

NT SHELTER

PRIORITIES FOR THE NORTHERN TERRITORY HOUSING STRATEGY

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Housing pressure in the Northern Territory, key facts

Independent estimates indicate that the **Northern Territory's shortfall of social and affordable homes** will reach **14,500 dwellings** by **2036**.¹



Severe overcrowding accounts for **76% of homelessness** in the Northern Territory (**65% in urban centres**).²

Urban public housing stock in the Northern Territory **declined by almost 30%** from early the 1990s to 2021.³



Insufficient supply of social housing in the Northern Territory contributes to an overburdened urban waitlist of more than **5,000 applicants**, with **wait times** ranging from **four to ten years** based on location and dwelling type.⁴

28% of people presenting to NT homelessness services do so due to **inadequate** or **inappropriate dwelling conditions**.⁵



The **National Housing Supply and Affordability Council** projects that the NT will **reach 31%*** of our **Housing Accord** target.⁶

1. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Social housing as infrastructure: an investment pathway, 2018.
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Estimating Homelessness: Census 2021, 2023.
3. Report on Government Services, multiple years.
4. Northern Territory Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development, 2026.
5. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report, 2024–25.
6. National Housing Supply and Affordability Council, State of the Housing System, 2025.

*Council projections for housing supply are based on building approvals within declared building control areas. Social and affordable housing supported by government policy, including housing in remote communities outside these areas, is included separately.

The Challenge

Below is a summary of the most immediate yet consistent concerns that NT Shelter member organisations raise with us:

- The lack of affordable and social housing is the key concern, a clear plan to get the Northern Territory to sufficient, fit-for-purpose supply is increasingly urgent.
 - There are insufficient pathways out of the homelessness system and into long-term housing due to a lack of affordable and social housing stock. This has negative impacts at all transition points on the housing continuum causing bottlenecks from homelessness into and out of short-term, crisis accommodation and transitional programs.
 - Affordability, rather than complexity or compounding vulnerabilities, can be the impetus for seeking and staying in social housing due to a critical lack of affordable housing supply. The affordability gap between social housing and the private rental market is growing.
- The management of social housing assets impacts tenants. This includes, but is not limited to, ensuring tenant expectations are understood, inspections are timely and frequent, rental arrears are monitored and communicated early, and support needs are identified and referred early before they escalate.
- Existing social housing stock must be renewed to ensure that it is fit-for-purpose and compliant with all relevant performance requirements as identified in the National Construction Code (2022), ABCB Housing Provisions, namely section 11 pertaining to safe movement and access, and section 13 pertaining to energy efficiency.
- The private rental market is increasingly unaffordable. This no longer impacts only those on low incomes. The market is particularly inaccessible to young people and people with disabilities. Aboriginal people face discrimination when applying for rental properties.

The Northern Territory Housing Strategy must recognise:

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1. Affordable and social housing supply is the non-negotiable foundation

The Context:

The Northern Territory faces the highest levels of housing needⁱ and homelessnessⁱⁱ in the nation. Fixing both crises requires additional housing supply and there is no sign that the private market, operating under current policy settings, will deliver more housing to those who need it most.ⁱⁱⁱ Fixing a housing crisis is multipronged, but experts agree that increasing affordable¹ and social housing² supply is essential^{iv} v. Currently, national policy settings support expedited zoning, planning reform and inclusionary zoning to enable this growth.^{vi}

Housing stress and homelessness contributes to poorer health, disrupted education pathways and weaker labour force engagement, increasing long-term pressure on public systems. Each dollar allocated towards secure housing is estimated to generate approximately \$2.70 in avoided public expenditure.^{vii} Staff recruitment and retention is impacted when housing is scarce or unaffordable. Secure and affordable housing must be understood as both a social foundation and an economic enabler, essential to sustaining productivity and indeed, an effective catalyst for economic development and urban renewal.

A sustained program that adds net growth of urban affordable and social dwellings must be the non-negotiable foundation of a Northern Territory Housing Strategy. At a minimum, this requires:

- *Clear regional growth targets and accountability*
 - Affordable and social stock growth targets by region informed by backlog, projected need and population growth.
 - A commitment to replace social and affordable homes prior to demolition to ensure no net loss of stock.
 - A publicly available implementation dashboard to transparently track progress against targets.

¹ Generally, housing is considered affordable if the household members are not in housing stress after they have paid for their housing. That is, no more than 30% of household income is required to pay the rent/mortgage. However, Australia does not have a common definition of affordable housing across jurisdictions and government programs; sometimes affordability is determined by the household's income, others by rent that is lower than the prevailing local market rate – common in the NT. In higher rent markets, low-income households receiving rent assistance to make housing affordable could still be paying more than 30% of their income on housing costs if prevailing rent is used to set affordability.

² Social housing is government-subsidised rental housing. The term covers public housing, which is owned and managed by government and community housing which is managed (and often owned) by not-for-profit organisations.

- The establishment of a Social and Affordable Housing Advisory Council to provide advice to government on delivery coordination and strategic priorities.
- *Stronger partnerships to build supply*
 - A plan for private industry partnerships to improve the supply of affordable housing.
 - Partnerships with community housing providers to maximise financing opportunities and expand the Northern Territory's housing portfolio.
- *A land supply pipeline and enabling infrastructure*
 - Identification of available land across urban centres with a view to renew and repurpose government land to deliver more affordable and social housing, while creating jobs and economic growth.
 - Identification of priority growth precincts supported by servicing and infrastructure plans to enable urban renewal and support effective, sustained partnerships with Local Government.
- *Workforce and delivery capacity*
 - Recognising delivery capacity as a constraint, particularly in regional areas, back this Strategy with a housing construction workforce recruitment program focused on creating opportunities for young people.

2. Density done well is possible

The Context:

The Northern Territory requires a substantial increase in affordable and social housing supply. However, poorly delivered density undermines tenant outcomes and neighbourhood confidence. Growth must translate into socially sustainable communities.

Density done well is possible. In addition, it is estimated that it costs between two and four times less to service a dwelling in an established suburb with infrastructure than it does for a new home on the suburban fringe.^{viii} Planning and clearer coordination are critical to ensuring that increased social housing supply translates into functioning neighbourhoods. The Northern Territory Housing Strategy should include:

- *Strategic urban planning to deliver vibrant communities*
 - Apply mandatory inclusionary zoning of at least 10% as a mechanism for gentle, distributed density, embedding affordable and social homes within new developments rather than creating streets or suburbs dominated by single-tenure housing.
 - Prioritise infill and modest densification in well-located areas with established or planned community and employment infrastructure,

supporting low- to moderate-income households to live near the communities in which they work and contribute.

- Align infrastructure sequencing with identified housing growth areas to ensure communities are liveable in the long-term.
- *Clear accountability for delivery*
 - Establish a dedicated Northern Territory Government authority with responsibility for aligning land release, infrastructure sequencing and social housing outcomes in identified growth areas.
 - Use precinct-based planning to provide certainty to developers and the public while ensuring public land delivers a balanced mix of market, affordable and social housing supply.

3. Targeted housing responses are needed for key cohorts

The Context:

The Northern Territory's profile is distinct and requires tailored responses.

- 87% of people experiencing homelessness are Aboriginal^{ix}
- Almost 50% are children and young people^x
- Homelessness amongst people over 55 increased 13.4% between 2016–2021^{xi}
- Domestic and family violence remains the leading driver of presentations to homelessness services^{xii}
- People with disability living in social housing are less likely than the general population to report having a positive experience.^{xiii}

The Northern Territory's Housing Strategy must recognise that different cohorts require tailored housing pathways and respond effectively by:

- Establishing dedicated housing responses for key cohorts, in particular, the Strategy must recognise that housing is a foundational issue in closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage and commit to developing culturally appropriate housing solutions.
- Ensure social housing is housing of last resort, prioritised for households with low-incomes or compounding needs, while alternative pathways are strengthened for those whose primary barrier is affordability.

Young people: prevention and transition

In particular, the Strategy must recognise the disproportionate representation of young people in the Territory's homelessness population.^{xiv} Without dedicated housing pathways that seek to transition young people into sustainable housing and employment pathways, many of these young people will enter and remain within the social housing system long-term when alternative pathways may be more appropriate.

The Strategy should prioritise housing stability for young people to create structured pathways into education, employment and the private market where appropriate.

This preventative approach makes sense economically and socially with the lifetime cost to government of a young person accessing the specialist homelessness services system estimated at \$386,000^{xv} and the costs of social disadvantage difficult to measure.

4. Housing must be climate responsive

The context:

The Northern Territory's housing stock is among the least energy efficient in Australia, with new houses only required to meet a 5-star energy rating (and apartments only required to achieve 3.5 stars). This is below the standard adopted in most other jurisdictions.³ In a climate characterised by prolonged heat and increasingly extreme weather events, underperforming thermal standards leave social housing tenants vulnerable to energy hardship while increasing long-term maintenance and operational costs to the Northern Territory Government.

The Housing Strategy must adequately address current climate trends and account for climate projections. At minimum, the Strategy must:

- Commit to adoption of the NCC 2022 7-star rating for new housing stock.
- Commit to delivering upgrades to older social housing stock in urban centres in line with measures that can be funded under the existing Social Housing Energy Performance Initiative (SHEPI).

5. Community housing providers are part of a resilient system

The context:

Community housing providers (CHPs) play a complementary role within the Northern Territory's housing system. Where partnership settings are clear and consistent, CHPs can contribute to delivery, innovation and asset stewardship alongside public housing.

³ Tasmania has deferred adoption of the NCC 2022 7-star requirements until at least the next code cycle. Northern Territory has opted out and continues to apply a 5-star standard, significantly below national minimum expectations. Other jurisdictions (ACT, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and New South Wales-via its BASIX framework) have adopted or are transitioning to equivalent 7-star performance levels.

A stable and confident community housing sector supports overall system resilience. At a minimum, this requires:

- *Clear growth and transfer targets*
 - A defined target for community housing growth to 2030, expressed as both net new supply and proportion of total social housing stock.
 - A transparent forward pipeline of projects suitable for CHP delivery, including new builds, renewal sites and stock transfers.
- *Enabling regulatory and financial setting*
 - Streamline planning and land release pathways to enable CHP-led developments.
 - Ensure consistent treatment of registered CHPs within Northern Territory Government and local government regulatory frameworks to provide financial predictability and support sustainability.
 - Align performance, reporting and regulatory frameworks to balance accountability with sustainability and reduce administrative duplication.
 - Recognise CHPs as delivering essential public infrastructure, contributing to economic participation, workforce stability and community wellbeing.
- *Workforce and organisational capability investment*
 - Invest in sector capability development and coordination functions as essential system infrastructure and implementation of the Strategy.
 - Support sector workforce, leadership and governance capability, including a dedicated workforce strategy to strengthen regional delivery.
- *Data, transparency and system stewardship*
 - Establish a clear performance and data framework, including agreed system performance indicators, transparent data collection responsibilities and public reporting that builds confidence on the role and impact of community housing.
 - Commit to periodic review and refinement of settings to respond to system feedback and evidence.
- *System stewardship and role clarity*
 - Clarify system stewardship and complementary roles, including defined policy, regulatory and delivery responsibilities across public and community housing.
 - Embed co-designed reform and continuous improvement mechanisms, supported by transparent communication and periodic system review.

6. Barriers to private market entry must be reduced

The context:

47.6% of the Northern Territory population was renting at the time of the 2021 Census compared to just over 30% nationally^{xvi}. Despite this, the Territory is one of the least affordable rental markets in the country^{xvii}. For low to moderate income earners, including many key worker categories, the absence of affordable rental options leads to persistent housing stress, housing instability or homelessness, undermining workforce participation and retention^{xviii}.

A 2025 report^{xix} found that in Darwin, people earning net \$40,000 per annum must allocate 74% of their income to rent; this is more than double the 30% affordability threshold. For middle-income earners on \$60,000 per year, rent still consumes 53% of income. Even for Territorians on \$90,000 a year, rent is still 38% of income. Affordability is only achieved in Darwin at a net wage of \$120,000 per year.

The unaffordability of the private rental market has significant adverse implications in economic and social terms.

To support those who are currently housed in the private market maintain their housing and those who are vulnerable move into suitable market housing, the Strategy must reduce barriers to accessing and sustaining tenancies by:

- *Providing a greater range of financial assistance products including but not limited to, rental subsidies and bond assistance for people on low and moderate incomes and key workers.*
- *Offering financial products for public housing tenants that support access to home ownership or private rental, when affordability is the key barrier, including rent-to-buy and shared equity loans.*

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