



Comment to the Joint Select Committee
on
Northern Australia

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What is NT Shelter

NT Shelter is an independent community based incorporated body that works towards a just and fairer housing system in the Northern Territory by highlighting the housing needs of disadvantaged groups.

As the peak NT housing and homelessness body, NT Shelter primarily advocates for those on very low or low to moderate incomes and others who are disadvantaged in a market based housing system.

NT Shelter is funded by the NT Department of Housing to carry out our peak housing body role.

NT Shelter does not generally provide advice or comment to the Australian Government, rather our regular policy advice is to the NT Government and relates to key social housing issues impacting in the Northern Territory including:

- greater engagement between government and the Not-For-Profit sector,
- ensuring net gains in social housing; ie public and affordable rental housing for low income and disadvantaged Territory households as new development occurs (through the NT Government's Real Housing for Growth initiative) as well as through the re-development of older public housing estates,
- strengthening the capacity for Aboriginal management, control and delivery of housing in both urban and remote areas,
- reducing homelessness rates in the NT through a range of programs providing tenancy support, transitional housing and wrap around services for chronic homelessness,
- engaging a broader range of housing providers in the housing system including Not-For-Profit providers who may have the capacity to play a greater role in housing management and assist in filling the gap in our housing system between public housing and the high rents in the private market,
- reducing the numbers of general applicants on public housing waiting lists through a range of innovative and limited term supports which assist people into employment and to become independent from government welfare,
- providing greater opportunities for home ownership, and,
- improving housing outcomes through lands and planning.

General comment on the Consultation Paper

NT Shelter welcomes the opportunity to submit our comments to the House of Representatives Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia with regard to the Committee's Terms of Reference.

As the peak NT body for housing and homelessness, the focus of our response is primarily around the critical economic and social infrastructure needed to support the long term growth of Northern Australia, particularly from a Northern Territory perspective.

Key Issues

The Participation of Aboriginal People and Communities

The NT needs to build the economic potential of our regions and towns through a range of industries and trade links, but we need to do this in conjunction with Aboriginal communities. Developing Northern Australia provides an opportunity for Aboriginal communities to position themselves within a broader regional, national and potentially international market context.

This is a harsh, geographically vast and sparsely populated area of Australia and overwhelmingly this sparse population is made up of Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal communities and leaders in the NT have been overridden, disempowered, devalued and disengaged by a range of government policies and programs over many, many years.

Developing Northern Australia, offers a unique opportunity to make a paradigm shift in how we all work with Aboriginal people, communities, leaders and individuals in this part of the country.

In relation to building our regions and increasing the capacity and capability of Aboriginal Territorians and businesses, NT Shelter is of the view that Aboriginal community leaders must be engaged and supported to play a central role in meeting their people's needs and aspirations, and Aboriginal organisations must be resourced and mentored to take more control of their affairs and to develop strong governance structures.

An Indigenous Economic Development Strategy that invests and re-empowers Aboriginal communities, organisations, leaders and individuals over the long term is needed as is, encouragement for Aboriginal communities to invest in the housing and infrastructure in their communities – giving them a strong economic stake in its development.

It is also vital that the Economic Development Strategy be undertaken as a concerted approach to building and resourcing the strengths and capacities of Aboriginal communities to establish control

and the ability to sustain development, encouraging their contributions to the overall economy of the NT as well as to their own communities.

The development of this Strategy should be central to the Committee's broader policy considerations for Northern Australia. The incorporation of measures to ensure economic development for Aboriginal Territorians, including through continued investment in housing and infrastructure, and the creation of meaningful, sustainable employment and enterprise is critical. Government support for Aboriginal control of services, development and to investigate economic opportunities is central to this, ensuring the improved capacity of Aboriginal Territorians to fully participate in, and hence benefit from, the economy.

Infrastructure needs

It is NT Shelter's position that improved economic and social outcomes for Northern Australia will not be realised without a solid performance in the area of housing because housing plays such a critical role in facilitating access to education, employment, community safety and social and economic participation.

Housing must be seen as integral to other infrastructure investment needs.

NT Shelter addressed the central role that housing and accommodation provision plays in Indigenous Training and Jobs in its January 2014 submission to the *Commonwealth Government's Review of Indigenous Training and Employment* (refer:

http://indigenousjobsandtrainingreview.dpmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/get-involved/public-submissions/343_nt_shelter_redacted.pdf)

Access to appropriate and affordable housing is an issue that arises in respect to every household type ie; workers, students, young people, seniors, women and children, people with disabilities, families, single men with children, released prisoners and those with health issues including renal disease and mental health concerns.

The critical lack of appropriate and affordable housing in most of Northern Australia lends us to call for urgent action to increase housing supply and in remote, regional and the urban contexts. In urban settings, greater densities are needed close to transport and other community infrastructure if we are to meet not only current demand, but also to accommodate population growth that will come as more large scale development begins to occur.

The development of infrastructure needs also to take into account the remoteness of much of Northern Australia. Remoteness, cost, harshness and general difficulty are the key impediments to development and growth resulting in the lack of well-maintained infrastructure in communities, and with roads, power, water, telecommunications, transport services, and housing.

Infrastructure and asset maintenance costs in remote Australia are high. New technologies and materials which might offer lower up-front and ongoing costs (financial, social and environmental) for all types of infrastructure should be explored.

Planning for Growth

With planning for significant and long term growth in population and economic activity, NT Shelter acknowledges that change is inevitable as our land use needs continue to expand to accommodate an influx of people in our dynamic and ever-changing society. NT Shelter accepts that changes will provide opportunities for new lifestyles to emerge in Northern Australia. However, planning for these changes must involve effective consultation with existing populations and other stakeholders including the traditional owners of the regions.

NT Shelter is of the view that urgent action is required to increase housing supply and density in the NT in locations that are close to transport and other community infrastructure, if we are to meet not only current demand, but the demand that will come as more large scale development occurs. This refers to the need for significantly greater density in all centres from our cities to regional centres, now and into the future. Planning must therefore accommodate the need for more people to be well housed around key activity hubs.

NT Shelter often communicates the need for a broad range of quality housing types, sizes, tenures, management models, lot sizes and price points so that the Territory meets both current and emerging population needs. Planning for such housing needs to be encouraged within the planning regime along with innovation and best practice design for density, our climate and the urban environment.

The population of Darwin, with a mere 127,500 people combined with nearby Palmerston with around 30,500, is far, far less populated than any other Australian capital city and hence our scale puts us at a distinct disadvantage in many ways.

Other major towns in the NT which feature as the main transport, business and infrastructure hubs have even smaller populations; ie Alice Springs with 25,000, Katherine with 9,000 and Tennant Creek

with just over 3,000 people have even less scale. After the closure of the Gove refinery, the population in Nhulunbuy will be unknown although there may be up to 500 houses underutilised.

In order to support increased and sustainable commercial, pastoral, oil and gas, retail and industrial activity, the total population of the Northern Territory needs to grow – perhaps even to quadruple to a million people - but without displacing or adding to cost of living pressures to existing populations as occurs through increased investment, economic activity and gentrification.

The Darwin harbour with its existing deep sea access and capacity to continue to service increased shipping through either existing or new ports needs intensified development and all our major towns and cities need greater investment so that there is adequate transport, housing and other infrastructure requirements to accommodate much greater growth and density than has occurred over the past twenty years.

Darwin and the other major towns of the NT need real and significant investment in order to build their size and scale and hence long term sustainability. Our urban centres already have a range of businesses and support industries, schools, sport, recreational and cultural facilities, health services and an array of other services -some of which struggle for economic survival due to a lack of scale. Our cities with their existing infrastructure also have the potential to further develop to support additional industry sectors as they become established.

NT Shelter believes that with greater scale there is also far more opportunity to reduce the high cost of living pressures now encountered in the Northern Territory.

In all development areas, an integrated strategy needs to be developed for transport and infrastructure. Affordable housing must be considered as part of that infrastructure along with actions which reduce infrastructure costs and establish developer contribution levies which ensure social returns to the community including affordable housing outcomes. NT Shelter believes an integrated strategy is absolutely essential and that it needs to be developed alongside a social plan, particularly for areas more removed from existing facilities and services.

A new integrated and collaborative strategy between government, the private sector and communities needs to begin whereby innovation in materials and design, concern for the environment, Aboriginal and community ownership and investment becomes integral to planning, construction works and sustainability.

The economic development of the North must be accompanied by social and community development. The Not-For-Profit (NFP) sector and particularly Aboriginal NFP organisations in our sector must also be seen as important and potentially strong partners in communities, in regions, and in decision making and policy development. NT Shelter therefore calls for greater and ongoing consultation between governments and the NFP sector if we are to build strong and productive working relationships, ensure transparency and deliver improved services and standards across all areas of development.

It is also vital that we recognise Aboriginal communities and the NT's cultural heritage through ongoing relationships which value and truly invests in the development of Aboriginal communities, organisations, leaders businesses and individuals over the long term.

Aboriginal communities and NFPs) both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) have access to a range of funding sources which neither the public nor private sector has. These include their not-for-profit taxation status, access to philanthropic funds and other grants, and for many Aboriginal communities, the Aboriginal Benefit Account and royalties. All of these options should be should be focussed to encourage investment in infrastructure projects for the economic benefit of local communities.

The involvement of Aboriginal owned and managed business and NFP organisations would ensure local employment and incomes being generated by industry in the region, largely remains in the region. This will support incremental and ongoing investment and sustainability for the population that live there. Investing in the NFP sector (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) as part of an investment strategy in Northern Australia would be an appropriate way to ensure high social return on investment.

NT Shelter assumes that much of the housing and business development will ideally be located in existing centres and communities but we acknowledge that temporary settlements, such as for fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) operations, will be necessary where industrial development is located away from the main centres. In these cases it is essential that facilities be constructed in a way that ensures the accommodations remain as permanent low cost accommodation in the area, and that wherever possible, local resources and people be involved in the construction and future work plan; ie local labour, local services and local suppliers.

Overall, NT Shelter recommends building and investing in our existing urban centres and communities to ensure their ability to grow, prosper and support ongoing growth and industry

development. We believe with greater scale there is also far more opportunity to reduce the high cost of living pressures encountered in the Northern Territory.

NT Shelter also fully supports a commitment to cultural and environmental heritage protection and these considerations must be undertaken in full consultation and collaboration with traditional owners and environmental groups.

NT Shelter appreciates the opportunity to make comment to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia. Our representative, Ms Toni Vine Bromley, Executive Officer of NT Shelter would be pleased to meet with the Committee to provide a briefing or further information.