preventative and early intervention measures**

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