



Jesuit  
Social Services  
Building a Just Society

# Northern Territory Election Platform

## Youth and climate justice

July 2024



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## Who we are and what we do

Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation. Our vision is to build a just society where everyone can live to their full potential. For 47 years, we have been accompanying people and communities to foster and regenerate the web of relationships that sustain each one of us across people, place and planet. We have valued the opportunity to work with the Northern Territory Government and alongside children, families and communities to deliver youth justice programs, community development practices and capacity building partnerships.

We work to change policies, practices, ideas and values that perpetuate inequality, prejudice and exclusion and seek to influence policies, practices, legislation and budget investment to positively influence people's lives and improve approaches to address social challenges. Our tools include capacity building, advocacy, research and leadership development.

## Our vision for the NT – ‘a fairer, more equal and sustainable future for all Territorians’

We are advocating for four priorities ahead of the 2024 NT election. We believe Government should be partnering with community to achieve these priorities to help ensure a fairer, more equal and sustainable future for all Territorians. For a long time, a range of systems have worked against people facing generational disadvantage- it is time for change. We must learn from the past, listen to community and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and build on promising practices.



Each priority includes recommendations for the Northern Territory Government to take as steps towards achieving overarching outcomes. Many of the recommendations are not new, but have been called for by Territorians, ACCOs and the community sector for a number of years. Jesuit Social Services' priorities include:

**Priority 1: A humane youth justice system grounded in prevention and early intervention where the rights and unique needs of children are protected**

- a. Commit to raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14 in line with UN Recommendations
- b. Commit to embedding cross-service trauma-informed care and restorative practices throughout justice, education and child protection systems
- c. Reinvigorate the bipartisan commitment to fully implementing the Aboriginal Justice Agreement.

**Priority 2: Self-determining, resilient Aboriginal communities**

- a. Commit to progressing Treaty, including ensuring appropriate resourcing and broad consultation to establish a Treaty Framework as determined by community
- b. Establish mechanisms that embed genuine consultation and partnerships, Aboriginal voice and leadership at all levels of government decision-making
- c. Consult with local organisations to determine and meet resourcing needs required to build organisational capacity and effectiveness, including training, regular professional development and supervision.

**Priority 3: A responsive service sector capable of meeting the needs of children and families**

- a. Invest in programs not prisons by significantly increasing funding for evidence-based, community safety approaches
- b. Commit to long-term investment in Justice Reinvestment initiatives across the Northern Territory
- c. Fund the full cost of quality service delivery, including infrastructure, management and administration costs and adopt adequate indexation that is consistent across funded organisations, is published annually and reflects increase in costs incurred by funded organisations, as called for by NTCOSS.

**Priority 4: A collaborative and just transition to protecting our Country and community**

- a. Act urgently to minimise the health harms of climate change, recognising the strong evidence that links extreme heat to morbidity and mortality
- b. Legislate a Climate Change Act with a specific focus on climate justice and a target of net zero emissions by 2050
- c. Allocate funding for regional mitigation and adaptation, including funding to consult, develop and implement regional planning.

## **Priority 1: A humane youth justice system grounded in prevention and early intervention where the rights and unique needs of children are protected**

Since the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, some positive steps have been made towards implementing recommendations and reforming our youth justice system. But with prisons overflowing and over half of young people in detention on remand<sup>1</sup>, it is evident there is still a long way to go. Criminalising children and young people in contact with the justice system and incarcerating them for poverty-driven offences will not reduce youth crime. We need preventative, systemic reform if we are going to Close the Gap, trigger a decline in Aboriginal children coming into contact with the child protection and youth justice systems and see the rights of children upheld.

It is understandable that people feel scared and frustrated by rates of crime in the Northern Territory- but by failing to acknowledge the stories and systems contributing, we are not tailoring our prevention to the unique circumstances and needs of children and families, nor are we understanding the long-lasting harms caused by offending and how they can be repaired.

In August 2023, the Northern Territory Government raised the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 12 years of age. Whilst a step in the right direction, the Territory is still lagging behind upholding child rights and international standards recommending the age of criminal responsibility to be a minimum of 14 years of age. Raising the age of criminal responsibility is a critical step towards a youth justice system grounded in prevention and early intervention, however with it must come resourcing for service providers and monitoring and evaluation. We must review the new 'On the Right Track' model targeted at this cohort including consulting with stakeholders, to ensure it is effective and can be continuously improved upon.



The young people with whom we work in our Youth Justice Group Conferencing and Back on Track programs are incredibly resilient. But they are also often facing the toughest circumstances, including histories of trauma, poverty, family separation and unstable living arrangements, high rates of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), cognitive impairment and learning difficulties, disengagement from school, boredom through lack of access to structured and meaningful activities, limited support networks and positive role models, mental health concerns and alcohol and drug use.

The foundation of our response for vulnerable young people at risk and in the justice system cannot be incarceration. It must be a robust, therapeutic, culturally grounded system of place-based child and family support services, prioritising primary prevention and early intervention.

### **We outline the following recommendations as steps towards achieving Priority One:**

- a. Commit to raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14 in line with UN Recommendations
- b. Commit to embedding cross-service trauma-informed care and restorative practices throughout justice, education and child protection systems
- c. Reinvigorate the bipartisan commitment to fully implementing the Aboriginal Justice Agreement.

<sup>1</sup> <https://tfhc.nt.gov.au/youth-justice/youth-detention-centres/youth-detention-census>

## **Priority 2: Self-determining, resilient Aboriginal communities**

The leadership of Aboriginal people over generations has advanced justice in many ways. However, Aboriginal people still suffer significantly from barriers to justice, including flawed policies, misguided investment and poor implementation. There has been a failure by successive governments to listen to the solutions that communities articulate, and failure to respect and acknowledge Aboriginal people's rights and connection to culture, Country and language.

Aboriginal people know what works best for their communities and we need ongoing commitment from Government to genuinely listen to and embed Aboriginal voice and leadership. We need active efforts to protect and promote the rights of Aboriginal people, including rights to culture, language and Country, and recognition of the enduring impacts of previous laws and policies.

In 2018, former Chief Minister, Michael Gunner announced the Northern Territory Government would progress a treaty or treaties in the Northern Territory. Six years on and we are still waiting for recommendations from the Treaty Commissions Final Report to be completed. Jesuit Social Services agrees it is not a process that can be rushed; however a lack of action and minimal consultation have placed this work in jeopardy, with the Country Liberal Party (CLP) pledging to reform remote local governments in replacement of a treaty or treaties.

The outcome of the federal Voice to Parliament Referendum in October 2023 was devastating for Aboriginal communities. What could have been a step towards Aboriginal self-determination, progress against the Closing the Gap targets and acknowledgement of past wrongdoings, was instead a disheartening indicator of how far we have to go. Overall, the Northern Territory voted against enshrining a Voice to Parliament, however results from remote communities were heavily in favour of Yes. Contrasting results between regional and remote communities, particularly amongst Aboriginal voters, demonstrates an evident gap in how we are approaching reconciliation and the importance of continuing to progress and explore how Aboriginal leadership is embedded in decision making.

### **We outline the following recommendations as steps towards achieving Priority Two:**

- a. Commit to progressing Treaty, including ensuring appropriate resourcing and broad consultation to establish a Treaty Framework as determined by community
- b. Establish mechanisms that embed genuine consultation and partnerships, Aboriginal voice and leadership at all levels of government decision-making
- c. Consult with local organisations to determine and meet resourcing needs required to build organisational capacity and effectiveness, including training, regular professional development and supervision.



### **Priority 3: A responsive service sector capable of meeting the needs of children and families**

There is no denying that like the rest of the country, the Northern Territory is facing challenging economic times. The community sector is resilient and committed, but with rising costs of living, and unique challenges in relation to workforce recruitment and retention, the sector's ability to maintain the provision of high quality, essential services is at risk.

Rather than spending money on incarceration, we need to be providing wraparound supports in the form of programs and services focused on community safety. Time spent in prisons not only causes further harm to already vulnerable young people, and increases the likelihood of further offending, but it is also expensive. In 2022–23 the Northern Territory spent \$1,672 per person on police services (2.9 times the national average) and \$869 per person on corrective services (3.8 times the national average)<sup>2</sup>.

Communities, ACCOs and the community sector know what is best for their children and families, they know the strengths, challenges and solutions to help break down barriers. Models that embed community led, place-based principles such as justice reinvestment should be invested in, in order to help build a sustainable, effective system. A justice reinvestment model looks at saving money on the tertiary end of the justice system by investing in preventative and early intervention solutions.

Restorative practices such as youth justice group conferencing provide alternative approaches to reducing re-offending by giving children the opportunity to learn about the impact of their actions and be accountable. Through restorative programs, young people have the opportunity to make amends for their actions, not only to a victim, but to the broader community.

An evaluation of our Youth Justice Group Conferencing pilot found victims valued the opportunity to engage directly with the young person in a safe and respectful space as a way

to help motivate change. They reported feeling closure and found it as a valuable opportunity within our youth justice system. Over three quarters of young people who participated in a group conference reported improved connection to social supports and four out of five reported improved engagement in education, training or employment.

Participating in a process that helps reconnect children and young people to their community and family and be re-engaged in their education or employment creates a positive plan moving forward that takes their story into consideration with reasonable responsibilities to fulfil.

The Commonwealth Government's Justice Reinvestment funding announced in 2022 included \$69 million over four years for initiatives for up to 30 communities. However at the end of this, communities such as the Katherine Justice Reinvestment Group, which Jesuit Social Services is a consortium member of, will need to acquire additional funding to continue building on the work achieved. The Northern Territory Government has a role to play in ensuring these communities have the resourcing and support to continue progressing a model of justice reinvestment.

#### **We outline the following recommendations as steps towards achieving Priority Three:**

- a. Invest in programs not prisons by significantly increasing funding for evidence-based, community safety approaches
- b. Commit to long-term investment in Justice Reinvestment initiatives across the Northern Territory
- c. Fund the full cost of quality service delivery, including infrastructure, management and administration costs and adopt adequate indexation that is consistent across funded organisations, is published annually and reflects increase in costs incurred by funded organisations, as called for by NTCOSS.

<sup>2</sup> ROGS. (2024). Northern Territory justice and corrective services– Report on government services 2024. Retrieved from <<https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services>>.



## Priority 4: A collaborative and just transition to protecting our Country and community

According to the latest IPCC report<sup>3</sup>, there can be no doubt that human activities are causing climate change. The CSIRO, Bureau of Meteorology and National Climate Change Research Facility (NCCARF) have highlighted some of the main changes expected in northern Australia, including rising temperatures and sea levels, and increasingly severe fire, cyclone, and rainfall events.<sup>4</sup> These changes are not in the future; they are here and now, already impacting the lives and wellbeing of Territorians. Flood damage to roads delay the movement of goods and services in already very isolated areas.<sup>5</sup> Flooding in remote communities, such as the repeat flooding on Gurindji Country at Kalkarindji, Daguragu and Pigeon Hole, puts stress on inadequate housing and highlights the need for more considered adaptation planning.<sup>6</sup> Increasing temperatures create additional pressure on energy systems, placing lives at risk – there is an undeniable correlation between extreme heat, and mortality.<sup>7</sup> These are just some examples of the ways in which climate change reinforces social inequities in the Northern Territory.

Those who are least equipped with the capacity and resources to combat the impacts of climate change are those who are experiencing its impacts the most. This also generates conflict, as resources are put under stress – between groups of people, and between people and planet. The Gurindji floods of March 2023 demonstrated this dual impact. The three communities of Kalkarindji, Daguragu and Pigeon Hole were evacuated over 750km away, to Howard Springs with all three communities forced to live together for months on end. The pressure of being away from Country, in close proximity, and for many, in a very unfamiliar place, generated tension and conflict between many.<sup>8</sup>

The profound sense of environmental loss also impacts culture and wellbeing. The Daguragu community is proud of its Country and big trees, something of a rarity in remote Northern Territory – all of which were washed away in the floods. 'It is like those road diggers that tear up bitumen... there's no future for us here' stated one of the local Elders. 'We have to move. Those hills hold water now. It spins around like a whirlpool, and it's eroding the land. This is climate change'.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2022). Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. H.O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegria, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds.). Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781009325844.

<sup>4</sup> CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology. (2024). Climate Change in Australia website: Projections for Australia's Natural Resource Management (NRM) Regions. <https://www.csiro.au/en/research/environmental-impacts/climate-change/Climate-change-information>; NCCARF. (2013). Supporting evidence-based adaptation decision-making in the Northern Territory: A synthesis of climate change adaptation research. AECOM.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Crawford. (2024). Victoria Highway flooding prompts calls for a climate change audit of northern Australia's road network. Kimberley Echo, 6 February. <https://www.kimberleyecho.com.au/news/the-kimberley-echo/victoria-highway-flooding-prompts-calls-for-a-climate-change-audit-of-northern-australias-road-network-c-13485889>

<sup>6</sup> Australian Red Cross. (2023). Northern Territory floods: recovery will be long and complex. <https://www.redcross.org.au/stories/2023/NT-floods-recovery/>

<sup>7</sup> Longden, T., Quilty, S., Riley, B. et al. (2022). Temperature extremes exacerbate energy insecurity for Indigenous communities in remote Australia. *Nature Energy* 7. pp. 11–12. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-021-00968-6>; Longden, T., Quilty, S., Riley, B. et al. (2022). Energy insecurity during temperature extremes in remote Australia. *Nature Energy* 7, pp. 43–54. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-021-00942-2>

<sup>8</sup> Garrick, M. (2024). 'Gurindji leader Rob Roy says damages to Howard Springs centre by flood evacuees sparked divisions'. ABC News, 6 February. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-02-06/nt-flood-evacuations-howard-springs-damage/103426776>

<sup>9</sup> Australian Red Cross. (2023). Northern Territory floods: recovery will be long and complex. <https://www.redcross.org.au/stories/2023/NT-floods-recovery/>

An effective response by Government requires explicit acknowledgement of the risks climate change poses to the most marginalised people in our community. Without a commitment to mitigation by Government, the impacts of climate change are likely to exacerbate disadvantage across a range of social and economic indicators, including health, housing, food security, and employment. Recognising the connection between Country and people, and the extent of disadvantage already experienced by Aboriginal peoples, Government needs to address the unique and disproportionate impacts of climate change on First Nations communities.

**We outline the following recommendations as steps towards achieving Priority Four:**

- a. Act urgently to minimise the health harms of climate change, recognising the strong evidence that heat causes morbidity and mortality
- b. Legislate a Climate Change Act with a specific focus on climate justice and a target of net zero emissions by 2050
- c. Allocate funding for regional mitigation and adaption, including funding to consult, develop and implement regional planning.

