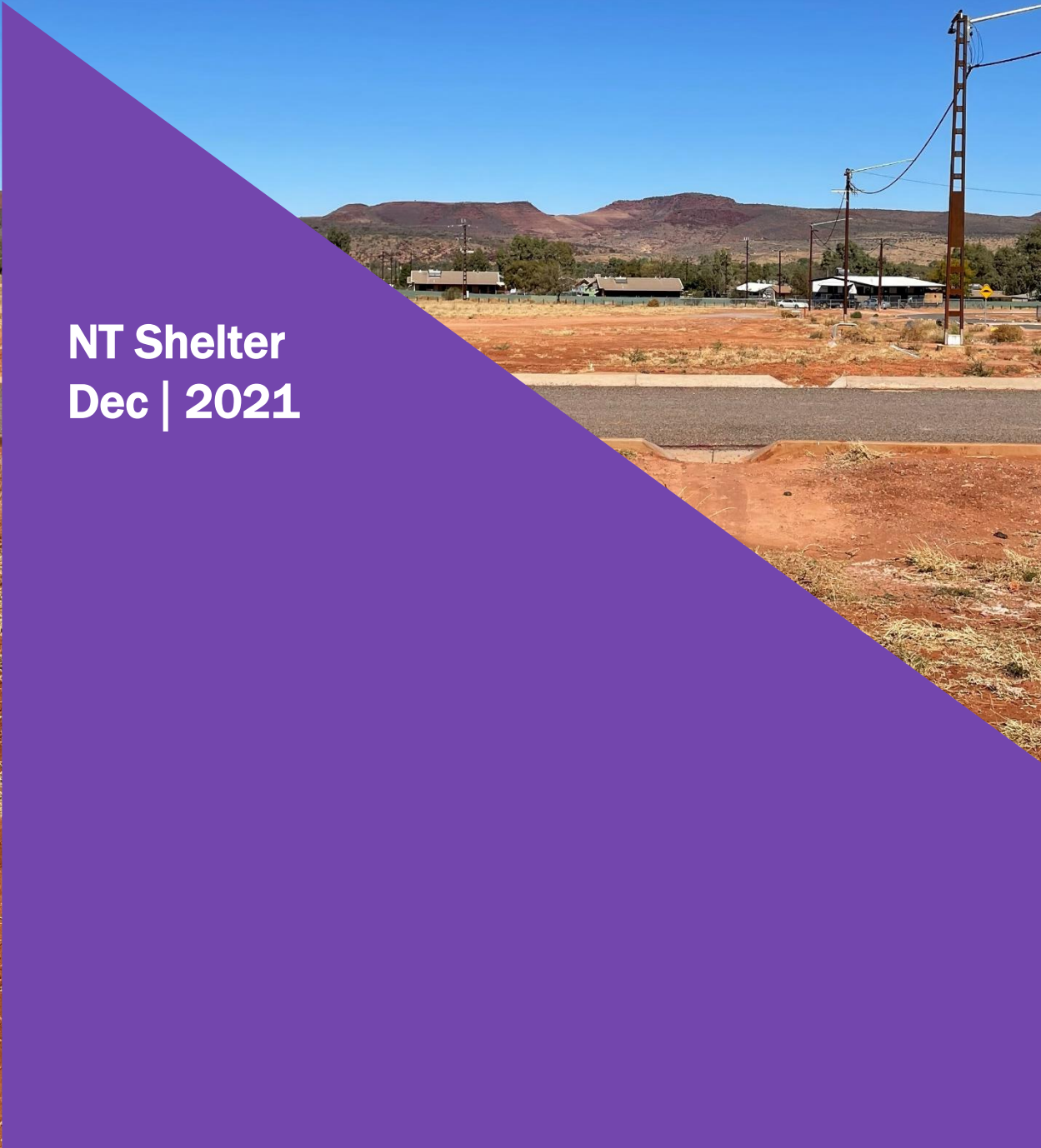




PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION NT Budget 2022-23

NT Shelter
Dec | 2021



NT Shelter Inc. is the Northern Territory’s peak body for affordable housing and homelessness. Our members are specialist homelessness services, community housing providers, and other stakeholders engaged with the provision of appropriate and affordable housing for all Territorians.

NT Shelter receives operational funding from the Northern Territory Government through the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHaC).¹

NT Shelter’s members:



NT Shelter acknowledges the Traditional Owners and custodians of country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea, and community. We pay our respects to them, their cultures, and their Elders past, present, and emerging.

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NT Shelter Key Asks for NTG Budget 2022-2023

Section	Ask
Urban Housing Asks	<p>Key Ask #1: The Northern Territory Government must be highly engaged and connected with work by The Territory Economic Reconstruction Commission around population and housing, and housing investment initiatives at the national level. All opportunities to participate in the design of a national housing strategy and associated systems (e.g. NHFIC, financing models etc.) must be actively taken to ensure that program design is fit-for-purpose for the Territory’s unique housing challenges and demographics, and to ensure that we are well-placed to pounce on any early investment opportunities.</p> <p>Key Ask #2: The Northern Territory Government develop and release a Social and Affordable Housing Supply Plan that provides credible annual housing supply targets, financing partners and a pathway to halving the Urban Public Housing Waitlist by 2035.</p> <p>Key Ask #3: The Northern Territory Government increase its annual investment on 2021-22 levels on repairs, maintenance and upgrades of urban and remote housing infrastructure, ensuring every available house is tenanted to the greatest extent possible. KPIs for timely completion of urgent and non-urgent repairs should be set and continuously improved.</p> <p>Key Ask #4: The Northern Territory Government commit to reducing the average number of days to occupy an urban public housing asset by 25% on 2020-21 levels by June 2023, by 50% on 2020-21 levels by June 2024, and achieve parity with registered community housing providers (14 days or 42 days according to maintenance level) by June 2026.</p>
Region-Specific Asks	<p>Key Ask #5: The Northern Territory Government identify and commit to opportunities for further investment in medium and long-term accommodation for women in the Northern Territory’s regional centres.</p> <p>Key Ask #6: Northern Territory Government financially support the development of a locally led project to identify the most cost-effective, fit-for-purpose visitor accommodation model for short-stay visitors to Katherine. This to take into account the forecast demand having regard to what has been learned from COVID-19, visitor mobility and homelessness trends. Expected cost = \$100K.</p> <p>Key Ask #7: The Northern Territory Government work across Government departments and in partnership with non-Government organisations to stand up an assertive outreach model in the Northern Territory’s regional centres. Expected annual cost = \$600K.</p>

Community / Affordable Housing Asks

Key Ask #8: Before demolition or asset sales occur, the Northern Territory Government to provide registered community housing the opportunity to discuss potential alternatives to demolition or market sales of assets. This may well avert a net loss of public housing assets, with every available house invaluable in meeting growing housing need. Community housing providers to be offered first right of refusal on planned sales of public housing assets at fair value.

Key Ask #9: Fund a registered community housing provider to work with community, neighbours, building sector, architects etc. to design a new housing model to replace the current Shier Street public housing complex in The Narrows and optimise the liveability and amenity of the space.

Key Ask #10: The Northern Territory Government, in the absence of a viable alternative scheme that is funded by the Commonwealth, allocate the equivalent of the current NRAS entitlements attached to the 1,045 eligible properties participating in the scheme, in perpetuity. This will ensure that there is no reduction in the Northern Territory's affordable housing stock. **Estimated Cost = \$8.72 million per annum (unadjusted for indexation over future years).**

Key Ask #11: The Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities develop a joint strategy with NT Shelter and its members to secure the commitment of Commonwealth, State and ACT governments for a revised funding model under the NHHA based on need rather than population share or, otherwise, a mechanism that provides more equitable funding for the Northern Territory having regard to our unique and disproportionate housing and homelessness challenges.

Private Rental Asks

Key Ask #12: The Northern Territory Government, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, finalise and implement mechanisms that provide safeguards against unreasonable increases in rent for tenants, having regard to measures already in place in other Australian jurisdictions.

Remote Housing Asks

Key Ask #13: The Northern Territory Government to reach an agreement with the Commonwealth Government, Aboriginal Housing NT, Land Councils and other key stakeholders on the continuation of a National Remote Housing Partnership Agreement past 2023, including a commitment that there will be joint government investment in housing until the last required house in remote Northern Territory is built.

Alignment with NTG Housing and Homelessness Strategies

	Pathways out of Homelessness Northern Territory Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023					A Home for all Territorians Northern Territory Housing Strategy 2020-2025			
	Priority Action 1	Priority Action 2	Priority Action 3	Priority Action 4	Priority Action 5	Strategic Objective 1	Strategic Objective 2	Strategic Objective 3	Strategic Objective 4
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Overview

The Northern Territory is at a crossroads with housing and opportunity knocks.

We open our Pre-Budget Submission, Budget 2022-23 with a statement that may be somewhat surprising: never has the housing situation in the Northern Territory been more perilous for Territorians, *regardless of their level of income*. At the same time, there has never been a better opportunity to set the Territory on a new trajectory that will slowly, but surely, address our current and future housing needs.

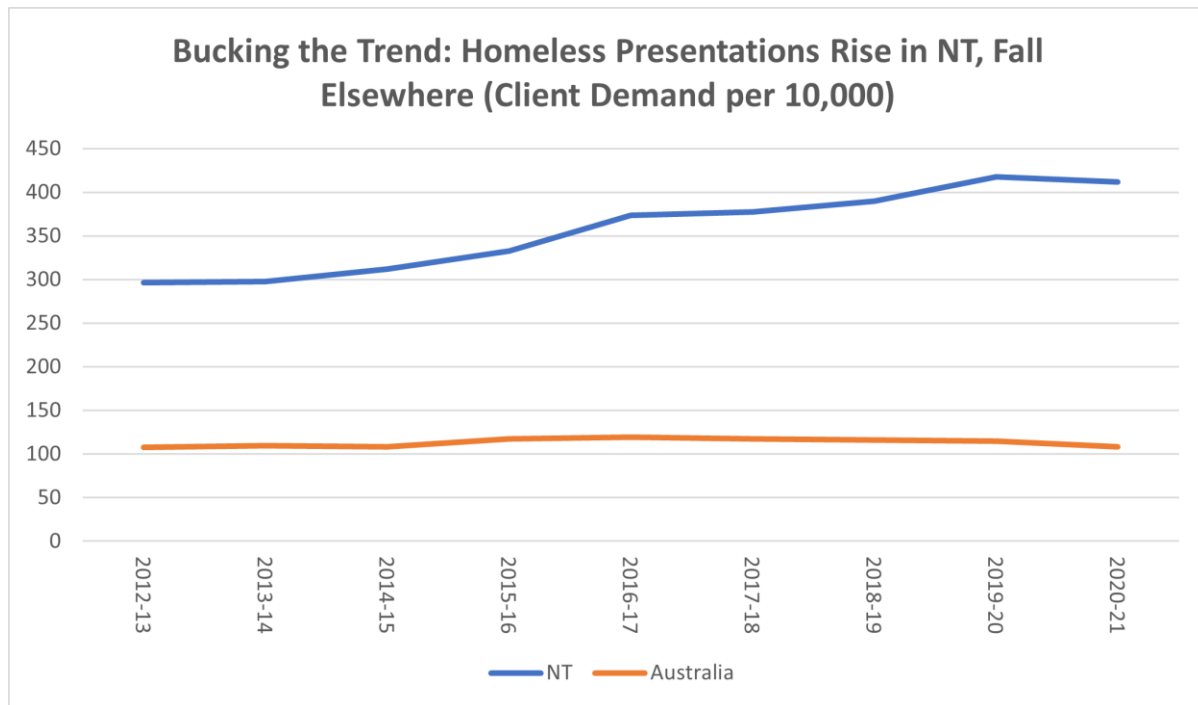


Chart 1: Number of Presentations to Specialist Homelessness Services per 10,000 Population

The Northern Territory Government has set an aspirational, ambitious but exciting growth trajectory of a \$40 billion economy by 2030. A larger, more diversified and stronger economy that is delivered through higher population, increased productivity and greater participation in the economy, will provide employment, education and better standards of living for communities across the Territory.

Housing is integral and fundamental to the Northern Territory's future economic success.

A lack of housing, and a lack of housing that is affordable, is putting the brakes on the Northern Territory's economic growth. There is already evidence that it is constraining growth and will undoubtedly further impede it, jeopardising the Northern Territory Government's economic growth aspirations if left untended.

We sense a growing awareness within the Northern Territory Government that housing is seen as an essential part of the regional economic development jigsaw, and for good reason. Regional economies across Australia are at pains to point out the lifestyle and employment benefits of living outside our major cities but, at the same time, have found that they have insufficient housing available, especially

for rent. This has led to historically low vacancy rates, higher rents, and insufficient housing to support job creation across industries that are well placed but unable to grow due to workforce limitations.

In the Northern Territory, there are notable examples of businesses and industries across our regions that have been held back, ostensibly because they are unable to fill jobs due to a lack of available labour. This is often due to a lack of available rental properties, affordable or otherwise. In Katherine and Tennant Creek this year there have been occasions when there has literally been nothing to rent.

NT Shelter is encouraged by the commitment of the Northern Territory Government to develop a model for community housing in the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory continues to lag other Australian states and territories with respect to the share of social housing that is attributable to community housing providers. Growing a strong and sustainable local registered community housing sector is a necessity. Earlier this year, we provided advice to Government on how this should be doneⁱⁱ.

Recent asset transfers to registered community housing providers are welcomed. However, these will not, in the short term, result in any significant increase to net housing stock. There remains significant work to be done to address the critical undersupply of social and affordable housing in the Northern Territory, far beyond the growth of the NT community housing sector alone.

NT Shelter takes this opportunity to outline what we see as priorities for the Northern Territory Government’s 2022-23 budget. These priorities were determined through extensive consultations with our members and key regional stakeholders in Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs.

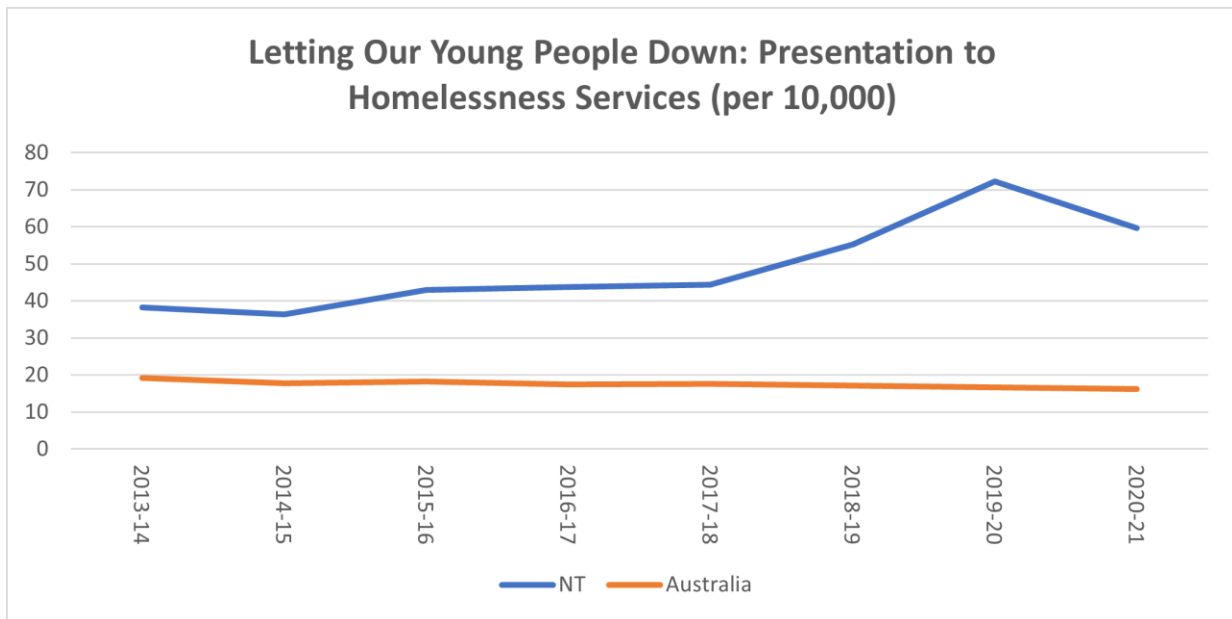
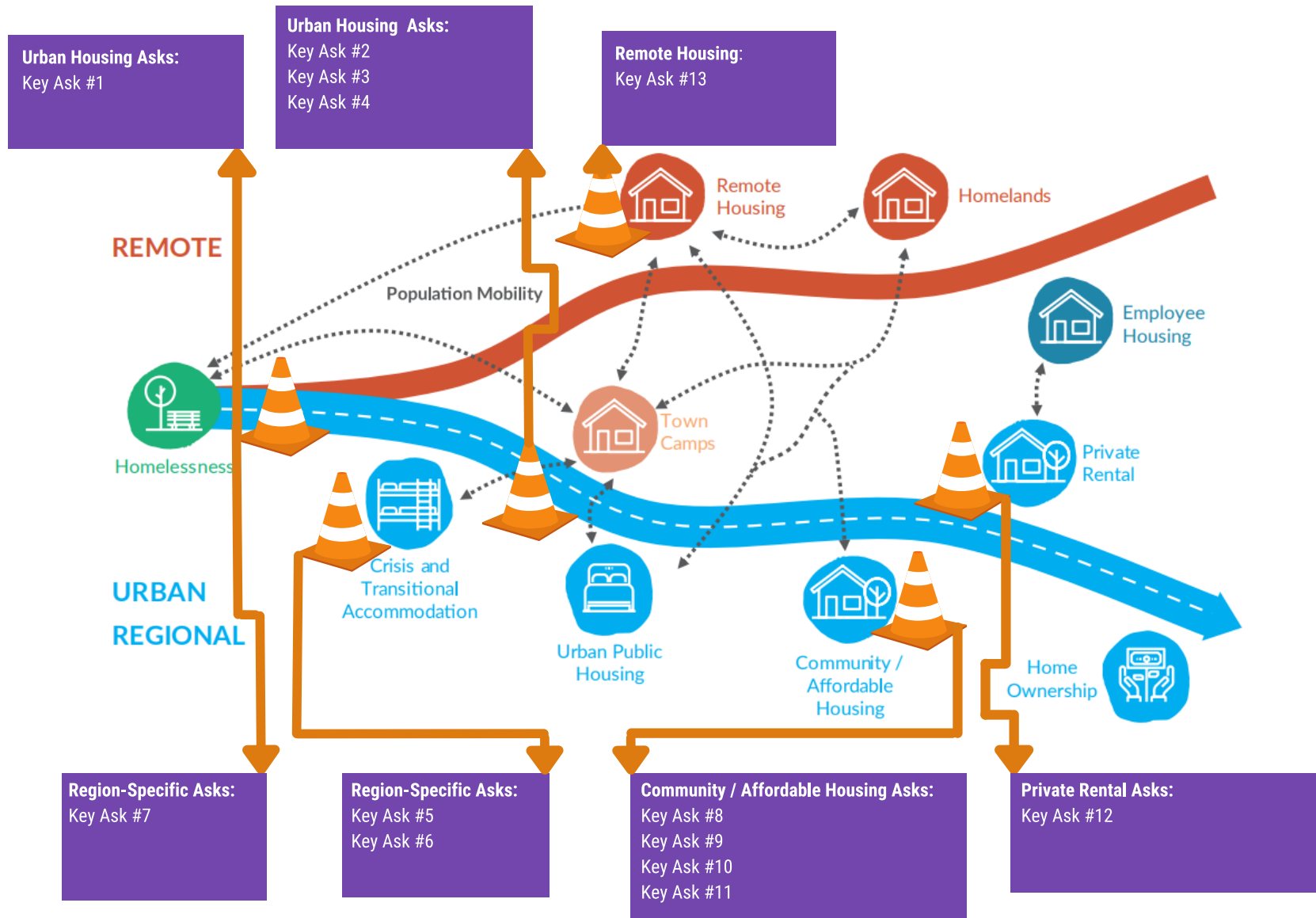


Chart 2: Number of young people presenting alone (15-24) to Homelessness Services per 10,000 Population

Figure 1: Tackling the Northern Territory Housing System's Pressure Points



Graphic source: Northern Territory Housing Strategy 2020-2025, Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Developmentⁱⁱⁱ. Edited by NT Shelter.

Urban Public Housing Asks

Key Ask #1: NT at the Forefront of the Key National Housing Conversations of 2022

The Territory Economic Reconstruction Commission's final report demonstrates a clear understanding of the "crucial role" that social and affordable housing plays as part of achieving the Northern Territory's growth ambitions and potential. It acknowledges that housing for key workers and families on low to moderate incomes is a key aspect of supporting new industry opportunities and population growth across the Territory. It emphasises that the community housing sector has an important role to play in this regard.

In a similar vein, the recent Infrastructure Plan from Infrastructure Australia places considerable emphasis and recognition, for the first time, on the important role that social and affordable housing plays as key economic and social infrastructure. The productivity impacts that infrastructure investments provide in the case of transport, utilities and communications apply equally to housing. As noted earlier, without sufficient housing infrastructure, population growth will be curtailed, and industry will not be able to recruit the staff needed to meet business requirements and support growth opportunities. Continued and additional reliance on FIFO workers would amount to a failure to get urban, regional and remote housing right.

The discussion of housing within the infrastructure context is exciting news. It provides opportunities to think about housing in new ways, and sharpens the conversation in terms economic benefits. While housing is a fundamental human right and the case for building more social and affordable housing is already compelling, the added interest in housing from government agencies responsible for investment, planning and infrastructure, and Treasury is important and welcomed.

The challenge nationally is to take this a step further by converting this into an investment opportunity. There are already national and international infrastructure funds that attract investment due to relatively low risk, stable and predictable returns that are attractive to institutional and retail investors alike. The development of housing as an investable asset subclass in a broader infrastructure portfolio is needed.

The good news is that this work on this is already well under way. Considerable focus has been given to the design and viability of initiatives that, with Commonwealth, State and Territory government support, will enable new financing and investment streams for social and affordable housing. This, of course, should be music to the ears of governments who currently bear the brunt of expenditure on housing. The NT government needs to be hard-wired into this work.

Key Ask #1: The Northern Territory Government must be highly engaged and connected with work by The Territory Economic Reconstruction Commission around population and housing, and housing investment initiatives at the national level. All opportunities to participate in the design of a national housing strategy and associated systems (e.g. NHFIC, financing models etc.) must be actively taken to ensure that program design is fit-for-purpose for the Territory's unique housing challenges and demographics, and to ensure that we are well-placed to pounce on any early investment opportunities.

Key Ask #2: Fail to Plan, Plan to Fail. Release a Comprehensive, Multi-Year Urban Plan

Each release of the NTG's Public Housing Waitlist and Wait Times invariably reveals a steady rise in the number of Territorians waiting years for their chance to access safe, affordable and appropriate housing.

Currently there are over 5,400 families on the Urban Public Housing Waitlist alone. Each applicant has their own story, but they share this in common: they all meet the eligibility requirements for a dwelling at subsidised rent yet continue to be denied one. While they wait, these individuals and families couch surf, live in temporary shelter, stay with friends, often in overcrowded environments, sleep in the long grass, doing what they can to make ends meet while their fundamental human need for shelter goes unmet.

It is no consolation to these many families that their government says it cannot afford to build dwellings on any significant scale relative to the 5,000 to 6,000 that are needed, or that registered Community Housing Providers will be the answer to the shortcomings of the flawed public housing system, or that new housing and homelessness strategies are being released without any significant additional funding to underpin them. These families want to know who has their back in the "Comeback Capital".

If there was ever any doubt, there is an increasing array of compelling evidence that investment in social and affordable housing makes sense for the Government, particularly as a counter-cyclical investment when residential construction activity tapers off. Similar to the outcomes from the 2009 *Social Housing Initiative*^{iv}, investment in social and affordable housing generates significant economic output in terms of Gross State Product, construction and other job creation economic activity and avoided system costs. These include, but are not limited to, the costs of homelessness in the health and mental health systems, interactions with the justice system, and better employment and education outcomes.

Although the rationale for building more social and affordable housing at scale is compelling, individual State and Territory Governments do not have the fiscal capacity to foot the bill on their own. The current Commonwealth Government stubbornly and unhelpfully maintains that housing is the responsibility of each State and Territory. This contention flies in the face of Commonwealth-State Housing Agreements since 1945. In the absence of a National Housing Strategy, the reality is that many thousands of Australians continue to go without one of the most basic, fundamental needs – access to a home - as governments of all persuasions bicker.

It is not feasible to expect that the Northern Territory Government, even as a housing provider of last resort, can go anywhere near addressing the housing shortfall in the short term. This does mean that it is off the hook. It has an important leadership role in identifying and securing viable options for a housing supply pipeline, funded by other means as necessary (e.g. institutional investors, superannuation funds). The Government needs to be proactive and urgent and cannot accept that over 5,400 families (and growing) remain on public housing wait lists as an unavoidable given. At the very least, the Northern Territory Government needs to expand its Community Housing Growth Strategy into a more comprehensive Urban Housing Supply Initiative.

Key Ask #2: The Northern Territory Government develop and release a Social and Affordable Housing Supply Plan that provides credible annual housing supply targets, financing partners and a pathway to halving the Urban Public Housing Waitlist by 2035.

Key Ask #3: Boost Funding for Repairs and Maintenance and Set KPIs for Completion

It is universally accepted that a healthy home is essential for health and wellbeing^v.

Poorly designed and poorly functioning houses, often caused or compounded by severe house crowding, create unsatisfactory health, safety and living conditions, impacting severely and adversely on the lives of many Aboriginal families. This leads to further homelessness, with Aboriginal Territorians faring very poorly on this measure in comparison to those in other States and Territories.

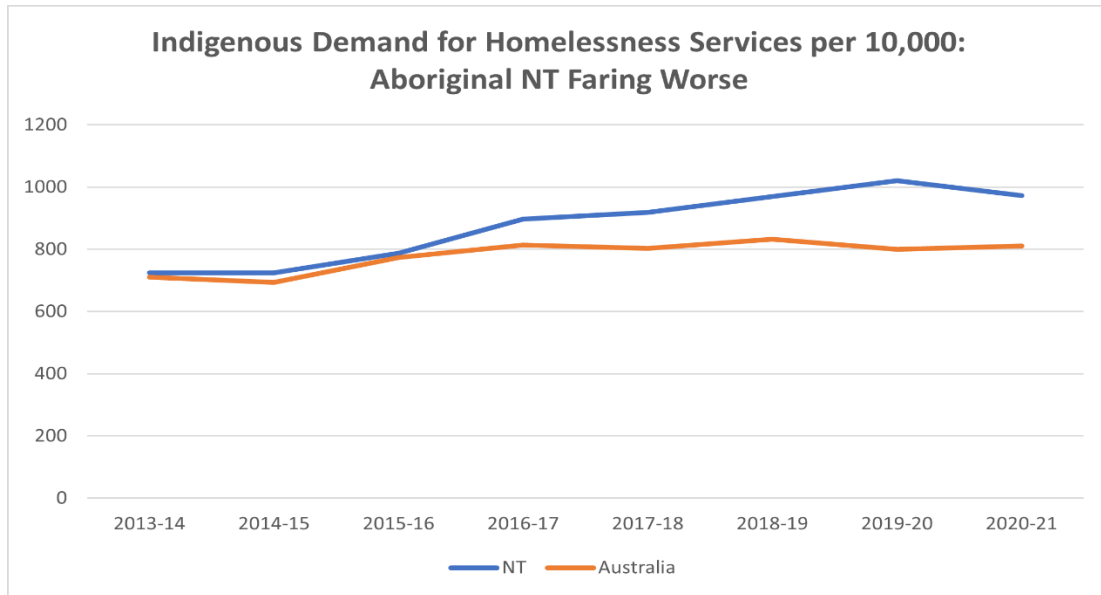


Chart #3: Aboriginal Clients presenting to Specialist Homelessness Services per 10,000 Population

We know that the Northern Territory Government understands this. NT Shelter acknowledges the continued investment and priority being placed by the Government on remote housing, which includes not only new builds but also renovations and repairs to existing housing.

Despite record investment, there will of course continue to be significant work that needs to be done over many years in the remote housing space.

A continued focus on “Housing for Health” initiatives with survey-fix and responsive maintenance, such as those implemented in the Jilkminggan community, improve the safety and health hardware of the home. Better functioning houses enable Aboriginal families to live by, and experience, the healthy living practices that are essential for improved health, safety and wellbeing.^{vi}

Increased attention must also be given to aging urban housing infrastructure. Across the Northern Territory, NT Shelter members and stakeholders are surprised to see properties sitting empty because they are waiting for repairs and maintenance. Given the lengthy wait times for public housing, it is essential that existing stock receives the repairs and maintenance it requires to remain in circulation in a timely and more urgent manner.

Case study #1: Jill illustrates that Territorians with disability and/or limited mobility, continue to wait for extended periods to be tenanted due to the lack of accessible public housing and the limited availability of resources to upgrade existing properties.

In the NT Budget 2019-20, \$27 million was diverted from the repairs and maintenance budget of then Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development. Not to be outdone, a decrease in net recurrent expenditure per dwelling between 2018-19 and 2019-20 on NT “State Owned and Managed Housing (SOMIH)” is, according to a footnote to the *Report on Government Services 2021*, “largely due to a reduction in preventative repairs and maintenance due to fiscal constraints.”^{vii}

To reduce what is already a grossly inadequate amount of funding for preventative maintenance of Aboriginal housing for some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in Australia under the guise of “fiscal constraints” is completely unacceptable. It speaks more to priorities rather than fiscal constraints. Left unchecked, it will undoubtedly have a direct and adverse bearing on the health, safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal families and their children.

It is essential that the Department of Territory Families, Housing, and Communities has a recurring budget for repairs and maintenance that reflects the needs of the community, the standard, and the age of its properties.^{viii}

Key Ask #3: The Northern Territory Government increase its annual investment on 2021-22 levels on repairs, maintenance and upgrades of urban and remote housing infrastructure, ensuring every available house is tenanted to the greatest extent possible. KPIs for timely completion of urgent and non-urgent repairs should be set and continuously improved.

Key Ask #4: NT Government Should Achieve the Same Targets it Sets for Others

As the Northern Territory Government starts to release opportunities to tender for social and affordable housing projects (such as John Stokes Square), various conditions and performance expectations of project proponents are set out in associated schedules e.g. tenancy and asset management performance measures that mirror requirements in NT Government community housing policies).

The Northern Territory Government should be committed to, and capable of, achieving the same performance targets that it sets for registered community housing providers. Not doing so weakens the agency’s prerogative to expect others to perform at significantly higher standards than those it sets for itself and is able to achieve.

The latest Annual Report from the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHaC) reveals that, on average, it takes 136 days to occupy an urban public housing property that has become vacant. This represents a rise of 39 days on the prior year, with the next highest average number of days being 119 in 2018-19.^{ix} The estimate for 2018-19 of 70 days is a far cry from what the agency has been able to achieve.^x

In comparison, the required performance standard that is required to be met under the National Regulatory Scheme for Community Housing (NRSCH) for registered providers is 14 days from date of vacate, or 42 days if more substantial maintenance is required. By any measure, the difference between these performance standards is stark.

In circumstances where public housing waitlists are so long and continue to grow, it is unacceptable that a property remains vacant for three months longer, on average, than it would if managed by a registered community housing provider.

NT Shelter is aware of the practice of leaving a public housing asset vacant after it has been vacated to enable neighbours to get some respite from troublesome tenants and visitors. A registered community housing provider could simply not afford to leave a property vacant for three months; the loss of rental revenue would be a huge financial impost.

Working to a much more stringent timeframe of 14 days (or 42 days at most), community housing providers are highly motivated to work with their tenants and neighbours to avoid the tenancy getting out of hand and putting neighbours through turmoil.

NT Shelter cannot see any reasonable justification why, with greater focus and urgency, TFHaC should not be expected to turn around vacant urban public housing properties in the same timeframes. We accept that this will require a change in culture and will not happen overnight, but reasonable targets will drive improvements for both the agency and tenants-in-waiting. Put simply, it will reduce the number of nights spent homeless each year.

Key Ask #4: The Northern Territory Government commit to reducing the average number of days to occupy an urban public housing asset by 25% on 2020-21 levels by June 2023, by 50% on 2020-21 levels by June 2024, and achieve parity with registered community housing providers (14 days or 42 days according to maintenance level) by June 2026.



Case study #1: Jill

Jill* is a 47-year-old Aboriginal woman. Her childhood was spent in foster care, her schooling was sporadic and after facing several traumatic events in her community, including the death of her foster mother, Jill moved to Darwin and became homeless at just 15.

For the next 30 years, Jill moved from house to house. She spent time couch surfing, in hostels or living in the long grass. Amazingly, during those 30 years Jill undertook tertiary education, developed close friendships, and found work in the theatre and with various non-government organisations around Darwin.

Jill was referred to the Homelessness Response Group (HRG) convened by NT Shelter and was supported into temporary housing, giving her the stability that she needed to make decisions around her future and look towards a permanent and stable home. Jill applied and was accepted onto the priority housing waitlist in 2019. Her accommodation providers gave her permission to remain in her current housing until her priority allocation came through.

In 2020, Jill's leg was amputated due to diabetes complications. She was confined to a wheelchair and unable to navigate the three flights of stairs to her apartment. She handed the keys back to her landlord.

Jill found herself in a small, ground floor room at an accommodation facility. The trauma of losing a limb, coupled with the fear of losing her belongings and the uncertainty of her future saw Jill descend into depression and anxiety. To Jill, her future had been shattered, but she was buoyed by being told that her dire situation would result in a quicker journey up the priority housing ladder. Jill's advocates and supporters provided updates to the staff at Territory Families, Housing and Communities. They trusted the system and believed 'Housing' would do their best to move Jill to appropriate accommodation.

Jill suffered a heart attack and returned to hospital. Through this, Jill and her advocates contemplated whether Jill's illness would at least get her housed rapidly. Jill's NDIS support learnt that she was at the top of the priority waitlist and, as soon as a suitable property was vacant, she would be tenanted.

As of November 2021, Jill is still waiting. Accessible units are few and far between and Jill has been informed that there are no funds to make an existing unit accessible. So, Jill waits. She describes herself as "really depressed" and admits to considering self-harm. Her self-esteem is "destroyed" and she feels as though she is "just a stat". Jill's dream is to have her own "sacred site", somewhere she can feel safe and start to focus on her ambition of supporting and mentoring her community. She wants independence but is confined by the uncertainty of temporary accommodation.

When asked what she would say to those in Government Jill says, "let them live here, live like I live or have one day living with us on the streets".

People like Jill need adequate resources to be invested into making housing fit for purpose for everyone.

*Name changed to protect the privacy of the individual.

Region-Specific Asks

Key Ask #5: More Housing Options for Women

Women are the main recipients of specialist homelessness services.^{xi} Nationally, women aged 45 or older are the fastest-growing cohort of homeless Australians.^{xii} Yet, for female Territorians who are not fleeing domestic or family violence, women who are homeless due to domestic or family violence but who are not at imminent threat, and women who are exiting from domestic and family violence crisis shelters, there are few viable accommodation options in our regional centres of Katherine, Tennant Creek, Nhulunbuy, and Alice Springs.

In Alice Springs, the cases of homeless women with complex needs are regularly presented at the Homelessness Response Group (HRG) that is auspiced by NT Shelter. As is the case with *Case study #2: Agnes*, with no other accommodation available these women often sleep rough or couch surf with friends and family, in some cases impacting existing public housing tenancies. A period of homelessness often leads to the breakdown of a family unit, as children of homeless women are often taken into care, adding to the already significant trauma that homeless women face.

The situation is similar in Tennant Creek and Katherine. The Tennant Creek Women's Refuge offers shelter to women and their children who are victims or at risk of domestic and family violence. For homeless Aboriginal men and women, Commonwealth-funded Wangkana Kari Hostel offers short-term accommodation. In Katherine, the only option for women who are not fleeing domestic or family violence is the Corroboree Hostel.

Women's accommodation services in the Northern Territory are primarily funded both Federally and at a Territory level to provide services to those escaping domestic and family violence. In the past, these services were permitted to also assist homeless women in general with an urgent need for shelter. However, this discretion was removed from grant agreements by the Federal Government.

Services across the Northern Territory now have little choice but to turn away vulnerable women. NT Shelter is aware of instances where women feel it is necessary to cite domestic violence in order to get the support that they urgently need.

The lack of medium and long-term accommodation also results in women who are at risk of domestic and family violence moving cyclically in and out of crisis accommodation. In a recent example provided by Central Australia Aboriginal Family Legal Unit (CAAFLU) Aboriginal Corporation, a woman from a remote community was evacuated to Alice Springs with her children due to being at high risk of family violence. Once in Alice Springs, she was able to access crisis accommodation. Once her stay was over, the woman sought medium to long-term accommodation in Alice Springs where her children had settled into a new school. With no luck, the woman returned to her community where she was again assaulted. Again, she was evacuated to Alice Springs and placed into crisis accommodation.

For this woman, this story has repeated itself dozens of times over more than a decade. She is stuck in a cycle of disruption and violence, unable to get the stability she needs. Stability starts with accommodation.

Key Ask #5: The Northern Territory Government identify and commit to opportunities for further investment in medium and long-term accommodation for women in the Northern Territory's regional centres.



Source: Getty Images

Key Ask #6: Addressing Katherine Visitor Accommodation Needs – A “No-Brainer”

The Northern Territory Government’s recent announcements on funding for crisis shelter accommodation in Palmerston and \$21 million for the construction of new houses, stock transfers and land packages provides reason to be optimistic that the Gunner Government realises the necessity and priority in bringing more housing, crisis and transitional accommodation onto the market in order to address, at least in part, unmet demand.

It is incumbent on Government to ensure that critical regional infrastructure gaps are addressed, with economic, social and equity factors providing strong support for comparable infrastructure, services and opportunities to be provided for communities facing the same challenges.

The community of Katherine has approximately 30 times the national rate of homelessness. Upon implementation of the Barkly Regional Deal^{xiii}, Katherine will be the only major regional centre in the Northern Territory without visitor infrastructure.

A survey conducted in early 2020 by the Katherine Doorways Hub Drop-In Centre found that 94% of people who had come to Katherine for a medical appointment, and were accessing the hub, were sleeping rough due to the lack of affordable, short-stay accommodation options.

The visitor accommodation gaps in the Katherine and Big Rivers Region have been made clear for all to see following the recent Katherine COVID-19 outbreak. To have a place where visitors can sleep with some dignity, protection and comfort is a completely reasonable expectation and right of any Territorian.

In recognition of this need, The Northern Territory Government provided additional financial support to local non-Government organisations to allow them to provide temporary motel accommodation options to rough sleepers and those at risk in overcrowded homes. While welcomed by the sector, brokering accommodation in commercial facilities presents its own challenges and is not a solution to what is a well-known, ongoing part of mobility across Aboriginal communities through the services hub of Katherine.

NT Shelter’s Pre-Budget Submission to the Northern Territory Government 2020-21 highlighted short-stay visitor accommodation for Katherine as its headline priority. Local and regional support is widespread, with 19 of Katherine’s leading business, local government, and community sector organisations joining forces to advocate for a commitment from candidates to the August 2020 Northern Territory election. All parties acknowledged the need for short-stay visitor accommodation in Katherine and committed fully or in-principle.

With the changing landscape of COVID-19, what was once a simple accommodation model is now more complex. Lockdowns in the Katherine and Darwin regions have highlighted the need for a rethink on a design that would cater to a number of emergency responses, in addition to the ongoing short-stay accommodation needs of the Katherine community.

We see considerable potential in securing a tripartite agreement with Commonwealth, Northern Territory and Katherine Town Council commitment to this initiative, as was achieved in Tennant Creek.

Supporters of this project have committed to support a local Aboriginal controlled community organisation to secure Commonwealth assistance to an infrastructure component. Securing the finance

for the construction of a suitable facility requires a significant commitment by a non-Government organisation. NT Shelter and our members and project supporters in Katherine call upon the Northern Territory Government to provide modest funding for concept and design options that investigate value for money, culturally informed and locally led solutions. Specifically, this requires the engagement of a local Aboriginal controlled organisation to auspice and oversee the project and present business case options back to government.

Key Ask #6: Northern Territory Government financially support the development of a locally led project to identify the most cost-effective, fit-for-purpose visitor accommodation model for short-stay visitors to Katherine. This to take into account the forecast demand having regard to what has been learned from COVID-19, visitor mobility and homelessness trends. **Expected cost = \$100K.**



Darwin has excellent short-stay accommodation facilities for rough sleepers and visitors to town, including this facility at Batten Road. In contrast, there is nothing available for rough sleepers in Katherine despite consistently large numbers of visitors and similar, if not worse, climatic conditions.

Key Ask #7: Assertive Outreach – A Lifeline for Rough Sleepers

The street-based assertive outreach model has provided a successful response to rough sleeping.^{xiv} This model is one of harm-reduction and allows workers to respond directly and immediately to the individual needs of rough sleepers in the spaces that they frequent, rather than relying on individuals to access services on their own.^{xv}

As part of the City of Darwin's Safer City Program^{xvi}, a street-based Assertive Outreach Team patrols Darwin's public spaces early on weekday mornings and links the city's vulnerable population with a range of services including:

- Accommodation
- Health and wellbeing services
- Alcohol and other drugs (AOD) services
- Legal and material aid
- Other support services as required
- Transport
- Advocacy and assistance.

The Assertive Outreach Team works with partner non-Government organisations via a strengths-based approach. The team engages with individuals on a voluntary basis and has no regulatory powers.

While many non-Government services around the Northern Territory provide various forms of outreach, the Territory's regional centres lack ongoing street-based assertive outreach programs.

The need for these programs was particularly critical during the 2021 COVID-19 lockdowns in Katherine and Alice Springs. The planning of outreach for homeless individuals as a response to these lockdowns was impacted by the lack of existing knowledge on the number of rough sleepers and their needs. In Darwin, the Assertive Outreach Team was an invaluable source of intelligence, but also a trusted and often used means for disseminating important health information.

Having a team of trusted, respected and capable local outreach workers in regional centres will connect visitors and rough sleepers to services before problems arise. They serve a key role in disseminating key health messages, check on the welfare of people who are vulnerable, and can help people receive the assistance they need – whether that be getting connected back up to Centrelink, getting home, receiving the medication or clothing they need, or counselling and support. For a modest investment, significant issues and costs to Government can be avoided.

Key Ask #7: The Northern Territory Government work across Government departments and in partnership with non-Government organisations to stand up an assertive outreach model in the Northern Territory's regional centres. **Expected annual cost = \$600K.**



Pictured here with NT Shelter's Executive Officer (left), City of Darwin's Safer City Program staff recently received a nomination in the NT Human Rights Awards for their outstanding work in the community providing outreach and welfare assistance to rough sleepers across the greater Darwin region.

Case study #2: Agnes

In this case study, a 31-year-old Aboriginal woman struggles to find appropriate accommodation and has ended up not only homeless, but also placing the public housing tenancies of family members at risk by contributing to the existing issues of overcrowding and visitor management.

The subject of this case study, *Agnes* (not her real name), has a two-year-old child in her care and another six-year-old child who is intermittently in her care. Agnes is not in good health; she is partially deaf and has a medical history that includes heart surgery, injuries from a serious car accident, and addiction. Agnes has been on the Territory Families, Housing and Communities public housing waitlist since 2015 and, in late-2021, was advised that her application is still a two-year wait away from allocation. In Alice Springs, the general wait time for a three-bedroom home is six to eight years.

From early-2020 to mid-2021, Agnes had been living in independent living transitional housing. Due to ongoing issues with overcrowding and visitor management, which were challenging Agnes' history of addiction, Agnes exited herself from the program. Agnes was referred to another residential facility, however the reduced independence of the new program made it hard for her to parent her child and, despite efforts, Agnes exited herself and became homeless.

Agnes and her child are now moving between two family households. Neither option is suitable and her family, through a sense of obligation, are placing their own tenancies at risk.

In October 2021, Agnes' case was presented at the Alice Springs Homelessness Response Group (HRG) convened by NT Shelter. For the HRG, stories of homeless women are all too common. The group discussed Agnes' case, considering each existing medium- and long-term accommodation option in Alice Springs.

Considering the lack of viable medium- and long-term accommodation options for women in Alice Springs, the suggestion from the HRG was for the case worker presenting Agnes' case to arrange for the client to stay at Aboriginal Hostels operated by Aboriginal Hostels Limited (AHL), who offer short-term accommodation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who need to travel to service centres to access services and economic opportunity. They are not intended to be medium- or long-term accommodation options for locals with no other accommodation option.

Agnes has complex needs. She needs support to manage her addictions and physical and mental health assistance and she needs secure and stable accommodation for herself and her children.

Community / Affordable Housing Asks

Key Ask #8: Demolish and Sell Assets an Absolute Last Resort

The growth of the registered community housing sector in the Northern Territory is imperative. Significant priority is now being attached to this work by the Minister for Urban Housing. Although a long time in the making, the current urgency and priority afforded to this work is very encouraging. The transfer of public housing stock through long term management lease arrangements, as well as a range of other measures including land packages and, in time, title transfers, represents low risk to government and has already been done successfully and extensively elsewhere.

The recent announcements by Minister Worden relating to land and asset transfers, investment in crisis accommodation infrastructure for women fleeing domestic and family violence, and the NT Government's commitment to supporting an Industry Development Plan for the community housing sector, will make a real difference. These announcements have been warmly received. The importance of the Chief Minister adding his stamp to these announcements is not lost on us. We are greatly encouraged by the priority that the Chief Minister places on social and affordable housing, providing reasons for optimism that the tide may be beginning to turn on urban housing investment. We look forward to further announcements in 2022 and beyond.

The Northern Territory's public housing stock is relatively old with approximately 85% 30 years of age or greater. Much is in poor condition. While the nominal expected life of urban assets is 50 years, there will times when stock is at or close to beyond economic repair. In those instances, before demolition or asset sales occur, registered community housing providers should be offered the opportunity to discuss potential alternatives with Government. This may avert a net loss of public housing assets, with every house needed to meet growing social and affordable housing need.

Community housing providers should also be offered first right of refusal on planned sales of public housing assets at fair value.

Key Ask #8: Before demolition or asset sales occur, the Northern Territory Government to provide registered community housing the opportunity to discuss potential alternatives to demolition or market sales of assets. This may well avert a net loss of public housing assets, with every available house invaluable in meeting growing housing need. Community housing providers to be offered first right of refusal on planned sales of public housing assets at fair value.

Key Ask #9: Doing Social Housing Differently: Shier Street Opportunity

The Northern Territory has many challenges in various urban neighbourhoods across the Territory as a result of decades of public housing neglect. This is a widely accepted position and is a reflection that the provision of social housing by public housing authorities across Australia is an outdated and flawed model which, in many cases, has not served tenants and neighbouring communities well.

As a consequence of this, as well as other factors relating to intergenerational trauma and many other factors, urban centres experience fluctuating, and often intense, levels of generalised anti-social behaviour and more localised, heightened anti-social behaviour, in and around public housing.

Anti-social behaviour, problem visitors and crowded urban housing settings present genuine difficulties for tenants and neighbours alike. Ultimately, it is the tenant who is responsible for meeting their obligations under the Residential Tenancies Act. Their inability or unwillingness to do so results in tenants facing sanctions and, ultimately, the risk of losing their tenancy.

The effort, from here, needs to be on trying to find new solutions that support the tenant and more effectively engage with and manage visitor behaviour. Different approaches are currently under consideration and are being trialled on a small scale.

There are many legacy issues and difficulties with the current profile and condition of housing assets, as previously noted. However, when a complex such as Shiers Street in The Narrows is earmarked for redevelopment, this presents an ideal opportunity to reimagine what a housing precinct can look like, done differently. For example, mixed tenure models of low-income households, key workers and others in the affordable housing threshold, premium stock at market rent, and potentially a portion of dwellings for sale or through a different ownership model such as shared equity.

Having a mix of cohorts has been undertaken successfully in NSW, Victoria and elsewhere. These communities can be set up differently, but they are all, in their own way, great places to live. They build connections between residents, provide public spaces for recreation, sport, social interaction and social enterprise. They are places that many people would be happy to live in regardless of their level of income, occupation, and life story. Physically, they are generally attractive places with aesthetic elements such as a community garden, cycle paths and good design.

Regardless of project budget, the message here is that with some creative thinking, greater imagination, and community engagement, it is definitely possible to deliver a mixed-tenure social and affordable housing model that demonstrates to the broader community that housing, designed, built and implemented well, can result in vibrant, supportive and inclusive communities without high levels of crime, poor amenity, and antisocial behaviour.

The growth of the community housing sector provides a rare opportunity to build confidence across our urban centres that the current public housing model can be substantially overhauled. Experienced, committed NGOs can work with CHPs to work with tenants, visitors and the neighbourhood at large to address issue before they become serious problems.

Key Ask #9: Fund a registered community housing provider to work with community, neighbours, building sector, architects etc. to design a new housing model to replace the current Shier Street public housing complex in The Narrows and optimise the liveability and amenity of the space.



Key Ask #10: NRAS Allocations and Affordable Housing for over 1,000 Territory Families

As outlined in the latest NRAS Quarterly Performance Report,^{xvii} the Northern Territory has a total of 1,045 NRAS allocations that will progressively cease from 2022 through to 2026.

The loss of 1,045 rental properties for key workers and those on low to moderate incomes who are paying affordable rents (typically about 75% of market rent), will create tremendous challenges for many Territory families in an environment when rents have risen dramatically over the past 12 months and vacancy rates are 2% or substantially lower. The loss of an NRAS subsidy of \$11,124 per annum per dwelling will be devastating for households unable to afford market rents, resulting in even further poverty and homelessness.

Under the current NRAS funding arrangements between the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments, over the next year the Commonwealth will contribute \$8,343 per NRAS entitlement and the Northern Territory's contribution will be \$2,781 per entitlement.



NRAS housing for low to moderate income earners in Tennant Creek (Courtesy: Venture Housing)

Key Ask #10: The Northern Territory Government, in the absence of a viable alternative scheme that is funded by the Commonwealth, allocate the equivalent of the current NRAS entitlements attached to the 1,045 eligible properties participating in the scheme, in perpetuity. This will ensure that there is no reduction in the Northern Territory's affordable housing stock. **Estimated Cost = \$8.72 million per annum (unadjusted for indexation over future years).**

Key Ask #11: Seize the Moment – A Fairer Funding Deal for the Territory

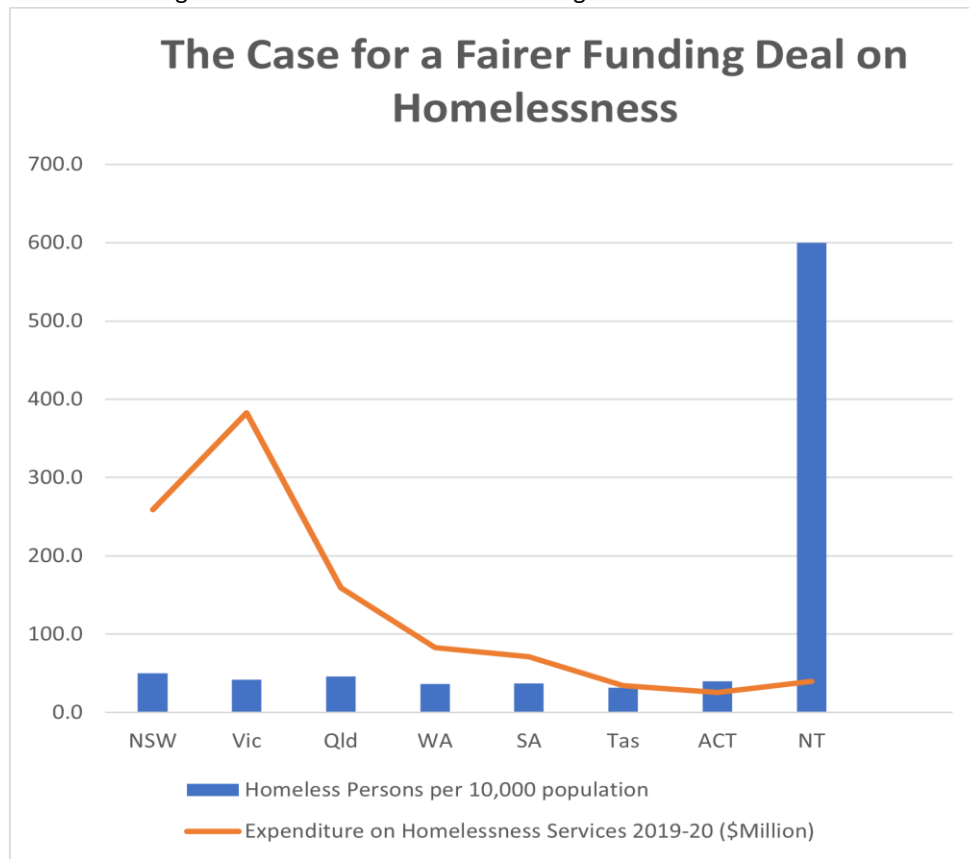
In 2022, a milestone review of the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) will be undertaken by the Productivity Commission. Details have just been released by the Commission, calling for submissions towards their study into how well the Australian, State and Territory Governments have achieved the objectives, outcomes and outputs set out in the NHHA.

We urge the Northern Territory Government to work side by side with us over the next 12 months to position us for a better funding deal for the Territory on housing and homelessness under the NHHA national partnership agreement.

The Northern Territory Government, and Minister Worden in particular, has already confirmed support for funding based on need rather than population share. This is consistent with the approach taken by the Commonwealth on other funding models such as domestic family violence.

The final report of the *Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia* has also heard these arguments and recommended that funding be based on need (Recommendation 9).^{xviii}

Figure #5: The Case for a Fairer Funding Deal on Homelessness



The importance of this finding cannot be overstated.

There is still much to be done in 2022 to lock in the support and agreement of the Australian, State and ACT Governments and secure more than the \$19 million out of \$1.6 Billion that the Northern Territory Receives from the Commonwealth.

It is vital that, together, we build up the case for a needs-based allocation under the NHA and not let this opportunity slip through the cracks.

Key Ask #11: The Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities develop a joint strategy with NT Shelter and its members to secure the commitment of Commonwealth, State and ACT governments for a revised funding model under the NHA based on need rather than population share or, otherwise, a mechanism that provides more equitable funding for the Northern Territory having regard to our unique and disproportionate housing and homelessness challenges.



The long wait is over. The relief and joy of finally getting the keys to your own house. New housing changes lives for the better. Photo courtesy Minister Chancey Paech, LinkedIn.

Private Rental Asks

Key Ask #12: Protect Territorians Against Boundless Greed

The Territory's lack of housing has significant implications for the attraction and retention of key workers, particular for those on low and very low incomes but also families on moderate to higher incomes too. Stories abound of people leaving the Territory due to opportunistic and unchecked surges in rents that are unaffordable, even for higher income earning households in some cases.

Unfortunately, in the absence of both a Rental Bond Board and an auspiced consumer association/tenants' union, there is a paucity of data regarding the number of Territorians leaving the Territory and heading south due to significant rent increases at the end of their lease.

What we do know is that the airwaves and social media are awash with accounts of people, their families, friends, neighbours and work colleagues who have faced the predicament of what to do when their landlord asks for an increase of rent of more than \$100 per week. In several instances NT Shelter is aware of renters facing rent hikes greater, or far greater, than \$150 per week.

There is something fundamentally wrong with the state of our housing system when families who have made the Territory their home face a 25% or greater increase in rent that puts them in the predicament of joining the queue with other families looking for a cheaper place to rent, moving into a caravan, or leaving the Territory altogether.

Under Northern Territory legislation, landlords currently have an unfettered, unchecked discretion to charge renters whatever they like when the rental market is tight. NT Shelter does not have an objection to reasonable rent increases. We do have an issue with unreasonable, unconscionable rent increases that force families to the point of financial hardship, especially when they have been good tenants, lived in the property without incident for years, and are blindsided by the demands of an opportunistic landlord. The security of tenure for Territorians shouldn't be dependent on whether or not they have a reasonable or unreasonable landlord.

The Northern Territory Government needs think carefully about what it is trying to achieve and how to get there. It is detrimental to the Territory's interests of retaining and growing its population, and not losing highly skilled workers, if there is a leakage of Territorians due to landlords trying to recover investment losses in a hurry, or rake in the extra cash because they can. There are ample cases of consumer regulation that prevent unreasonable rises in utility prices and other charges. Renting is one of the most expensive consumer purchases yet there is very little, if any, protection for consumers.

Key Ask #12: The Northern Territory Government, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, finalise and implement mechanisms that provide safeguards against unreasonable increases in rent for tenants, having regard to measures already in place in other Australian jurisdictions.

Remote Housing Asks

Key Ask #13: Secure Long-Term Commonwealth Investment in Remote Housing

The global COVID-19 pandemic appears to be far from over. The Northern Territory, like other states and territories, remains susceptible to further outbreaks. Vaccination rates, mercifully, continue to rise and are likely to afford a higher degree of protection for many vulnerable Territorians.

There is no merit in politicising the Northern Territory's current housing situation during a global pandemic. There is widespread agreement on all sides of politics that there is much more to be done to address overcrowded housing across the Territory. NT Shelter and our members' efforts have been focused on working with the NT Government to provide the most effective pandemic response for rough sleepers and those in overcrowded housing that we can, recognising there are limitations to the options before us.

Nevertheless, for those who may have not have seen the issue so starkly, and especially the firm link between housing conditions and illness and disease, it is important that we never lose sight of the risks that severely overcrowded housing and a lack of short-stay visitor accommodation present for vulnerable Territorians in the face of a pandemic. COVID-19 provides a sobering reminder of the tinderbox-like housing conditions that too many Aboriginal families continue to live in and the threat that those conditions pose to human lives. This is prevalent in urban settings too and is not merely a remote housing phenomenon.

We know all too well that there are many old and poorly functioning houses that are overcrowded and in an unacceptable condition. There are many communities that still require significant increases in stock, whether that be additional houses or extra living spaces.

Unfortunately, we know it will take some years to complete the huge task ahead of meeting the housing needs of Aboriginal communities across the Northern Territory. Under no circumstances, though, can there be any easing of the effort to complete the work that is now under way. Large scale infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges and telecommunications are not abandoned mid-way. The Commonwealth Government cannot and must not exit the scene in 2023 with so much work still to be done. It has a responsibility.

The mechanism for continued Commonwealth investment in remote housing beyond 2023 will be determined by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and their communities, as well as other stakeholders in the remote housing space.

On a more positive note, NT Shelter congratulates the Government on its announcement of a five-year operational funding agreement for Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory (AHNT). Aboriginal Territorians account for 88.5% of the Northern Territory's homeless population, making it essential that Aboriginal voices are amplified in discussions surrounding housing need, particularly in relation to aboriginal housing, outstations, homelands, and town camps.

Key Ask #13: The Northern Territory Government to reach an agreement with the Commonwealth Government, Aboriginal Housing NT, Land Councils and other key stakeholders on the continuation of a National Remote Housing Partnership Agreement past 2023, including a commitment that there will be joint government investment in housing until the last required house in remote Northern Territory is built.

References and End Notes

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ⁱⁱⁱ Northern Territory Government, Department of Local Government, Housing, and Community Development (2019), *A home for all Territorians: Northern Territory Housing Strategy 2020-2025*, page 7.

^{iv} See, for example, the Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development's Annual Report, 2018-19. Available at: https://tfhc.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/743892/dlghcd-annual-report-2018-19.pdf

^v Further information on the correlation between housing and physical and mental health is available online at: <https://www.habitat.org.au/housing-and-health/>.

^{vi} Health Habitat, "Housing for Health – The Guide" (formerly known as The National Indigenous Housing Guide), <https://www.healthhabitat.com/resources/housing-for-health-the-guide/>

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^{viii} Northern Territory Auditor-General's Office, Auditing for Parliament, June 2020: Report to the Legislative Assembly. Available at: https://ago.nt.gov.au/reports/2020_June.pdf

^{ix} See, for example, the Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development's Annual Report, 2018-19. Available at: https://tfhc.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/743892/dlghcd-annual-report-2018-19.pdf

^x See, for example, the Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development's Annual Report, 2018-19. Available at: https://tfhc.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/743892/dlghcd-annual-report-2018-19.pdf

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^{xviii} Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, *Final Report: Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia*, July 2021, page xxi (2.382). Available at: https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportrep/024522/toc_pdf/Finalreport.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf