Tackling the Housing Deficit in Remote Communities

Territory Labor’s Remote Housing Policy
Labor believes that access to good housing is a right for all Territorians.

Having a place to sleep and shelter, to raise a family and to have personal space, is critical for the social welfare, the mental wellbeing and the health of Territorians.

Access to decent affordable housing is necessary for workers to perform their jobs, parents to raise children properly, and students to succeed in their education in the remote communities.

Labor believes that the most significant infrastructure shortage and social issue impacting on Territorians living in remote communities is the lack of sufficient decent affordable housing.

We believe that we are in the midst of a housing crisis in most remote communities. This crisis is resulting in poor outcomes for indigenous Territorians and Territorians as a whole. This crisis is exacerbated by an apparent vacuum in CLP plans for a way forward after the ending of the National Partnership Agreement for Remote Indigenous Housing.

Failure to address this crisis now and over the next decade can only result in more social dysfunction and dislocation, poorer health and education outcomes, and deteriorating law and order. Labor is concerned that with the population of most remote communities increasing, the gap in housing is widening. If this is not addressed now it will get much worse in time.

Territorians who are aged or who have a physical or mental disability, or who are recovering from dependencies or addictions, do not have specialised or purpose built housing or accommodation in most remote communities.

In government, Labor is committed to getting more Territorians into their own home, or into a rental property or supported accommodation that they can afford.

Michael Gunner
Territory Labor Leader
Labor will focus on two major programs in remote communities designed to address poor social outcomes. The first is our 0-4 Early Childhood program that has been previously announced.

The second is an intense Territory Government investment in expanding the living space, bedrooms and housing available to remote Territorians.

We also recognise that an expansive and guaranteed rolling housing program will result in more jobs and economic growth during the construction phase, with a rolling maintenance program that will continue to supply employment to local tradespersons, and other skilled and semi-skilled workers.

Labor recognises that the Northern Territory does not have the budget capacity alone to achieve the outcomes required in this area and we will be seeking Australian Government support and investment in this nation building project. To successfully argue the case for increased investment from the Australian Government Labor believes the Territory Government needs to bring some real funds and commitment to the table.

One of the issues that will need to be addressed is the Commonwealth Grants Commission decision to include funding for remote housing under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing in the GST provision to the States and Territories. This means that additional funding for remote housing reduces the Territory’s overall GST result. Given that housing people living in remote communities is a critical national project Labor believes this decision should be reversed by the Australian Government.

We will also work with indigenous Territorians and their representative bodies to boost ways for private investment to occur in housing development to open up greater housing outcomes. This will be done in close consultation with indigenous people and at a pace and in a way supported by them.

Labor will also work with bodies such as Indigenous Business Association, the Indigenous Land Corporation and other organisations to provide solutions to more housing.
To ensure that the program is developed in true partnership with Aboriginal leaders, family heads and tenants alike, we will ensure that trained interpreters are employed as liaison officers in all phases of the housing program, from basic consultation and planning, and training and employment delivery, through to maintenance and management activities.

Labor is determined to provide appropriate housing with appropriate design to ensure that housing addresses the real needs of people. We will work with indigenous people and their representatives and leading housing design innovators to ensure that housing is appropriate without being excessively expensive. There is a significant body of work already done on this and this will be used in determining plans going forward.

Labor supports the right of Territorians living in remote communities to buy their own homes. This also needs to be done as part of an overall plan with the relevant community.

In delivering on this commitment to indigenous Territorians living in remote communities Labor will treat all people with the respect they deserve and will consult, negotiate and engage with them in the government’s decision making.
In Government Labor will provide a 10 year $1.1 billion remote housing program to lift the amount of housing, living space and rooms available to Territorians living in remote communities.

These funds will be allocated from within the Territory budget for infrastructure. This budget is expected to be around $1.4 billion per year over the next few years and this allocation represents 8% of the total budget. It is within the resources of the Territory to achieve this. Labor recognises that this investment will be required to be backed by a package within the infrastructure budget which provides for the necessary civil works to match the planned housing expansion.


These funds will be additional to the Australian Government’s commitment through the national partnership. Labor will provide $500 million over 10 years from Territory infrastructure budgets to pay for this program.

HomeBuild NT will be focussed on bringing new homes on line for Territorians in remote communities. The program will be flexible enough to include remote specialist housing for aged Territorians and for those with a disability, mental condition or in recovery from addictions and dependency on alcohol and other drugs.

Within this program and all housing programs outlined Labor will provide the opportunity for residents to paint their own homes in whatever colours they choose.

While this program will begin in the 2017-18 budget and will run until 2026-27 it will be established following extensive consultation and the bringing together of existing data, information and local advice on remote community needs.
2. A Territory Labor Government will invest in repairs and maintenance of houses beyond the funds currently provided by the Australian Government.

Labor will provide an additional $20 million per year to repairs and maintenance programs once again beginning in the 2017-18 budget and extending through the full 10 years.

3. Labor will introduce a new program called Room to Breathe NT.

This program will fast track the building of rooms, ‘granny’ flats and spaces designed to provide more living space, sleeping space and shelter for remote Territorians.

The program will include outdoor living and cooking areas. $20 million per year will be provided from 2017-18 onwards for 5 years to get quick results. At the end of 5 years this program will be reviewed and recommenced for a further 5 years if it is proving successful.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Do you support the introduction of a program like Room to Breathe NT?

Will this enable more rooms and living spaces to be built?

Are there any other programs that could be implemented?
4. An expanded Government employee housing program that is accessible by locally recruited remote Government employees, with access governed by transparent criteria based on an annual assessment of priority needs.

Labor will provide $20 million per year additionally to support this initiative.

Labor believes that Territorians living in remote communities who train to work and are employed locally by Government should be rewarded with access to the Government Employee Housing program, starting where the needs and overcrowding are greatest. We understand the additional pressure this will place on the program but it is imperative that Government recognise and reward people for this achievement.

Labor recognises that this will need to be managed carefully to ensure that there is housing available to bring in outside employees where necessary. Allocation of housing for local recruits and government workers recruited from outside of the local community will be a matter that will be jointly administered by the Government and local people and will balance the need for external employees to have housing and to support government employees who are local recruits.

The expansion of the Government Employee Housing program to accommodate this additional pressure will be accompanied by a thorough assessment of the type of housing that can be quickly put into place that satisfies all EBA requirements.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

This policy change will allow local recruits in remote communities to be eligible for Government employee housing.

Do you agree with this change?

Labor believes that access to good housing is a right for all Territorians.
5. An expanded Homelands Extra funding program.

Labor will lift the program to $6000 per eligible family per year and reform the eligibility criteria.

Labor believes this program has been effective but its application and administration requires improvement.

Guidelines for expenditure should allow for the funds to be banked or rolled over, to allow applicants to apply the funds to larger expense items than just $6000. There should also be a provision to allow applicants to make contributions should they wish to do works over and above the $6000 limit.

The ban on funding the installation of air conditioners will be lifted.

To make the roll over or contribution of funds easier, improved data management systems need to be investigated. This would allow for improved relationships between service provider and applicant significantly. Many applicants get confused about how much money has been spent and what it has been spent on, even though it was at their direction. This leads to confusion and frustration about what funds are available.

Labor will investigate the development of an app or website which could allow an applicant to access their account, see what money has come in (through Government or own contribution), what money has been spent and what is currently available to use.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

Do you support Homelands Extra?

If so, how would you make it more workable?

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**Table of Expenditure on Building and Construction**

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*This funding could be diverted to other remote housing construction programs should the review deem its work completed.

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It is the intention of Labor to devolve key decision making over housing back to indigenous people living in remote communities.

Labor is prepared to devolve to shires, regional authorities or to housing groups the decision making about what to build, where to build it, how to build it and who will build it.

Labor is also prepared to work with new models of decision making that engage communities and external groups such as resource centres.

To do this Labor recognises that there will need to be support for capacity building amongst indigenous leadership in communities and that different places will want a different amount of time and method of devolution.

Our solutions will be place based, directly relate to local priorities and time frames for devolution will be flexible. A key principle will be that this devolution will be done hand in glove with indigenous people and representative groups. A Labor Government will invest in the capacity building necessary to make this work.

Additionally, we will establish the outcomes that are to be achieved over a period of time and will work with the relevant housing body to ensure that these are being achieved.

Labor’s five element housing program will be the vehicle through which funds are allocated.

Labor will work closely with the Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT (APONT) whose work and workshops identifying issues in remote housing has provided all Territorians with a way forward for improving housing in the Territory.
Managing Tenancies

Labor believes that there is now significant confusion regarding tenancy management, repairs and maintenance and housing allocation decisions.

Labor will re-invigorate the Housing Reference Groups and will ensure that communities have local housing officers to support local initiatives and improve government responses. Initially Labor will ensure that housing officers exist across 25 major areas.

Labor is prepared to devolve the tenancy management for remote communities away from Territory Housing.

Similarly Labor will review the housing repair contract arrangements in an effort to make housing repairs and maintenance a more locally provided service, with local trade workers on site for quicker response.

Leasing

Labor believes that the issues associated with leasing have been slowly worked through.

We want to work with what works; not create more administrative delays and road blocks. 40 year leases developed, with the land councils under Labor, are working to assist in deliver improvements to social housing. We will support the preference for and leasing arrangements for 40 years with the Territory Government on a block by block, town by town approach.

We’ll continue to work with land owners, land councils and Indigenous business to develop more options and opportunities for the development of housing in our remote towns.
Labor believes that the policy approach to the provision of housing on homelands and outstations is in need of rethinking. Labor understands the issues involved with building houses on what is considered private land and the impact on leasing in communities and we also understand that some outstations and homelands have empty houses while some are bursting at the seams.

However, it is clear that a one size fits all policy is not appropriate into the future.

Therefore Labor will address the issue on a case by case basis. We are prepared to provide new housing to some outstations and homelands where the proponents are prepared to place co-funding into the proposal. Labor will also investigate the establishment of a grants program that applies to building houses in outstations and homelands.

Labor will also investigate designed for purpose financial models and products that can help people borrow money to build their own homes. These models are being developed around the world and should be examined for applicability in the Territory.
TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

This discussion paper is a part of an ongoing discussion which has already involved meeting many parents, children, professionals, workers and organisation right across the Territory.

We have held a number of public forums to date with more planned.

We want to hear from you regarding the plans outlined in this paper and any other questions or suggestions you have.

Tell us what you think about the ideas in this document.

You can let us know your thoughts by emailing opposition.leader@nt.gov.au or by calling 08 8928 6668.

We look forward to hearing your thoughts and continuing our discussion in this crucial policy area for the Territory’s future.