

# STRONGER FUTURES

**IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY**

Discussion paper June 2011



Australian Government



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## Minister's Foreword



The views of people living in the Northern Territory will be at the centre of shaping what we do next to tackle the unacceptable level of disadvantage still experienced by too many Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.

Through our efforts and investments over the past four years, we have made some progress. When I speak with people in remote communities and in towns like Alice Springs, particularly women, they tell me that they and their families feel safer, their children are better fed and clothed and less money is being spent on alcohol and gambling.

But there is still much to be done and we know that governments cannot create stronger futures without community support and individual determination.

I have heard from many people that the way the Northern Territory Emergency Response was introduced by the previous government, without consultation, has caused ongoing anger, fear and distrust among Indigenous people and communities.

I believe that we must work in partnership with Aboriginal people, leaders and communities as we develop directions and policies for our future work in the Northern Territory.

We will not succeed in tackling the priority issues that continue to contribute to Indigenous peoples' disadvantage—making sure children get a good education, reducing alcohol abuse, and getting people into jobs—if there is distrust between government and community, if people do not feel respected to take responsibility for their own lives.

Likewise, governments must continue to shoulder our responsibility for delivering much needed investments, as well as ensuring laws and income and employment support encourages Aboriginal people to live strong independent lives.

Given the Australian Government's existing extensive involvement in the Northern Territory, the unacceptable level of Indigenous disadvantage and significant funding provided to the Northern Territory Government, the Australian Government will continue to play a key role in the Northern Territory. The Australian Government will continue to support the Northern Territory Government to strengthen its capacity to meet the high levels of need for vital services and expectations for service delivery.

Now is the time for us to examine what has been achieved in the past four years, looking at what has worked well and where improvements can be made.

We want to build on the foundations established through our unprecedented investment in infrastructure and improved services. More police stationed in remote communities, more teachers in schools, health checks for children, health professionals on the ground, new crèches and playgroups, and across the Territory 310 new houses and 1400 rebuilds and refurbishments.

Together we need to confront the problems that remain, and work to ensure children are attending school, break the cycle of welfare dependence, and take strong measures to tackle the devastation caused by alcohol abuse.

The Government will be talking with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory over the coming months. I encourage everyone to get involved in these discussions so that we can build stronger futures together.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jenny Macklin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

**The Hon. Jenny Macklin MP**  
Minister for Families, Housing,  
Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

22 June 2011

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# 1 Building stronger futures

The situation for many Aboriginal people and families in the Northern Territory remains critical. Too many children do not go to school. Alcohol still fuels violence and abuse, devastating lives of far too many.

Four years on from the start of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), there have been some real changes but more action and new directions are required.

Central to this is the Australian Government's commitment to work in partnership with Aboriginal people and communities, tackling difficult issues and sharing common goals. Working together to build stronger futures for individuals, families and communities and providing improved health and safety and more opportunities for children will be at the heart of what we do next in the Northern Territory.

A stronger future for children means a proper education that will lead to future learning and employment.

A stronger future for children means being raised in an environment that is not locked in the grip of alcohol abuse and social dislocation, where even going to school becomes impossible.

Schools need to be a key part of every community and school attendance must be non-negotiable.

The Government is determined to continue to do all it can to reduce the devastation and community dysfunction driven by alcohol abuse.

Valuable lessons have been learned over the past four years about what has worked, what could be improved and, importantly, how much more there is to do in building a stronger future for Aboriginal people living in the Northern Territory.

This discussion paper sets out priorities for building on the work of the NTER and identifies directions for reform, particularly to improve education for children, to expand employment opportunities and to tackle alcohol abuse.

It is a starting point for debate and consultation on new approaches and new ideas. The Government wants to hear the ideas and views of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Territorians, and will hold public meetings and community consultations over coming months.

These community consultations and public meetings will give people the opportunity to comment on the ideas outlined in the paper and to put forward additional proposals.

All future actions taken by the Government will comply with the Racial Discrimination Act, either because they are non-discriminatory, or because they are special measures. Special measures are actions that the Government takes to help people of a particular race claim their human rights equally with others, and to protect the people who need it most.

Throughout the past four years, the Australian Government has been working with the Northern Territory Government to jointly strengthen the way we tackle the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people and communities. Service delivery in areas such as education, policing, social housing and child protection has traditionally been the responsibility of the Northern Territory Government. The Commonwealth will continue to support the Northern Territory Government to strengthen its capacity to meet expectations and high levels of need in delivering these vital services.

# Building stronger futures

Given the Australian Government's existing extensive involvement, the high levels of Indigenous disadvantage and significant funding provided to the Northern Territory Government, the Australian Government will continue to play a key role in the Northern Territory.

## Background

The Northern Territory Emergency Response was introduced by the previous Australian Government in 2007 following the release by the Northern Territory Government of the *Little Children are Sacred* report.

After its election in November 2007, the new Government announced that it would review the NTER after the first year of its operation. The independent review reported in October 2008. In its response to the review, the Government said it would:

- recognise as a matter of urgent national significance the continuing need to address the unacceptably high levels of disadvantage and social dislocation experienced by remote communities and town camps in the Northern Territory
- reset its relationship with Indigenous people based on genuine consultation, engagement and partnership
- respect Australian human rights obligations and reinstate the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*.

From June to the end of August 2009 the Government conducted extensive consultations with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory about how the NTER should proceed. These consultations involved people across the 73 communities affected by the NTER. More than 500 meetings were held in communities, attended by several thousand people.

Subsequently, the Australian Parliament passed legislation in June 2010 to:

- reinstate the operation of the Racial Discrimination Act in relation to the Northern Territory Emergency Response
- introduce a new, non-discriminatory scheme of income management
- redesign the alcohol and pornography restrictions, five-year leases and community stores licensing
- redesign law enforcement powers to improve and make them sustainable for the greater long-term benefit of Indigenous people.

Key legislated NTER measures will cease in August 2012. Funding for most measures continues to 30 June 2012.

## 2 Benefits achieved through the NTER and Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory

The lives of many Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory have improved through the work done over the last four years. Women, children and the elderly are now safer; children are better fed and clothed; there is less pressure on welfare recipients for money to be spent on alcohol, drugs and gambling. Significant new employment opportunities have been created.

The Government's investment in the Northern Territory since November 2007 has provided new infrastructure and services and underpinned important reforms.

In **housing**, the Government is investing \$1.7 billion over 10 years and has recently announced the acceleration of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing in the Northern Territory. This investment will provide more than 900 new houses and more than 2900 rebuilds and refurbishments across the Northern Territory by the end of 2013. At the end of June 2011, more than 310 new houses will have been built and over 1400 rebuilt or refurbished.

Thirteen new voluntary leasing arrangements now offer opportunity for economic development and better housing, including through 80 or 99-year whole-of-township leases in Nguuiu, Umbakumba, Angurugu and Milyakburra. The communities of Wadeye, Maningrida, Gunbalunya, Galiwin'ku, Milingimbi, Ngukurr, Lajumanu, Hermannsburg and Gapuwiyak have agreed to 40-year Housing Precinct Leases to underpin new housing.

Through the Alice Springs Transformation Plan, the Government has been working with communities to transform the town camps into normal suburbs with appropriate infrastructure and services. Construction of 85 new houses in the town camps is well underway, along with the rebuilding or refurbishing of around 200 existing houses. This work was able to commence after 40-year sub-leases were successfully negotiated with individual town camp housing associations.

To make **communities safer**, 62 additional Northern Territory police officers are being deployed, mostly in remote communities, and, in addition, Sworn Community Engagement Police officers will start work in eight communities from July 2011. Police are now located in 18 communities that did not have a police presence before the NTER and five new, permanent police stations are being built in Gapuwiyak, Ramingining, Yarralin, Arparra and Imanpa. The work of the police is supported by 80 active night patrols and 22 operational safe places, which altogether provide jobs for around 430 local Aboriginal people. Crisis accommodation is available for more than 750 adults and 500 children. A Mobile Child Protection Team has provided support in over 2700 child protection cases, and Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Workers are operating in 12 communities, supporting child protection workers dealing with abuse and neglect.

In late 2010, in response to the findings of the Bath inquiry into the Northern Territory child protection system, the Government announced a range of measures including an additional 15 mobile child protection workers, 22 additional Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Workers, a new intensive family support program for vulnerable families, and a new child protection income management system to ensure that the needs of children in vulnerable families are met.

In **tackling alcohol abuse**, alcohol management plans (AMPs) have been introduced into every regional centre outside the Darwin region—Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine and Nhulunbuy/East Arnhem—and to some remote areas in the Northern Territory. Community-driven AMPs are helping to reduce alcohol-related harm in a number of communities, including incidents of alcohol-fuelled crime, anti-social behaviour and serious assault.

Groote Eylandt in particular has had significant success through its AMP. Between 2005 and 2009 anti-social behaviour has declined by 74 per cent, property crime decreased by 68 per cent and aggravated assaults also decreased by 68 per cent. In Nhulunbuy the number of people in protective custody has halved since its AMP was introduced in early 2008.

## Benefits achieved through the NTER and Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory

The Government has also provided funding to increase the drug and alcohol treatment and rehabilitation workforce across six Aboriginal Community Controlled Medical Services and five stand-alone services.

These measures complement the important reforms recently announced by the Northern Territory Government to tackle problem drinking, including the introduction of a Banned Drinker Register and ID scanners.

Since coming to office in 2007, the Australian Government has delivered **more jobs** for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.

Up to December 2010 more than 4100 job placements have been brokered with the assistance of Job Network and Job Services Australia providers. In the six months from 1 July 2010 to 31 December 2010, 908 job placements were achieved—55 per cent more than in the same period in 2009.

In addition, 2241 ongoing jobs have been created in Commonwealth and Northern Territory Government service delivery, moving people out of positions in Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) into employment with wages, superannuation and other benefits. The Australian Government is reviewing remote participation and employment services with a view to new arrangements being in place by 1 July 2013.

The NTER itself has created new jobs for Aboriginal people in remote communities. More than 200 are employed in child care, more than 350 in night patrols, and up to 95 at any one time in safe houses. More than 160 local people work in the School Nutrition Program and there are over 115 new jobs for Aboriginal people as health, family and community workers. Locally recruited Indigenous Engagement Officers serve in 23 communities.

Together the Northern Territory and Australian Governments are investing \$30 million in a Shires Indigenous Workforce Package that will provide sustained employment for up to 530 Aboriginal people over the next three years. This includes mentoring support for the Indigenous workforce. The Australian Government set a target of 20 per cent Indigenous employment from our \$1.7 billion investment in housing. This is being exceeded, with over 1050 employed since the start of construction, representing around 30 per cent Indigenous employment. Thirty-five Indigenous owned businesses and 15 local Indigenous organisations, suppliers and small enterprises have helped to deliver works in communities.

In **education** the Government has funded more than 185 additional teachers and assisted existing Indigenous teachers and assistant teachers to upgrade their qualifications. The Government has also provided funding for targeted schools to make enhanced services available to students with Conductive Hearing Loss and to implement whole-school approaches to literacy. The School Nutrition Program has provided more than 7000 meals each school day to children in 66 remote community schools. Through a partnership with Northern Territory education providers, more than 50 new houses have been built to accommodate teachers in remote communities.

The Government is also trialling the School Enrolment and Attendance Measure, which is a new way of making sure children attend school by attaching conditions to parents' income support payments. As a result, a number of children, some of whom had not been enrolled for more than two years, are now enrolled in school.

In **early childhood**, the Government has funded the building of nine new crèches, and the upgrade of 13 existing crèches. In addition, playgroups are operating in six communities and in the Katherine and Tennant Creek town camps.

The Government, in partnership with the Northern Territory Government, is committed to ensuring that by 2013 all children, including Indigenous children living in remote communities, will have access to an early childhood education program in the year before full-time schooling.

Five Children and Family Centres are being established across the Northern Territory in areas with high Indigenous populations and high levels of disadvantage (four will be in remote communities). These centres will bring together important services for children and families including child care, early learning and parent support programs.

The Government is supporting a number of initiatives to provide **young people** with development opportunities. These include a case management program promoting health and wellbeing, youth camps providing team building, self esteem and life skills, peer mentoring, diversion activities and alternative education programs to give disengaged young people the social skills and confidence to return to education.

In **health**, more than 10 600 child health checks have been conducted, and more than 24 000 follow-up services provided to Indigenous children for audiology, dental, and ear, nose and throat procedures. Since the Remote Area Health Corps began in October 2008, 691 health professionals including doctors, nurses and specialists have undertaken short-term placements that address critical health workforce shortages.

The Government has funded a major expansion and reform of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander primary health care in the Northern Territory. Beginning in July 2008, the Expanding Health Service Delivery Initiative has established 273 new positions for doctors, nurses and Aboriginal health workers.

With the licensing of 92 **community stores** there has been a significant improvement in the quality, quantity and range of fresh food available in remote communities, and in the management and operation of stores. Cleanliness and hygiene in the stores has improved and Indigenous staff numbers have grown. The licensing of stores has meant an end to 'book-up' (where stores offered customers 'informal' credit secured with their debits cards or bank account details) helping many people break the cycle of debt.

In July 2010 the Government made major changes to **income management** in the Northern Territory. Income management is now non-discriminatory, applying to all eligible income support recipients across the Northern Territory, and provides financial stability and assistance to vulnerable people and families. At 22 April 2011, there were 16 796 people on the new model of income management in the Northern Territory. Of those people who were eligible to leave compulsory income management after the new scheme was introduced, some 55 per cent chose to sign up for Voluntary Income Management.

Models of income management are also being trialled in parts of Western Australia and Queensland. From 1 July 2012 a targeted model of income management will be introduced in five new locations across Australia, as part of a package of place-based measures targeting very disadvantaged locations, announced in the 2011–12 Budget. As income management now also applies in other areas of Australia it is no longer part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response.

## 3 There is more to be done

Progress has been made but there is a long way to go. Compared with other states, the Northern Territory has the widest gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people by a long way.

Average life expectancy for Indigenous males and females in the Northern Territory is lower than all other states and territories. Northern Territory Indigenous men had an average life expectancy of only 61.5 years in 2005–07 compared to a national average for all Australian men of 78.7 years.

The Northern Territory also has the highest Indigenous infant mortality rate in Australia and the largest gap compared with the non-Indigenous population. The overall mortality rate for Indigenous children aged 0–4 years is three times the non-Indigenous rate in the Northern Territory.

Education is another area where the gap remains too large. The Northern Territory has very low levels of literacy and numeracy among Indigenous students and the lowest school attendance rates. It also has the largest gap in Year 12 attainment rates—non-Indigenous 20–24 year olds are over four times more likely to have completed year 12 or equivalent than Indigenous 20–24 year olds.

Employment outcomes are equally poor. The Northern Territory has the largest gap in the proportion of people of working age who are employed. Without counting CDEP as employment, Indigenous people of working age are over two-and-a-half times less likely to be employed than non-Indigenous people of working age in the Northern Territory.

In the Northern Territory, consumption of alcohol is 1.5 times the national level, alcohol related harm is four times the national level and alcohol related deaths are 3.5 times the national level. For non-Indigenous people in the Northern Territory the rates of alcohol-related deaths are twice as high as the national average, while the rates for Indigenous Territorians are nine to ten times higher.

In the Northern Territory Indigenous children are nearly seven times more likely to be the subject of a child protection substantiation than non-Indigenous children. The Northern Territory also has a higher crime victimisation rate for assault than any other State or Territory.

The Council of Australian Governments is leading the work to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage across Australia, but it is clear that urgent and additional measures are necessary to achieve the change needed for Indigenous people in the Northern Territory.

# 4 Priority areas for action

For Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory to have stronger futures, we need to move beyond the initial emergency response and to focus on what still needs to be done. This paper sets out eight proposed areas for future action:

- School attendance and educational achievement
- Economic development and employment
- Tackling alcohol abuse
- Community safety
- Health
- Food security
- Housing
- Governance.

Getting children to attend school and improving educational achievement, getting more Indigenous people employed, and dealing with alcohol abuse will be the key to building a stronger future for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.

The focus on improving community safety, child protection, health, food security, housing and governance will also need to continue.

A stronger future can only be built in partnership with Aboriginal people and communities, because we know that the issues we want to tackle are the issues which many Aboriginal people confront every single day.

This discussion paper is a starting point for the conversation we need to have.

## Priority areas for action

### a) School attendance and educational achievement

It is neither fair nor acceptable that so many children in the Northern Territory are not getting the education they need to give them the best possible start in life. This is why the Government believes education is one of the key areas we need to focus on to give children a stronger future.

Indigenous children and young people in the Northern Territory have some of the worst educational outcomes in Australia. Compared with other jurisdictions, the Northern Territory has the largest gap in educational achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and significantly lower school attendance and enrolment rates for Indigenous students.

As a result of the past four years of work, the Government has tackled some of the conditions that have been hindering children's ability to get an education. By investing in decent housing, we are giving children the space they need to study and sleep without the noise and chaos of overcrowding. Through income management family finances are stabilised so there is money to spend on school uniforms and books. In addition, regular health checks, a better diet through the School Nutrition Program and early intervention activities such as crèches, playgroups and family programs help children thrive. By 2013 all children will have access to a preschool program in the year before formal schooling. Preschool provides early learning, developmental milestones and social experiences that set children up for life and a strong start to school. We have also invested in crèche and other early childhood services because of the importance of quality early childhood education and care to the development of young children.

But we know there is much more to be done. Importantly, government cannot do this alone—it needs to work with parents, families and communities. Although preschool and other early childhood services are not compulsory, regular attendance can greatly improve children's school readiness. As children grow, it is the responsibility of parents and families to make sure that their children go to school regularly and are encouraged and supported to stay on and finish their schooling. We need to work in partnership with communities, schools and families to develop strong learning communities. Schools need to be at the heart of a community, and school attendance is non-negotiable.

Once at school, high-quality teaching in a well-resourced environment is essential for children to achieve. The Australian and Northern Territory Governments are working together to improve the quality of teachers in disadvantaged areas to get better results and to upgrade school buildings to provide early learning opportunities and trade training.

Specific NTER measures are helping children achieve at school. These include:

- the School Nutrition Program, a breakfast and/or lunch program in 66 schools
- the initiatives supporting Quality Teaching and Improving Literacy and Numeracy outcomes, which are strengthening the teaching workforce and giving students an improved educational experience
- funding for more teachers and more housing for teachers.

Under the Australian Government's School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM) trial, parents receiving Australian Government income support payments (such as Parenting Payment and Newstart Allowance) are required to demonstrate to Centrelink that their children are enrolled at school and that they are taking reasonable steps to ensure that their children attend school regularly. SEAM is operating in the Northern Territory and Queensland and initial advice shows that it is having a positive impact on parents ensuring their children are enrolled and regularly attending school.

The Northern Territory Government has recently amended the Northern Territory Education Act to boost school attendance and ensure every child in the Territory attends school every day. This includes strengthening penalties for non-attendance and non-enrolment, directing parents and youths to attend meetings about a child's education, and broadening the powers and functions of an authorised person to deal with truancy and non-participation. It is important that Commonwealth policy on education supports these changes.

### **Future directions**

Improving the education of Indigenous children requires concerted effort—from government, schools, communities and families. It also needs to start from birth, working directly with parents so they understand the benefits of play, socialisation and early exposure to literacy and learning. Participation in quality childcare, playgroups and pre-school helps very young children and parents establish important learning and attendance habits that set them on the path to achieve at school. Research shows that children from very disadvantaged families may benefit from two years of high-quality early childhood education to get them ready for school.

The quality of the experience that children receive in early childhood education and school is essential to educational achievement. This comes down to the skills and experience of educators, teachers and school principals, particularly in remote preschools and schools across the Northern Territory, and the support services available to help teachers in the classroom.

Improvements could be made through:

- promoting closer connections between early childhood services, preschools and schools to improve transitions
- improving the quality and accessibility of early childhood services, including crèches
- ensuring students have personalised learning plans in place that are negotiated between the school and family, and monitored closely
- increasing the number of teachers with English as a Second Language qualifications
- providing on-site or regionally based professional development for local Indigenous teaching staff
- enabling existing Indigenous teacher assistants to gain teaching qualifications
- providing training and assistance for teachers to deal with discipline issues
- increasing special needs assistance in classrooms, such as ensuring children have access to hearing and vision programs where needed.

Poor school attendance, especially in the first two to three years of school, has long-lasting negative effects on the literacy and numeracy achievements of children. These children are also less likely to be living in a home where literacy and learning are nurtured.

## Priority areas for action

### **Issues for discussion**

What are the key factors in getting children and young people in remote communities to go to school regularly?

How can we improve educational outcomes of young people in remote communities?

What can the Government do to encourage this, for example through links to welfare payments?

How can parents be encouraged and assisted to better support and play a greater role in their children's development, education and health?

How can schools and local communities improve access and participation in early childhood services?

How can we attract good teachers to remote schools and preschools, and retain them?

How would you like to be involved?

## b) Economic development and employment

The Government is committed to getting more Indigenous Territorians into properly paid jobs. A job gives purpose and meaning to people's lives. Having a decent job also gives people the economic independence and security they need to provide for themselves and their families.

There has been some progress but more needs to be done, particularly to extend opportunities to disadvantaged job seekers and those outside the labour market. Improving education will be an important foundation for getting a job, staying in employment and being able to take advantage of economic opportunities.

People must also be encouraged to take responsibility for getting and keeping a job, with support from government agencies such as Centrelink and Job Services Australia. This will help break the cycle of welfare dependency, which robs people of the meaning and purpose a job can bring.

In the Northern Territory more than a third of Indigenous people of working age are not in the labour force, compared to two in 10 non-Indigenous Territorians. And Indigenous employment rates for 15 to 64-year-olds fall to one-third when Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) are not counted as employment.

While the increase in job placements and the conversion of CDEP jobs into real jobs has delivered some advances in employment, there is still a significant employment challenge, especially in many remote communities where job opportunities are limited.

More than 1050 Indigenous people have been employed in housing and construction works funded by the Australian Government's \$1.7 billion investment. As we continue to build more houses, we will work with Indigenous people to ensure that employment continues to be a key outcome of the construction work.

Welfare reform is an important tool in promoting active engagement in study and employment, enhancing financial capability and encouraging improvements in family and social responsibilities. The new model of income management, for example, means that people in employment and study may be exempt from income management. At 22 April 2011, 850 people had been exempted from income management due to becoming full-time students.

It will also be necessary to identify new opportunities for economic development in remote regions. This will include emerging industries and also existing industries such as tourism and mining. It will also be important to enable Indigenous people to get an increased share in jobs in community services, which is a major source of potential local employment.

Many remote towns in the Northern Territory are located on Aboriginal land. These titles are communally held and inalienable, which means they cannot be sold and consequently cannot be used to secure a bank loan. Unlike the arrangements that apply to most Australians, this can make it difficult for Indigenous corporations and individuals to use land to secure loans to buy a house or start a business.

Long term leases, which protect underlying title in remote Aboriginal communities, will help to expand opportunities for business investment such as farming, tourism and retail businesses and home ownership.

## Priority areas for action

### Future Directions

Lifting Indigenous employment requires concerted effort by individuals and families, all levels of government and the private and non-government sectors. The Australian Government has decided to review remote participation and employment services with a view to new arrangements being in place by 1 July 2013. National consultations will begin soon with people in remote Indigenous communities, service providers, employers and other stakeholders on how to improve participation and employment services. The Australian Government considers that a more simplified and integrated servicing model might be more appropriate for remote Australia. Key principles would include a focus on maximising local employment where possible while recognising the very limited labour market in many remote Northern Territory communities. The Australian Government welcomes people's views now on how employment services can be improved, and there will be additional opportunities later in the year as part of the consultations on remote employment services.

Further reform of remote employment programs, including CDEP, will be critical to encouraging broader participation. Other possible directions include:

- improving educational achievement including the provision of training and mentors to help young people in the transition from school to employment
- tailoring training so that it meets the needs of local job opportunities
- helping child care workers in remote communities to improve their skills and qualifications to meet the demand for qualified child-care positions
- funding employment-related accommodation so people can move from remote communities and take up training and employment opportunities elsewhere
- working with the Northern Territory Government to increase employment opportunities through the Shires Indigenous Workforce Strategy, building on the Government's \$4.8 million contribution to employ Indigenous mentors
- continuing to improve the service delivery and accessibility of Centrelink in remote areas; and
- developing procurement models that open up direct contracting opportunities for Indigenous suppliers, including in housing construction and maintenance.

### Issues for discussion

How can the Government further improve employment and economic development opportunities in Northern Territory remote communities?

What changes can be made to remote participation and employment programs in the Northern Territory to increase economic participation?

What can be done to link jobseekers in Northern Territory communities with employment opportunities?

## c) Tackling alcohol abuse

Too many families are still devastated by the effects of alcohol abuse. This problem lies at the heart of the continuing dysfunction in some Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. It is a serious problem and the Government is ready to take serious measures to address it. We know we need to tackle the supply of alcohol. We also need to work in partnership with people and communities to understand and address the underlying causes of the demand for alcohol.

At all times we need to ensure that children and vulnerable people are protected from the extreme damage that alcohol can inflict. It is time for a serious discussion. We want to hear from Aboriginal communities about local solutions to alcohol abuse and base our next steps on evidence of what works.

The Australian Government is determined to continue to use all measures at its disposal to reduce the appalling levels of violence, harm and community dysfunction caused by alcohol abuse in Indigenous communities.

Across the 73 NTER communities, alcohol contributes to almost 30 per cent of domestic violence incidents and more than a third of confirmed assault incidents. It is estimated that the cost of alcohol related harm across the Territory totals \$642 million a year.

Currently, under NTER alcohol restrictions, which are a special measure, it is an offence to drink, possess, supply or transport liquor in a prescribed area with the exception of licensed premises and individual permits for some recreational, tourism and commercial fishing activities.

Following extensive consultations with Indigenous people in 2009, the Government has encouraged communities to develop locally-based alcohol management plans (AMPs).

In cases where the proposed AMP requires the variation of existing alcohol restrictions, the Government takes into account the level of alcohol-related harm in that area before giving approval.

The Northern Territory Government recently introduced reforms aimed to reducing problem drinking. In particular the introduction of ID scanners and a Banned Drinkers Register will assist communities to enforce decisions to stop problem drinkers having access to alcohol.

## Priority areas for action

### **Future Directions**

Reducing alcohol-related harm requires concerted action on a number of fronts. Action is needed which tackles alcohol demand and supply, as well as offering support and rehabilitation. It involves working with communities, with problem drinkers and with the liquor industry. We want to hear from Aboriginal communities about local solutions to alcohol abuse.

The Government believes that current alcohol restrictions should remain and will consult and work with communities to develop ways to make them more effective in tackling local alcohol abuse—by strengthening current Alcohol Management Plans where necessary, and helping those communities without AMPs to develop and agree plans.

We will consider developing minimum criteria for AMPs to ensure they are more effective in reducing alcohol-related harm. This could include urban and regional locations where levels of alcohol-related harm are as high as or higher than in remote communities.

The Government has increased support for problem drinkers by providing more drug and alcohol treatment and rehabilitation workers, expanding treatment and rehabilitation services in regional centres, and strengthening education and professional development for the drug and alcohol workforce across the Northern Territory. We also support the Northern Territory Government's recent laws to tackle problem drinking.

### **Issues for discussion**

Will communities benefit from continuing the current NTER alcohol restrictions? How could they be improved?

How can alcohol management plans be strengthened to ensure that there is a clear focus on reducing alcohol-related harm?

What other things should be done to reduce alcohol-related harm?

What can we do to reduce the supply of alcohol, including very cheap alcohol?

## d) Community safety and the protection of children

Protecting children and improving community safety are the founding principles of the NTER prompted by the findings of the *Little Children are Sacred* report. Before the introduction of the NTER there were no law-enforcement authorities in many remote communities. As a result serious crime escalated and often went unreported.

As well as measures to reduce alcohol-related violence, community safety has been improved with additional police and police stations, the expansion of night patrols, new safe places offering security and protection, a Mobile Child Protection Team and more remote Aboriginal Family and Community Workers. A number of communities are also developing community safety plans which involve community members identifying safety issues and how to resolve them.

The need for services to help parents and carers nurture their children was a key finding of the *Growing them strong, together* report (the Bath Report), released last year. The Australian Government has responded with new services that will provide intensive support for parents and carers to gain practical skills to help them make sure their children are safe and well. The Government has also provided extra funding for the Northern Territory Government to improve its child protection services in remote communities and to employ an extra 22 Aboriginal Family and Community Workers in remote communities. The Northern Territory Government also responded swiftly, announcing the creation of a new separate department to better focus on the welfare of children; a significant boost to the numbers of child protection workers; the introduction of community safety and wellbeing teams in the largest 20 communities from July 2011; and new arrangements to better assess child protection notifications.

Legislative measures have also been adopted to make communities safer, especially for women and children. These include special measures restricting sexually explicit or very violent material, controls on publicly funded computers, special law enforcement powers for the Australian Crime Commission to investigate serious violence and child abuse, and the capacity for communities to ask that police be allowed to go into private residences to stop alcohol-related harm. They also include laws to ensure that customary law or cultural practice cannot increase or lessen the seriousness of criminal behaviour and therefore the sentence imposed on someone found guilty of a crime. The Government would welcome views on whether laws like these should continue.

The Government believes that these measures have made a significant contribution to Indigenous people's safety and wellbeing. However, reports such as the Bath Report clearly demonstrate that there is a long way to go before Aboriginal people, especially children, in Northern Territory communities are as safe as other Australians. The Bath Report found that, compared to children in other States and Territories, children in the Northern Territory are more likely to be raised in unsatisfactory environments and to be exposed to various forms of harm such as exposure to family violence, alcohol and drug abuse, physical and sexual abuse and neglect.

### **Future directions**

The Government believes it is important to build on the foundations of NTER measures to improve community safety in the best interests of children and families. Tackling alcohol abuse, which lies behind so much violence, is clearly important. There are also a number of other protections and services that governments and communities are and could be using to increase safety. The Government wants to know from the people affected what works well and should be retained and expanded, what does not, and what new things need to be done.

## Priority areas for action

### **Issues for discussion**

What is the best way to make communities safer?

Which services make the most difference?

- Safe houses?
- Police?
- Community night patrols?
- Child protection workers?
- Better planning and use of existing services?
- Others?

Should the current special measures about community safety continue? How could they be improved?

## e) Health

Key measures under the NTER have been targeted at improving the health of children, their families and communities. Tackling alcohol abuse, making communities safer places to live, and making sure children grow up in safe, healthy houses all contribute to improving the long-term health of Indigenous children. With the introduction of the NTER, initial rapid response child health checks were provided and the required follow-up services were subsequently delivered.

The NTER also greatly expanded and reformed primary health care. People in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory are now receiving better primary health care and a higher level of treatment in oral health, hearing health and the trauma associated with abuse. The range of new comprehensive primary health care services, including 273 new positions for doctors, nurses and Aboriginal Health Workers, provides the foundation for future progress.

Nevertheless, it will take time for health care reforms and expanded services to translate into better health results for Indigenous people. This can be seen in the hospitalisation rates for Indigenous children aged up to 14 which have not changed markedly over the seven-year period from 2001 to 2008.

### **Future Directions**

The Government supports the continued expansion and reform of primary health care with the focus on regional, community-controlled health services. It also supports the continuation of the existing range of health services in the Northern Territory.

Additional initiatives could include:

- more alcohol and other drug treatment services to complement existing measures
- better support for mental health, and care for people with severe and debilitating mental illness
- improving specialist and allied health-care services to overcome the deficiencies in the referral of Indigenous children for ongoing treatment, through better systems responses, including hearing and oral health
- improving the services available for children who are dealing with the trauma associated with abuse, through better therapeutic and educational responses.

### **Issues for discussion**

Have individuals, families and communities benefited from the expanded health services?

Which health programs and services are working well?

Which programs and services need to be improved?

Are there any health programs and services which are missing?

What else could be done to improve health outcomes in your community?

How would you like to be involved?

## Priority areas for action

### f) Food security

A secure food supply—one that is reliable, healthy, reasonably priced and varied—is the expectation of most people living in Australia. But being able to buy fresh and healthy food has long been a major problem for many Indigenous people living in remote communities. The distance from the main distribution centres combined with the small scale of many stores, and the cost of building and maintaining them in remote communities, has meant that prices are consistently high and often fresh food has not been available.

The community store is often the only provider in remote communities so there is no competition to promote better services and pricing. Although people still bring in ‘bush tucker’ where it is available, this is not enough to sustain whole communities. And the situation gets worse in the wet season when roads are often impassable for months. In addition the commercial skills and business controls needed to maintain a viable good value store have not always been in place.

To overcome these problems, the NTER introduced a licensing scheme for community stores. This special measure meant store managers were required to offer a reasonable range of healthy food and drink as well as promoting and pricing them to make them attractive to customers. Stores have also been required to adopt good business practices and governance. At the same time they have been supported with advice, training and help with equipment to make their operations more efficient so that they can offer the lowest possible pricing. ‘Book-up’ has been abolished in licensed stores, helping many people escape the cycle of debt. Follow-up assessments are undertaken to make sure store standards are being maintained.

The Government also provided funding for Outback Stores, a Commonwealth-owned company that communities can contract to run their stores. Through Outback Stores, communities can ensure their stores are properly managed and are supported to be viable in the long run.

On the advice of the Aboriginals Benefit Account (ABA) Advisory Committee, the Government has also allocated \$51.8 million for an ABA Stores Infrastructure project that will provide new stores, upgrade existing stores and improve store manager housing for 18 communities across the Northern Territory. Additional funding for store-related infrastructure is also provided through the stores licensing scheme and through Outback Stores.

A recent independent evaluation found that stores licensing had expanded the range of healthy food available and improved store environments, pricing and financial transparency. The abolition of book-up was considered a major step forward and some ‘rogue traders’ had left the sector as a result of the licensing requirements. However the evaluation also showed that the cost of food and the quality of takeaway food continues to be a problem.

#### **Future Directions**

The Government’s aim is for remote community stores to provide an environment, choice and pricing that is as close as possible, given the problems of distance, to that available to people in non-remote areas of the Northern Territory.

To help achieve this, the Government supports the continued licensing of community stores. At the same time the Government will work to address issues raised in the evaluation. Options could include greater flexibility in the assessment process, extra support for effective store committees and reviewing the sanctions applied for not complying with licensing conditions. It will continue to provide support to stores which are essential for food security but which are not commercially viable. Further options in the areas of regulation, management support, infrastructure and supply could also be considered.

This is not just an issue for government. The operators of the stores themselves and the communities that own them also have a responsibility and a vested interest. The stores are businesses; the local community gets the most benefit from a well-run local store; and local people are best placed to develop local solutions. Local people taking responsibility for their stores was an issue raised during the licensing evaluation. Some people were concerned that too much government involvement and control, even with the best intentions, reduced the community's sense of ownership of the store. The Government respects and encourages these views and wants to support ownership by local people.

#### **Issues for discussion**

How can the current stores licensing arrangements be improved?

What other ways can we ensure that good quality food is available and affordable in communities?

What is the best way of supporting store committees to oversee their stores?

What is the best way of combining strong business and retail expertise with strong community ownership?

## Priority areas for action

### g) Housing

Decent housing in the Northern Territory is a major priority for the Government. It is critical to closing the gap in health, education and employment. It is pivotal to protecting children, giving them a place to study and improving their health and hygiene. For their parents, a decent house to live in supports everyday social norms like having a job and going to work each day.

Despite an unprecedented investment in remote housing by the Government, after decades of neglect and poor legislative and regulatory requirements, there remains a serious shortage of decent houses in remote Northern Territory communities. Overcoming this backlog is a long-term task but we have made substantial progress. By the end of 2013, we will have delivered over 900 new houses and more than 2900 rebuilds and refurbishments across the Northern Territory. At the end of June 2011, more than 310 new houses will have been built and over 1400 rebuilt or refurbished.

The Government is also negotiating leases with Traditional Owners to support the expansion of public and social housing in remote communities and to allow stronger property and tenancy management. The Government currently holds five-year leases over 64 communities under the NTER, providing short-term security of tenure.

All five-year leases will end in August 2012, to be replaced as soon as possible with voluntary arrangements. Thirteen new voluntary leasing arrangements now offer opportunity for economic development and better housing and infrastructure. Through leasing, Traditional Owners retain their ownership of the land while giving governments the security they need to make long-term investments in better housing and infrastructure.

#### **Future Directions**

The construction of new housing and the refurbishment of existing houses is a top order priority. So too is the reform of how housing is managed so that Indigenous tenants in remote communities have the same rights and responsibilities as all other public housing tenants. Social housing managed by government or a community housing provider now requires secure tenure. Without security, such as a lease, there is no legal right to access or control land or buildings. Leasing does two things: it provides the certainty government needs to make long-term investment and it makes clear who has responsibility to collect rents, allocate houses and maintain the housing with regular repairs and maintenance.

The Australian Government's \$1.7 billion investment will involve:

- continuing tenancy management reforms so that residents are required to pay reasonable rent and have support to help manage visitors in their homes. Houses will be fairly allocated, and regular and consistent repairs and maintenance will be carried out on houses
- progressively improving the quality of the social housing stock in communities
- upgrading the infrastructure supporting housing in communities. For example, in the Trucking Yards Camp in Alice Springs, new infrastructure works will include upgrades to roads, power, water, sewerage, drainage and street lighting. In other locations this has included new subdivisions for new housing.
- increasing the numbers of houses in communities. Where government, private landlords or community organisations provide housing in return for rent, standards apply through tenancy legislation. National standards also apply for community housing providers to ensure they have sound systems to collect rent, allocate houses fairly, support tenants and maintain houses in a similar way to public housing.

There could also be opportunities for viable community housing providers in the Northern Territory to have a greater role in managing housing and for home ownership to be expanded, where appropriate.

Whole-of-township leases now operate in four communities. These leases are voluntary and are negotiated between the Australian Government and the Traditional Owners represented by their Land Council. The leases protect the underlying ownership of the land in these communities by the Traditional Owners while allowing for home ownership and economic development. They also allow people, businesses and services in a community to hold individual leases. They can use that as security for a loan from a bank which most people need to build or buy their own home on a community or to establish a business.

On the Tiwi Islands, the whole-of-township lease at Wurrumiyanga has enabled families to purchase their own homes and for Traditional Owners to pursue a range of successful business ventures. For example, a car rental business and tour company has been established with the profits reinvested back into the local college.

The Australian Government has recently offered another 12 communities whole-of-township leases.

The Government is exploring options to encourage greater private home ownership and community sector involvement in housing across the Northern Territory.

The Government is committed to Indigenous Australians enjoying the same life outcomes as other Australians. This includes having greater choices about their housing options, including social housing, private rental and home ownership. The Australian Government wants to ensure that those Indigenous people who do have the skills, desire and capacity to borrow in order to own their own home or build a business have the same opportunities as other Australians.

Indigenous Australians who own their own home say it gives them more independence and control over their living environment and shows their commitment to building a better life for themselves, and their children and their children's children.

#### **Issues for discussion**

How could we improve the way housing is provided and managed in remote locations?

What kind of expanded role could community housing service providers have?

How can greater private home ownership be encouraged?

## Priority areas for action

### h) Governance

Community governance refers to how decisions and plans that affect the lives of people in communities are made. For community governance to be effective, it must be not just about process but about actually getting things done in the community. It is essential for communities to take charge of their futures, to build personal responsibility, and to work with different levels of government.

The Australian Government is working to improve governance in two ways:

- by building the capacity of communities and organisations
- by making sure governments work together and come up with solutions to meet the needs of individual communities.

Under the Indigenous Leadership Program, Aboriginal men, women and young people are being mentored and supported to develop their personal leadership skills. Since the program began six years ago, more than 250 people from the Northern Territory have participated in the national program, with many others taking part in targeted leadership workshops and activities.

There is also a stronger government presence in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. Fifty-six Government Business Managers (GBMs) and 23 Indigenous Engagement Officers now live and work in communities. Their job is to connect local residents to government services and resources and improve communication between people and government. We have also worked with the Northern Territory Government to increase the number of interpreters working in communities.

The Government is also changing how it does business in 15 locations in the Northern Territory through the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership Agreement. Under this agreement, governments and communities are jointly developing Local Implementation Plans which set out priorities for action to improve services and better support Indigenous community governance and leadership.

We also know that we need to talk further about how services can be best delivered to smaller communities and outstations. We also understand the concern about the provision of services to other communities including outstations and we are committed to talk further about how this can best be done.

The NTER legislation also includes Business Management Areas Powers to give the Government power to vary and terminate funding agreements if it feels a service provider is not doing its job properly. These powers have never been used.

In 2008 the Northern Territory Government set up a system of shire councils, which have taken over functions managed previously by local Aboriginal community councils. The aim is to deliver municipal services in remote communities in the same way they are delivered in other communities. An important and challenging task for these new shires is to ensure Aboriginal communities participate effectively so that Aboriginal people are not disenfranchised from local decision making and that service delivery effectively meets their needs.

#### **Future directions**

The Government supports the shire reforms in the Northern Territory but believes more needs to be done to foster local and community governance. People need to have a clear say about what is happening in their communities. Positive, sustainable change will only happen when Aboriginal people, working closely with government, develop and drive their own solutions.

Building community capacity and leadership is critical to creating stronger futures for communities. It is vital that communities themselves contribute their ideas on the most effective way to achieve this. It is also important to improve the way government staff interact with communities on the policies, programs and services which affect the lives of local Indigenous people—and the Government has created a framework to enable this to happen.

As part of our ongoing commitment to communities in the Northern Territory, government employees will continue to live and work with local people in remote communities, to make sure programs and services are effectively delivered, and to help develop local solutions. The Government is keen to explore how to improve this engagement so that the best outcomes are achieved for Indigenous communities.

The Government would welcome proposals about how it could assist communities to build their capacity and leadership.

#### **Issues for discussion**

How can people in communities have a better say about what is happening in communities?

How can governments work better with communities?

What are the most important aspects of community governance?

## 5 Next steps

The Government is committed to genuine consultation about future directions.

The Government will consult on the proposals in this paper from late June to mid August 2011. To ensure that everyone is able to have their say, the consultation will take a number of forms:

- public meetings—to be held in Darwin and regional centres in the Northern Territory
- community meetings—to be held in communities across the Northern Territory
- feedback sessions—where small groups and individuals in communities will be able to give their views to government staff, including Indigenous Engagement Officers.

## 6 Providing feedback

Details on the timing of public meetings and community consultations will be included on the website and further information can be found at:

*[www.indigenous.gov.au](http://www.indigenous.gov.au)*

Further information is also available from Government Business Managers in communities and from the Indigenous Coordination Centres in:

- Darwin (phone 08 8936 6448)
- Alice Springs (phone 08 8959 4211)
- Tennant Creek (phone 08 8962 1999)
- Katherine (phone 08 8973 2000)
- Nhulunbuy (phone 08 8987 8506)

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## **Alcohol management plans**

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## **Food security evaluation**

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[http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/nter\\_reports/Pages/eval\\_com\\_stores\\_licensing.aspx](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/nter_reports/Pages/eval_com_stores_licensing.aspx)



