



NT Shelter

Submission on Draft Legislation - \$1
billion increase to the National Housing
Infrastructure Facility

September 2024



NT Shelter

NT Shelter is the Northern Territory's peak body for affordable housing and homelessness. We advocate for affordable and appropriate housing for all Territorians, especially those on low incomes who are particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged in the housing market.

NT Shelter's work involves research and policy development, advocacy and communications, sector consultation and coordination, and capacity building.

NT Shelter is proud to work with and represent a range of organisations that make a significant contribution each day to the lives of people for whom housing is unaffordable and inaccessible. Our member organisations are specialist providers of services relating to housing and homelessness. Their focus is on low to moderate income Territorians who have a wide range of social and affordable accommodation needs, including crisis, transitional, short-term, low-cost, and supported housing. Many NT Shelter member organisations also provide professional services to support people who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness.

NT Context

The Northern Territory has a significant and disproportionate level of homelessness at twelve times the national average.ⁱ On the night of Census 2021, 13,104 Territorians were experiencing homelessness.ⁱⁱ This is almost 6% of the total population of the Northern Territory (232,605).ⁱⁱⁱ Despite holding just 1% of the total population of Australia, the Northern Territory accounts for 11% of the country's homeless population.

Two key cohorts of concern for NT Shelter members and partners are children and young people experiencing homelessness and women fleeing domestic, family violence (DFV). More context on both cohorts in the Northern Territory is included below.

Children and young people

Children and young people (>25 years of age) represent almost 50% of the Northern Territory's homeless population.^{iv} Nationally, they are 37.4% of the homeless population.^v The rate of young people experiencing homelessness in the Northern Territory is 11.74 times the Australian average.

The vast majority of youth homelessness in the Northern Territory is due to severe crowding. Young people living in severely crowded dwellings represent 87% of homeless young people.^{vi}

Whilst nationally the rate of young people (15-24 years of age) presenting alone to Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) has decreased overall in the eight years to



2022, the rate has risen by 55.8% in the Northern Territory.^{vii} The most common reason that young people seek assistance is housing crisis.^{viii}

In 2023, NT Shelter and the Office of the Children's Commissioner NT published a report on the experiences of young people in Alice Springs. When asked what would help the young people of the town exit from homelessness, 45.7% of respondents identified the need for housing and accommodation-related supports.^{ix} The majority specifically identified youth-specific accommodation.^x

We know that youth-specific accommodation is central to decreasing youth homelessness, yet despite the abysmal statistics, the Northern Territory remains the only Australian jurisdiction without proven models of youth accommodation, like the Youth Foyer approach.

Victim survivors of DFSV

Domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) and access to safe and affordable housing are inextricably linked. Inadequate housing is widely understood to be a risk factor for DFSV^{xi} and DFSV is the top reason that people, predominantly women, leave their home in Australia.^{xii}

In the 2021-22 reporting period, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reported that family and domestic violence (DFV) was the top reason clients sought assistance from specialist homelessness services.^{xiii} In the Northern Territory, this client cohort is 53% and increasing, compared with 37% nationally.^{xiv}

A critical gap in the Northern Territory housing system is the lack of transitional housing for women and children who are fleeing DFV. For women who are exiting from domestic and family violence crisis shelters or women who are not at imminent threat, there are few if any viable accommodation options in the Territory's regional centres of Katherine, Tennant Creek, Nhulunbuy and Alice Springs.

Across the Northern Territory, NT Shelter regularly hears from our member organisations and partners that, with little accommodation available, victim survivors of DFSV often manage their own homelessness by sleeping rough or couch surfing with friends and family, in some cases impacting existing public housing tenancies. This is supported by research on the female experience of homelessness, showing that women have a greater tendency to 'self-manage' homelessness.^{xv}

Services report that they regularly utilise brokerage funds to support women and children into hotels, however these options can also be unavailable (at capacity), unsuitable to the needs of the client, or reticent to accept the client, citing bans that are put in place due to destructive or intimidatory past behaviours by perpetrators. NT



Shelter partners have also raised concerns about the lack of crisis accommodation options for victim-survivors of DFSV under the age of 18.

Discussion

NT Shelter is supportive of additional investment in the NHIF to deliver targeted crisis and transitional accommodation for women and children experiencing DFV and transitional accommodation for youth. The merits of this targeted funding are clear in the Northern Territory context highlighted above.

Eligible Project Proponents

Finance under the NHIF is currently available to registered community housing providers, state, territory or local governments, government-owned investment corporations, utility providers and incorporated special purpose vehicles.

A challenge facing the Northern Territory is our developing community housing sector. In 2022, the Northern Territory Government released its Community Housing Growth Strategy which will see up to 40% of its public housing assets transferred to the registered community housing sector to manage. The opportunity for locally-based, registered community housing providers to manage social housing stock, at scale, will enable what is currently a small but highly capable and growing industry to develop.

We are strongly supportive of these measures.

However, in the meantime, there remain large geographies with a limited community housing footprint. The Barkly is an example. Despite the level of DFV in the Barkly, which on a per capita basis has the highest rate of recorded DFV-related assaults (almost three times the NT rate) and sexual assault offenses (2.6 times the NT rate),^{xvi} there is no transitional housing for women and children impacted by DFV.

This lack of accommodation leads to at-risk women and children cycling in and out of crisis accommodation. Data for 2022-23 provided by the Tennant Creek Women's Refuge (TCWR), shows that 81.9% of clients over this period were seeking assistance due to direct DFV and many are faced with a constant cycle of trauma and violence with limited accommodation options to offer a way out. For women with disability or those with access requirements, the only crisis accommodation, the TCWR, may not be an option given limited accessibility. This poses additional barriers to the safety of this cohort.

There is only one funded homelessness service provider in Tennant Creek, the Barkly's largest urban centre. There is currently no registered CHP in the region, however there are local service providers who are desperate to explore options for targeted DFV accommodation.



Time limited state and territory funding allocations

The proposed 12-month time limit is arbitrary and has the potential to negatively and severely impact the Northern Territory. Any redirection of the \$25 million earmarked for the Northern Territory to another jurisdiction would be utterly unacceptable and egregious given the sheer extent of need.

Our experience is that bringing land to market and securing all the necessary approvals for new housing projects in a quick timeframe is challenging in the Northern Territory. Considerable efforts have recently been made to examine ways to reduce red tape and improve the regulatory process and make it easier to deliver housing in the Territory. The former Chief Minister established the Housing Alliance to provide advice on how this can be effectively done and to ensure that the Territory is well placed to deliver on its commitments under the National Housing Accord Facility and the Housing Australia Future Fund Facility. With a recent change in government, we are hopeful that momentum will not be lost but this is a risk.

Despite high levels of need, the costs and risks of project development are also high and nuanced in the Northern Territory. Additional hurdles need to be overcome in terms of securing project approval given supply chain and building costs, and ensuring projects are viable. There is also a need from time to time to negotiate land use agreements with Traditional Owners of the land as well as meeting other, mainstream regulatory requirements. Delays are not uncommon.

Community-level consultation to ensure cultural considerations like mobility and family visiting will be critical to ensure the appropriate typology of any accommodation established. Effective consultation and local decision making takes time and can't be rushed.

NT Shelter and the local housing sector is also keen to understand the distribution between youth housing and DFV specific responses; both of which are at critically low levels in the Northern Territory. As highlighted, there are a number of challenges in developing in regional areas and in particular in the Northern Territory which, in part will be addressed by the upfront capital grant but the issue of lower cash flow associated with youth housing does not appear to have been considered to ensure those projects are viable.

For our part, we will be doing whatever we can to drive collaboration and partnerships between registered Community Housing Providers, local stakeholders and other project proponents to bring projects to shovel readiness before any deadlines set out in the Investment Mandate. While every effort needs to be made with urgency by all involved,



there is a risk that this may require more than 12 months but for good reason. This does not in any way mean that the Commonwealth's much needed additional investment in the NHIF is any less needed in the Northern Territory. We are therefore concerned that if the Northern Territory's allocation is not allocated in full by the 12-month period, it will be made available for projects elsewhere.

References

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ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ 2021 Census of Population and Housing. TableBuilder. Australian Bureau of Statistics; 2023.

^{iv} 2021 Census of Population and Housing. TableBuilder. Australian Bureau of Statistics; 2023.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Young people presenting alone [Internet]. Specialist homelessness services annual report 2021–22. Australian Government: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 14]. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annualreport/contents/young-peoplepresenting-alone>

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} NT Shelter, Office of the Children’s Commissioner NT (2023). *“They can’t go back home” Young People and Homelessness in Mparntwe (Alice Springs)*. Available at: <https://ntshelter.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Final-They-Cant-Go-Back-Home-YP-and-Homelessness-in-Mparntwe-Alice-Springs.pdf>

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. (2016). Family violence prevention programs in Indigenous communities, Resource Sheet no.37. Available at:

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^{xiii} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23., AIHW, Australian Government. Available at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialisthomelessness-services-annual-report/report-editions>

^{xiv} State and territory summary data and fact sheets [Internet]. Specialist homelessness services annual report 2021–22. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Australian Government; 2023 [cited 2023 May 14]. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/state-and-territory-summary-data-and-fact-sheets>

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^{xvi} Northern Territory Government and Territory Community Safety. 2023. Mapping of current investment and activity to prevent and respond to domestic, family and sexual violence in the Northern Territory. A report prepared by the Northern Territory Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Interagency Coordination and Reform Office. Available at: https://tfhc.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1274038/dfsv-mapping-report.pdf