

Let's get cracking on housing

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Opinion



WE

Public housing is desperately needed across Australia, including the NT Picture:
GLENN CAMPBELL

should all be concerned by the huge drop in new housing starts across Australia, with the Northern Territory severely affected too (NT News, NT Housing Devastated, May 6).

The building and construction sector employs about 6 per cent of all Australian workers.

With residential home builds expected to fall by 21 per cent, builders and tradies will be doing it very tough and the economic impacts for the NT will be felt through reduced wages, increased unemployment, and less income in the economy.

As reported by the NT News, the Territory has already seen a 17.6 per cent drop in wages income in the three weeks to April 4, more than twice the level nationally.

An estimated 11,000 Territorians have lost their jobs due to COVID-19 restrictions and business closures, with many more expected to follow.

Now is the time for a conversation on what we can do to emerge from this health and economic crisis in a way that minimises the carnage to business and helps keep Territorians at work and rebuilding our economy.

All options must remain on the table, consistent with the Chief Minister's commitment to do "whatever it takes to save lives, save jobs and protect Territorians".

A national proposal has been launched by housing advocates that would see the creation of at least 30,000 social housing dwellings across Australia over four years.

Taking advantage of historically low bond rates, the scheme would see the release of a \$7.2 billion capital raising for supply of desperately needed social housing across the country.

We know that in the NT there is an estimated shortfall of 8000 to 12,000 social and affordable homes.

Wait lists for public housing are as high as eight years. Many low to moderate income earners need housing and there are concerns that this number will grow as the economic impacts of the pandemic continue to bite.

Under the proposal, Commonwealth-sourced funds would be available for investment in social housing projects in the Territory.

For its part, the NT Government would be expected to make a contribution too.

But here's the good news. With the Territory facing large challenges with its budget, it wouldn't need to stump up cash. Instead, the Territory would be incentivised to contribute land. The Northern Territory Government can certainly bring land to the table. It owns significant parcels of land across the NT, including Crown Land which can be released for mixed development.

Opportunities for urban infill can also be pursued.

So where's the catch? It's hard to see one. Builders and developers get back to work building houses that Territorians need, using funds from Canberra.

The NT Government enables community housing organisations to take on projects which deliver housing as has been happening in other states for years.

The NT Government has to release some of its land, but this will generate larger and longer-term social and economic returns.

The Northern Territory Government knows the huge problem it has with its housing shortfall but currently does not have a plan.

Now, more than ever, is the time to get cracking on housing.

If we can get money from Canberra, house people who need housing, and keep builders and tradies working in the process, everybody wins. Surely that makes sense.

Peter McMillan is the executive officer of NT Shelter