

Changing the homelessness paradigm – an integrated approach for the Northern Territory

*Department of
Housing and
Community
Development.*

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PwC's Indigenous Consulting



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1 Introduction and methodology

1.1 Project methodology

The Department of Housing and Community Development (the department) commissioned a high level needs assessment for the homelessness services sector in the Northern Territory (NT). The project was to identify service gaps and priority needs of Territorians experiencing, or likely to experience, homelessness.

The methodology involved the following:

- desktop review of available population and service usage data to identify a quantitative basis for needs in the main regional areas of the NT;
- review of documented qualitative needs of homelessness people in the NT;
- consultation with the non-government organisations (NGOs) and not-for-profit homelessness service providers across the NT;
- consultation with relevant NT government agencies;
- analysis of the above data and information findings for key population groups;
- high level literature review of the current evidence about what works in homelessness service provision nationally and internationally; and
- high level review of the department's Tenancy Support Program.

While the project was to consider the whole of the NT, it has predominantly focused on the needs and gaps in services in the major urban centres. The department is undertaking other processes to inform the allocation of future funding and reform of housing and related support services in major remote communities.

1.2 The case for change

The department recognises that, for too long, the rate of homelessness in the NT has been too high and that a different approach is needed in both urban and remote areas. Planning based on need is a critical step towards understanding the current population needs and challenges, and can inform future funding and service delivery strategies.

The non-government and not-for-profit sectors have been providing services to Territorians who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, for many years. The sector will remain a critical partner with the NT Government in future planning and service delivery strategies. It is time, however, for the the department to move from simply being a funder of homelessness services, to being a full partner in the delivery of an integrated, person-centred system of housing, accommodation and support.

An integrated system would include programs and services operating within and outside the homelessness sector, connecting across the usual government portfolio boundaries and be based on a *Housing First* approach. The *Housing First* approach provides a system where there is 'no wrong door' and a spectrum of wrap around supports are provided to individuals and families based on assessed needs.

An integrated homelessness system should include a range of housing and accommodation options and strategies that will prevent homelessness, as well as housing options and supports that will assist those who have become homeless.



All services should have a focus on achieving sustained wellbeing for service users.

This will mean a new way of doing business for both the department and the homelessness services sector.

2 Homelessness in the Northern Territory


2.1 Service priorities

Six population groups represent the main users of homelessness services nationally and in the NT. The process of this project reflected the significance of the needs of these groups, which are as follows:


- young people presenting alone or with children;
- adults;
- families;
- women and children escaping domestic and family violence;
- people exiting care and custodial arrangements; and
- people experiencing mental health issues.

While there are commonalities, there are also demographic and regional differences in the NT homeless population, including the following:

- the majority of homeless people in the NT are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander;
- throughout the NT, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the majority of homelessness service users;
- service users are disproportionately women;
- more than half of the homeless population are under 24;
- the main reasons people seek assistance from homelessness services relate to domestic and family violence, housing crises, financial difficulties and time out from family or other personal situations;
- more than half of all homelessness service support periods are to adults accompanied by children;



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 74.69% of the NT homeless population.



52% of the NT homeless population is under 24.

- while 8% of service users are reported to have a mental health issue, service providers report much higher mental health service needs;
- service users tend to be staying longer in homelessness services, or are receiving support for longer periods, than was the case in the past; and
- the Barkly region demonstrates a high demand for services, with only three funded specialist homelessness services in the region. It has the highest rate of service use at 10.5%, compared to only 1.8% in the greater Darwin region.



2.2 *Service gaps*

The following summarises some of the key issues underpinning the need to reframe the approach to the provision of services for those who are, or are at risk of being, homeless.

- Most accommodation for young people experiencing homelessness is in Darwin and Alice Springs. There are no specific accommodation services in the Barkly or East Arnhem regions.
- Other than women’s shelters and refuges, there are no crisis or transitional accommodation options for adults in the Barkly or East Arnhem regions.
- Unless they are victims of violence or under 24, there are few accommodation options for single women.
- There are few accommodation options for men with accompanying children.
- There are few accommodation options for people who may be eligible for bail if they had accommodation.
- There are few accommodation options for people exiting prison or other residential settings.
- The department's Tenancy Support Program is not well targeted. The length and type of support offered varies markedly and is not necessarily linked to client need.
- If someone has been able to find affordable housing after experiencing homelessness there are some specialist support services that can continue to assist them, however the majority of support services are linked to accommodation services.



There are some excellent examples of collaboration between service providers. These collaborations have resulted in the capacity to meet needs that would otherwise have been unmet. There are some examples of service innovation and flexibility in delivery models, sometimes inconsistent with the formal funding agreements, but sanctioned by a funding agency in recognition of the needs being addressed.

The following table summarises the needs and gaps identified through the data analysis and consultation process.

Client group	Need	Service system gap
Young people presenting alone or with children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable housing with support as needed, e.g. allow to fail. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable housing options • Range of integrated supports • Accommodation options in the Barkly region • A ‘Foyer’ type model e.g. affordable accommodation with on-site services such as training and employment, health, wellbeing and social participation.



Client Group	Need	Service System Gap
Adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services for single women that is not domestic and family violence related. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable housing options and support.
Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accommodation for men with accompanying children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable housing • A “Common Ground” approach e.g. permanent housing and outreach services.
Women and children escaping domestic and family violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shelter for women who have male children 12 years and over • After hours case management support • Services that support women and children to stay in their home while perpetrators are accommodated elsewhere. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After hours case management support.
People exiting care and custody	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post release planning • Accommodation options for people who could be on bail and are homeless • Post release affordable and longer term housing • Leaving care plans • Leaving care support beyond 18 years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post release planning and support coordination • Bail hostels • ‘Foyer model’ for youth leaving care.
People experiencing mental health issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After hours support • Co-management of clients with long term needs • Integration with drug and alcohol services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After hours crisis care • Engagement and collaboration across services • Outreach programs involving family connections.
General system needs		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longer term funding agreements to provide greater certainty and stability for services. • Greater flexibility in service model funding to enable providers to respond to emerging needs. • More streamlined performance and reporting requirements so providers can spend more time and resources on service delivery. • Greater integration between specialist homelessness services and other services working with people experiencing homelessness. • Greater sharing of information between services and across government funding agencies. • A system that is based on action learning – it is safe to fail and try again. 		



2.3 *Funding arrangements*

Currently the NT and Australian Governments fund homelessness services through a multitude of agreements and programs, and through different agencies. These funding agreements are currently being renegotiated. As a result, for the last few years, most services have been receiving only one year grant agreements. This process is contrary to the NT Government's *Good Practice Guidelines for Funding Non-Government Organisations* and has resulted in a level of frustration within the non-government sector.

Working collaboratively, service providers and government can unlock innovation in service design and address emerging gaps. There are also cost effectiveness benefits when funding agreements are longer term, more outcome focused, and there is streamlined reporting.



3 Future service directions

3.1 Needs-based planning

Needs-based planning is a systematic process to identify needs and gaps in the capacity of services to meet needs. Needs-based planning also informs decisions about how, when and where to allocate finite resources to fill those gaps and get the best outcomes from investment.

There is room for improvement in how data is collected and used in the specialist homelessness services sector to better support future needs-based planning processes including:

- revise the data collection requirements for tenancy support services, to focus on agreed service outcomes;
- data collection about referrals, assessments and the outcomes for people who have received housing, accommodation and support services;
- development of key performance indicators and measures for alternative housing programs such as head leasing and affordable housing; and
- coordinated cross government data collection on client outcomes, including about clients exiting care institutions and correctional facilities.

3.2 Outcome-based funding

There has been a significant move towards outcomes-based funding in health and community services away from funding the delivery of defined outputs nationally and internationally. Outcome-based funding has been proven to deliver more person-centred services that are flexible and respond to local needs. The NT non-government sector supports this direction and is keen to work with the department to define the core outcomes to be achieved for people at risk of homelessness and those already experiencing homelessness.

There is also acknowledgement that there are common high-level outcomes relevant to all homeless or at-risk groups, even though the delivery systems and services will vary in urban and remote areas and for different population groups.

3.3 Housing First model

There is strong support for an NT system that is based on the Housing First principles. Figure 1 below provides an overview of the Housing First model. This approach prioritises getting those experiencing homelessness into permanent independent housing as quickly as possible, and then offering the support services they may need to remain stably housed. The fundamental principle is that people are better able to move forward with their lives if they are housed. In the NT, many people cycle through homelessness services or remain in transitional accommodation for long periods of time. A Housing First approach would enable them to be assisted more comprehensively and sustainably.

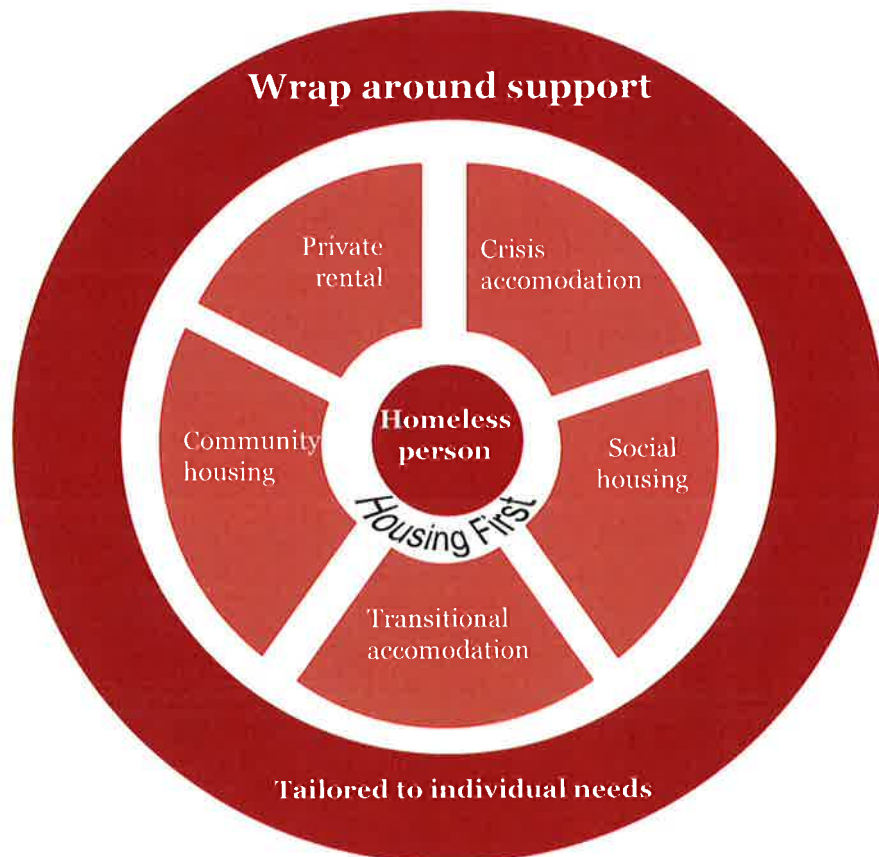
An obvious barrier to moving forward with a Housing First approach in the NT is the lack of availability and range of permanent housing and accommodation options. There is a number of crisis and short-term housing options in most urban regions, and a growth in transitional housing options filling the gap while people wait to be eligible for social housing, or to be accepted into a private rental property. Long wait times for access to social housing, however, and the high costs associated with private rental have meant that access to permanent and more stable housing have



been limited. Overcrowding is also a major issue in both urban and remote communities. The lack of sufficient housing in remote communities can impact negatively on people's health, education and capacity to maintain employment. The lack of affordable housing can result in people moving to urban and regional centres and cycling through available homelessness services.

The department has already committed to increasing the number and type of social housing in the next five years, to creating more community and affordable housing options and to increasing the number of beds in remote communities. What is required is one housing system inclusive of these housing and accommodation options, supported by coordination mechanisms is required.

Figure 1: The Housing First model



A key feature of systems that operate with Housing First principles is that there is 'no wrong door'. This premise means that wherever a person enters the system, regardless of which service they may contact, they can access any services that are needed. Service access is based on a streamlined assessment and referral approach to ensure that people receive the services they need at any given time.

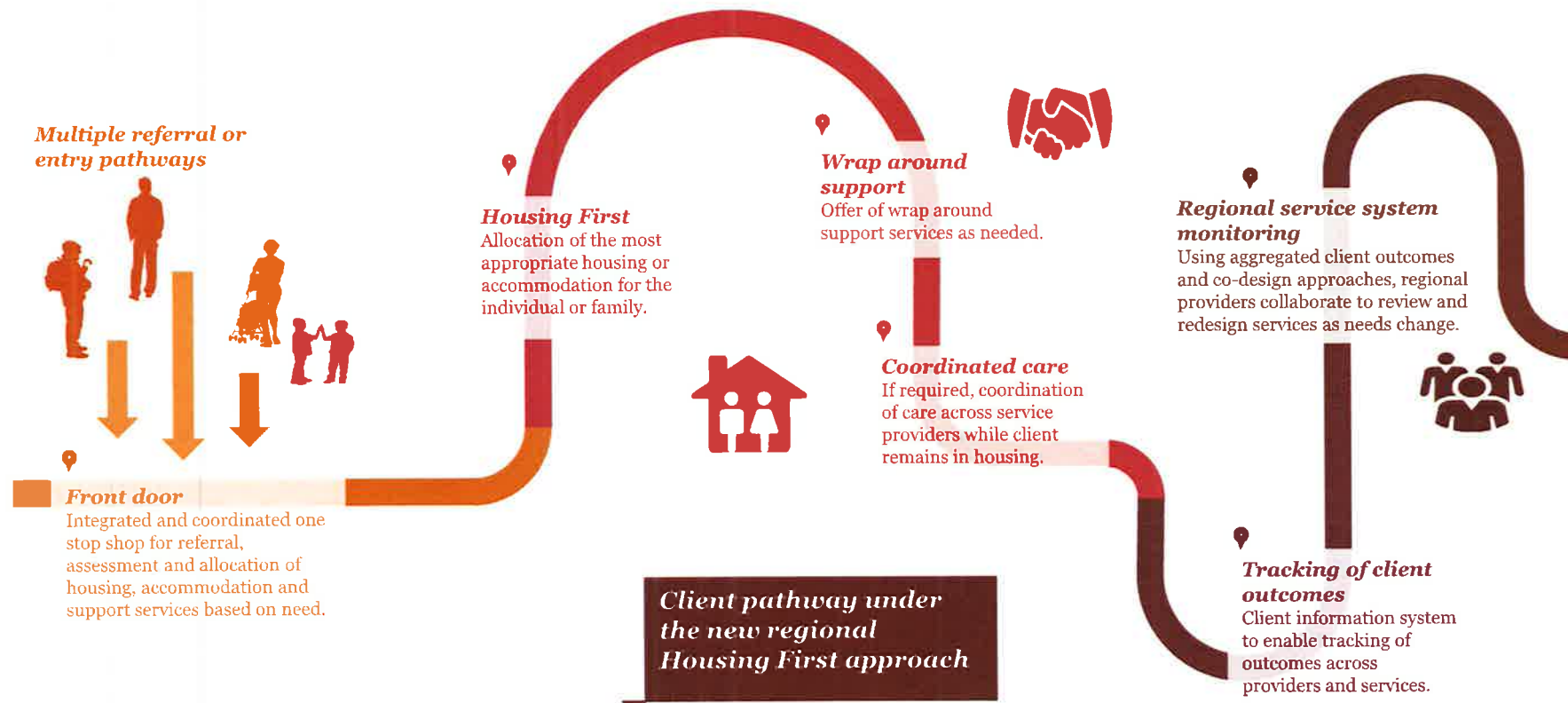
The department has already committed to and commenced planning for an integrated 'one stop shop' approach to provide wrap around services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This is consistent with a 'no wrong door' approach. The Homelessness Response Group (HRG), currently working with a small number of high-risk people in Darwin, is another example of this approach in which some larger NGOs manage homelessness and other support programs collaboratively and in a flexible manner to provide accommodation and support services tailored to need.



Another critical component of a Housing First approach is the capacity to provide tailored wrap around supports that are appropriate to cultural, demographic, geographic and other specialised needs. Support capability already exists in all urban regions, both within and outside of the homelessness sector. Although there are service gaps, these support services would be more effective if provided to people in stable permanent housing.

The client pathway in this type of service system is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Client pathway



3.4 Regional commissioning

The challenge is to build on the programs and services already in place, maximise the expertise in the non-government and not-for-profit sector, leverage the opportunities arising from the department's new housing and accommodation commitments, and redesign a more effective service system across the NT.

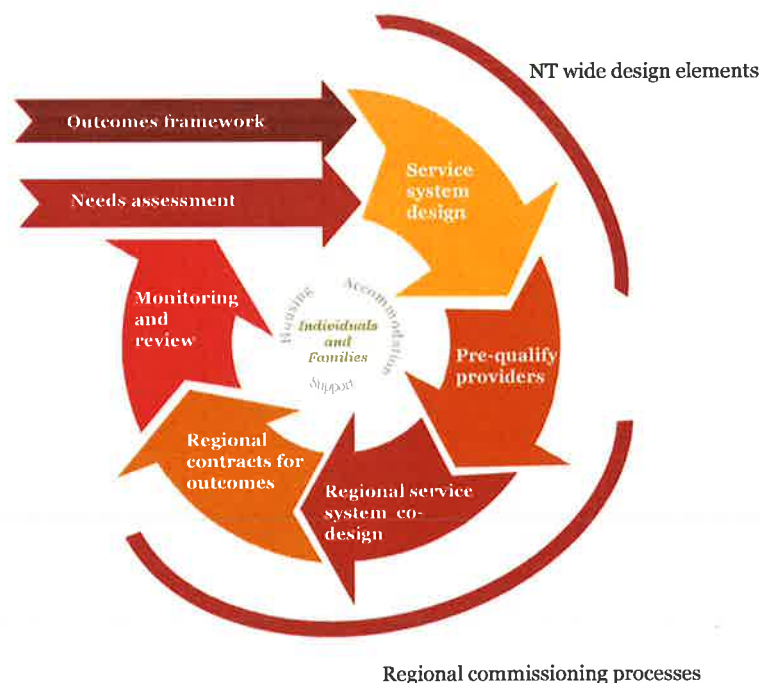
Implementation of an outcomes-based regional commissioning model would deliver the new Housing First based system with 'no wrong door' and wrap-around support services.

Redesign of services is possible and can begin immediately. While it would be preferable to have a longer-term national funding agreement in place to underpin this reform, progress can be achieved while negotiations continue.

The current method of contracting for homelessness services has been based, for the most part, on traditional procurement and competitive tendering methods. An alternative approach to designing and funding services is service commissioning, a concept well-established in the health sector nationally and internationally. Commissioning is an ongoing process of needs assessment, service design and market or provider analysis which informs service contracting, monitoring and evaluation. It is collaborative and outcome-focused and, if implemented on a regional basis, can address regional characteristics and housing needs.

Organisational and cultural change will be required across the housing service system to implement this new system. Change will need to occur within the non-government sector, within the department and within related government agencies and services. Development of a new outcomes framework, linked to the needs assessment, is the first priority. As shown in Figure 3 below, clearly defined system outcomes inform the NT wide system redesign and guide planning activity at the regional level where place-based service co-design processes will have the most impact.

Figure 3: Homelessness system redesign process





4 *Implementing the new approach*

Using a staged and consultative approach, the following steps would establish an NT commissioning system for homelessness services.

Development of the outcomes framework

The existing outcomes framework could be redeveloped with input from the non-government sector.

Integrated data collection system

An integrated data collection system will be needed to track referrals and outcomes at the individual level and support aggregation for regional and system wide outcome measurement and performance monitoring. So that people only have to tell their story once, the department could explore additional modules for the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC) tool, already in use in other jurisdictions, and consult with other NT Government agencies about shared data collection tools.

NT wide service system design

The department could work with the non-government sector to design the NT wide service system elements, including the following:

- **Refocus the department's Tenancy Support Program** – As a priority, commence redesign of the department's funded Tenancy Support Program to become a wrap around support service for people living in a range of social and private housing and accommodation services, with referral through the integrated 'front door'.
- **Integrated 'front door'** - The department has committed to developing an integrated 'one stop shop' approach to provide wrap around services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This system can operate as the 'front door' and point of coordination, referral and assessment for people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. This work should continue with engagement from the non-government and not-for-profit service providers and government agencies.
- **Housing and accommodation options** - The department has begun planning for the transfer of more social housing dwellings to the community sector, in addition to the development of new social and affordable housing. Priority could be given to ensuring gaps in housing options in Katherine and Tennant Creek are addressed as priorities in this process. Decisions about the management of this housing could be included as part of the regional service co-design process discussed below.
- **Funding and resource pools** - Allocate a funding and resource pool for each region. This may include current housing and accommodation stock, funding for the integrated 'one stop shop', the planned housing and accommodation transfers and developments, and the funding of wrap around support services.



Provider pre-qualification

The department could manage a pre-qualification process inviting service providers to be involved in the regional commissioning process. Once pre-qualified, providers could become part of the regional service co-design. Funding agreements arising from that process would be tailored, streamlined and outcome-focused.

Regional service system co-design

The department could begin trialling regional commissioning in a number of regions where there is evidence of existing service provider collaboration.

Pre-qualified providers in each of the trial regions would be invited to participate in service system co-design workshops with providers in other sectors working with people experiencing homelessness. Providers would discuss and negotiate the respective agreed roles they could play in the delivery of the new regionally designed system, and how the NT wide service system components would be connected and delivered as well. The regional service design would take account of the population group needs in that area, and the range of accommodation options available and planned, some of which may be for specific priority groups and some which may be more broadly available.

The development of the type and nature of wrap around supports would also take account of the population needs and where possible, leverage other specialist programs to avoid duplication and maximise available expertise.

New funding agreements

The roles and responsibilities of providers would then be translated into revised funding agreements that detail the agreed system outcomes and measures linked to the outcomes framework and reflect the regionally designed system. Some providers may choose to undertake certain functions on behalf of the system, while others may provide one or more specific services within the integrated system.

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