

Upper Hunter By-Election

Responses from Candidates to NCOSS 'Tackling Disadvantage' Survey

1. Housing and Homelessness

Homelessness is no longer confined to metropolitan areas and is an increasing problem across NSW's regional communities. A shortage of affordable housing means that specialist homelessness services cannot meet demand and are turning people away, while our social housing waiting list now exceeds 50,000. How do you think the issue of housing and homelessness in the Upper Hunter can be best addressed?

<p>Sue Abbott <i>The Greens</i></p>	<p>This is an issue I have been concerned about for a long time and have raised consistently at Upper Hunter Shire Ordinary Council meetings as an Upper Hunter Shire councillor. There should be significant (massive) public investment and funding into the building of public housing and not just emergency housing which is handy to have but nowhere near enough and does not solve long-term housing issues. There needs to be a housing programme where public houses could be rented from local councils. In my opinion having a proper well-funded social housing programme would provide certainty and reassurance and homes for life, and people and families would not have to worry about what they were going to do about a home for next year or the year after. Obviously this would also help in alleviating stress and mental health issues, as the stress of wondering where you're going to live next month or next year or in two years time is emotionally insurmountable.</p>
<p>Calum Blair <i>Sustainable Australia Party</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove the 50 per cent discount of capital gains tax on taxable Australian property (non-principal place of residence). • Abolish negative gearing on taxable Australian property. • Lower population growth / demand (mainly) by lowering immigration from a record 200,000+ p.a. back to the long term average of 70,000. • Restrict the purchase of Australian residential property and land for residential development to Australian citizens, longer term (5 year) permanent residents, and minimum 75 per cent Australian-owned entities. • Encourage developers to include an element of social or affordable housing in new projects. • Increase investment in public housing. • Reform tenancy laws to offer greater renters' rights

<p>Jeff Drayton <i>Labor</i></p>	<p>I have spoken extensively to homelessness support services across the Upper Hunter and they are at their wits end about lack of funding to meet the region’s need.</p> <p>Services have resorted to handing out tents as there just aren’t the beds available. People across Upper Hunter are sleeping in cars, under bridges and on friend’s couches.</p> <p>NSW Community Services Minister Gareth Ward said during the campaign that “If you are homeless anywhere in the state right now, you can call Link2Home ... we will find accommodation for you.” That’s a straight out lie. Upper Hunter Homeless Support has 1000 clients in need and funding for just 400 beds. Our region sends nearly a billion a year in coal royalties to Sydney and the Nationals haven’t been getting a fair return. I will fight for the funding we need for emergency accommodation and support long-term housing options.</p>
<p>Tracy Norman <i>Independent</i></p>	<p>There are several well planned programs, albeit city focused, already operating involving three levels of Government, the NFP sector and private industry, such as superannuation funds. A coordinated approach with all of these sectors involved and collaborating, which is targeted to regional areas such as the Upper Hunter would be appropriate.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentives from the three levels of government, such as discounted rates, tax exemptions, discounts on land tax/stamp duty in exchange for dedicated social/affordable housing in perpetuity. • Opening up land in state/council ownership and selling this land at a discounted rate to private or NFP developers again with the provision for social/affordable housing in perpetuity. • A defence force style arrangement where investors are guaranteed a lower rental income but over a significant lease period. • Working with super companies such as Australian Super to open up their key worker programs to the Upper Hunter • Working with the Clean Energy Finance Corporation to provide discounted finance to ensure affordable housing is energy and water efficient to minimize utilities bills. • Providing good public transport to allow easier access to places of work/education/medical facilities and recreational facilities.

<p>Kirsty O'Connell <i>Independent</i></p>	<p>We need to keep a fairer share of the \$1B in mining royalties that our community generates annually to invest in the kind of health care, mental health care, education, roads, housing and infrastructure that the community needs.</p> <p>We need to create a stronger, more diverse local economy that provides jobs for people with a variety of skills and qualifications. We can do that by providing immediate incentives for mining-focussed small businesses to grow and diversify their businesses (as we know small businesses create stable, local jobs) and by investing in the growth of our existing world-class farming, wine, agricultural, horse-breeding and tourism sectors.</p> <p>With the combination of better support services, infrastructure and better job prospects I believe we can address the complex challenge of housing and homelessness.</p>
<p>Steve Reynolds <i>Independent</i></p>	<p>Homelessness has existed for centuries, what changes is the availability of affordable community housing and the appropriate support of the people needing such support. In most cases community housing has been a reactive response rather than a plan for the future needs of the community. The pandemic and the change in the nature of work is making working from home a reality for many and the attraction of regional NSW quite attractive. The days of the fibro clad home on a quarter acres is no longer attractive or environmentally viable. The integration of modern economical designed homes sensitively integrated into regional communities, as opposed to the ageing "housing commissions" subdivisions of old.</p>

2. Mental Health Support

Barriers to timely mental health support are a significant problem in regional NSW, as highlighted by the [Productivity Commission's recent review](#). What should the State Government be doing to ensure the right support is available at the right time?

<p>Sue Abbott <i>The Greens</i></p>	<p>Again massive public funding not just 'tokenistic' gestures. In the rural communities we need a lot more public money spent on mental health support so I say less subsidies to fossil fuel companies, and instead let's spend our taxes on mental health support and expertise, and other important social essentials and necessities.</p>
<p>Calum Blair <i>Sustainable Australia Party</i></p>	<p>Sustainable Australia Party supports the findings of the Productivity Commission's recent review and its key findings. If elected, Calum Blair would work hard to implement these findings, particularly around prevention and early intervention.</p>
<p>Jeff Drayton <i>Labor</i></p>	<p>Mental health including depression and anxiety is a major issue in the Upper Hunter and we need more investment in local services to address it. Like many regional areas, we have distressing rate of suicide and it's something we see too often in the mining industry.</p> <p>We have a lack of local access to psychiatrists, psychologists and mental health nurses to support the community. GPs fleeing our hospitals because they are overworked means people are missing out on early diagnosis and support if they are struggling with mental health.</p> <p>I will fight for a major investment in our local health services, including the mental health support our community needs.</p>
<p>Tracy Norman <i>Independent</i></p>	<p>Mental health is at a crisis point in the Upper Hunter and harrowing stories of a lack of facilities and access to mental health professionals are replicated throughout the electorate.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The introduction of early intervention programs in 0-5 is essential. I am being told that waiting for children to reach the age to access such programs such as the federally funded headspace is too late. • We need in-school and pre-school access for occupational therapy, behavioural therapy and speech pathology. • We need in-depth training for teachers to recognise early signs, but we also need to support these teachers with more trained support staff and counsellors so that they are not burdened with further responsibility. • We need a head-space like program for under 12s.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easier access and education around what is available for mental health patients and their families, including tele health and other online programs. A one-stop shop providing information on what government and non-government services are available. • Parent programs and training programs in workplaces and educational facilities early signs of mental health. • More provision of and access to services. Decentralisation of support for small remote towns that just can't access programs because there is no outreach offered by the NGOs that are awarded the contracts to do just that. • Given that the above is a Federal responsibility, then better public transport for these same towns so that they can better access the facilities that can be located a prohibitive distance away. • Incentivising private practice counsellors and psychologists to set up practices in remote towns, through tax and rates breaks and the awarding of contracts with the education department to supplement their private practice.
<p>Kirsty O'Connell <i>Independent</i></p>	<p>We need to invest a fairer share of the \$1B in mining royalties that we create annually in better mental health services. That means more beds for emergency care, more case workers to support mental health patients and more funding for terrific mental wellness programs such as Where There's a Will - a home grown success story from the Upper Hunter which focuses on providing young people with the skills to support their ongoing mental wellbeing.</p>
<p>Steve Reynolds <i>Independent</i></p>	<p>Mental health has become an issue in recent times with the bushfires in 2019 and the pandemic in 2020/21 has highlighted a greater need for the awareness of mental health. A greater awareness and research is a must for the future. A better understanding as to why males are generally more reluctant to seek assistance with mental health issues compared to females. I have personally had interaction in this area, having put my hand up for assistance after a permanent injury and needing that help in overcoming the barriers that I had to learn to deal with. I spent 3 weeks as an inpatient and it assisted me and provided me tools/methods on managing things day to day moving forward. I am not too sure how many others would admit and put themselves out there publicly like this. There are many organisations who provide support but reducing the perceived emotional barrier between the issues and gaining help should be a priority.</p>

3. Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is in the news a lot lately with stories of women and children suffering psychological abuse, physical injury or losing their lives at the hands of violent men. What will you advocate for in the Upper Hunter to better support women and children in the electorate and prevent such tragic outcomes?

<p>Sue Abbott <i>The Greens</i></p>	<p>Absolutely. Domestic violence is a systemic problem, and that a woman a week dies at the hands of a partner or former partner is a national shame for Australia. Systemic change needs to happen and happen fast. Whether I am elected or not I will continue to advocate for women and children in the Upper Hunter electorate and the Upper Hunter Shire.</p>
<p>Calum Blair <i>Sustainable Australia Party</i></p>	<p>Sustainable Australia Party will better prevent and respond to domestic violence through increased funding for early intervention and education programs, frontline services, emergency accommodation and legal services.</p>
<p>Jeff Drayton <i>Labor</i></p>	<p>Housing will be a top priority for me. Most people in need of emergency housing in the Upper Hunter are women and many of them are escaping domestic violence situations. Safe and appropriate housing is essential for supporting women and children at risk of violence and abuse – in the short and long-term.</p> <p>In the short term we need to investment in services when and where women need them. We need well trained police and other health professionals who can recognise and support women who are experiencing violence. In the long term we need better education about respect and community norms that do not accept violence against women and children.</p>
<p>Tracy Norman <i>Independent</i></p>	<p>Many women and children remain in abusive relationships because of concerns about finances. We need easier access to good support mechanisms such as financial counselling, affordable housing and easy access to safe crisis accommodation and funds rather than early access their superannuation.</p> <p>Widespread training and education for family members and friends to recognise signs of coercion in relationships and how to support those going through this and how to encourage them to seek assistance.</p> <p>Decentralisation of services so that there is help on the ground where it is needed, rather than forcing these at risk mothers and children to travel vast distances to try to access help and better public transport so that when this doesn't happen, they can at least reach these services more easily.</p>

	Better regulation and independent auditing of the NGO providers to ensure that they are meeting their obligations to provide outreach to those areas that are on their books.
Kirsty O'Connell <i>Independent</i>	I personally worked on the Premier's program to prevent domestic violence re-offending and was horrified by the number of attacks occurring across the State every year. We know this is a problem across the Upper Hunter and particularly in Muswellbrook and Singleton. We need more emergency accommodation for women and children fleeing dangerous situations. I also think we need to better resource mental health services, health services, ambulance and police in order to be able to properly support women and children in these terrible situations.
Steve Reynolds <i>Independent</i>	Yes. Yes I most certainly will be advocating for this. It's unfair to identify all of the woes in the communities by the current pandemic, but it has helped bringing them into sharp focus. Reporting an incident is the only way authorities can be aware of such activity. Talking to and being open to a councillor, including advice on what appropriate action may be taken and support given including emergency contact details. I must add though, it's not only females. I acknowledge the statistics, but domestic violence needs to be stamped out and called out. Don't be silent if something is happening. We need more exposure about methods and awareness to be more prevalent in our mainstream media and educational systems on how to intervene without inflating the issue behind closed doors. Education on the appropriate way to intervene and document

4. Unemployment and Financial Hardship

Children growing up in families experiencing unemployment and financial hardship are more likely to miss out on effective parenting and to be at risk of abuse and neglect. What are your/your party's policies to support parents, promote children's wellbeing and keep them safe from harm?

<p>Sue Abbott <i>The Greens</i></p>	<p>The Greens understand that children, just like adults, have human rights across the full spectrum of civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.</p> <p>The Greens understand that children also have special rights because of their vulnerability, such as the right to protection from exploitation and abuse, the right to be cared for and to have a home, and the right to have a say in decisions which affect them.</p> <p>The Greens have comprehensive policies that support and promote children's wellbeing and keep them safe from harm, and uphold their human rights and protect them. The Greens' policies in this regard include but are not limited to "Children and Young People," "Climate Change," "Early Childhood," "Education," "Housing and Homelessness," "Gambling," and more.</p>
<p>Calum Blair <i>Sustainable Australia Party</i></p>	<p>As outlined above, Sustainable Australia Party will better prevent and respond to domestic violence through increased funding for early intervention and education programs, frontline services, emergency accommodation and legal services.</p>
<p>Jeff Drayton <i>Labor</i></p>	<p>Fewer than one in three Upper Hunter kids reported as being at risk of serious harm are ever seen by a caseworker. This is an appalling statistic.</p> <p>The number of Upper Hunter kids reported as being risk of serious harm has grown 40% since 2014 – yet services keep getting squeezed, not funded. Our kids deserve better and I will fight for the investment in child protection our region desperately needs – including more caseworkers so that more at-risk children can be seen and foster, kinship and grandparent carers are supported.</p> <p>I also support investment preschool and school education, better-funded health services and better coordination between health, school and the justice system to give families the support they need to keep them out of crisis.</p>

<p>Tracy Norman <i>Independent</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better parenting programs and mentorship programs for both parents and children. • Early intervention as discussed above. • Better training programs and support for teachers to recognise vulnerable children and the provision of information of where to access all government and non-government services to assist. • Working with NGOs and the private sector to provide services such as breakfast clubs to make sure children have access to healthy food. • Working with NGOs, the private sector and community groups to provide youth spaces where kids can be provided with 'accidental counselling' and other support.
<p>Kirsty O'Connell <i>Independent</i></p>	<p>As above</p>
<p>Steve Reynolds <i>Independent</i></p>	<p>Similar to the last response. There are a number of care and support organisations that can assist with rental assistance, food and food vouchers many of these organisations can assist with parenting and child conflict issues and child learning difficulties. Advice on these areas can also be gained from student councillors. We need to enable people and educate third parties if they suspect it's happening on how they can intervene correctly and effectively.</p>

5. A Strong Social Sector

During the COVID-19 crisis, the social services sector rose to the challenge and continued to support vulnerable children, young people, families, and communities across the state. [Recent analysis](#) by NCOSS and other peaks highlights that the sector is a growth industry, contributing \$15.4 billion annually to the NSW's economy and with potential for further job creation, including in regional areas. But the sector is stretched to capacity, under-funded and can experience difficulties recruiting and retaining staff because of low pay, poor conditions and the stressful nature of the work. If elected, how will you champion the work of the sector in the Upper Hunter, including NCOSS members and their workforce, and ensure they get the resources, recognition and support required to meet demand?

<p>Sue Abbott <i>The Greens</i></p>	<p>If I am elected I will advocate and be a voice for proper public funding for the social services sector. It is reprehensible that the coalition has not fully funded this important and vital growth industry in a meaningful and generous way to date. When you think that over \$10 billion was given to the fossil fuel industries last year (that's \$19,686 per minute) it is outrageous that our governments have not done the same for the sector that endeavours to look after our vulnerable when everyone knows that the benefits would be life-changing for vulnerable children, young people, families and communities across the state and country, and indeed the whole nation as a result.</p>
<p>Calum Blair <i>Sustainable Australia Party</i></p>	<p>If elected, Calum Blair commits to working with NCOSS to ensure the health and wellbeing of the Hunter Valley community is improved through access to a better resourced and recognised social services sector.</p>
<p>Jeff Drayton <i>Labor</i></p>	<p>Community services workers are our local heroes. Our area has a wonderful network of community organisations doing great things every day.</p> <p>I have spoken with many workers in the community sector during this campaign and I have been getting a clear message: lack of funding means they are barely keeping their heads above water, with real consequences for those they support.</p> <p>Our community workers and organisations are under stress because the Nationals don't deliver enough funding for them to keep up with growing demand, they constantly have to fight for one off grants programs and pilot programs that enjoy success but then don't continue.</p>

	<p>I will fight for a workforce plan for our community and disability organisations, fair funding for our services and proper pay for the workers in those services.</p>
<p>Tracy Norman <i>Independent</i></p>	<p>I recognise the crucial role that the social services sector plays in our society. I also recognise how stretched the sector is. The rates of pay do not reflect the hard and stressful work undertaken by the sector.</p> <p>I will show my full support to the sector by lobbying for more government funding and better pay and conditions for the workforce. This is vital so that outlying areas can receive the attention and outreach which is desperately needed from your sector.</p> <p>I understand how important recognition for work that you undertake is for the well-being of your workforce. It is often a thankless task.</p>
<p>Kirsty O'Connell <i>Independent</i></p>	<p>In addition to securing a fairer share of the \$1billion in royalties that we produce to improve services and our quality of life, I will involve the social services sector in developing a plan for the future of the Upper Hunter that achieves a prosperous and healthy future for all residents.</p>
<p>Steve Reynolds <i>Independent</i></p>	<p>Despite the Upper Hunter having some of the highest incomes in regional NSW, we also have a normal workforce who aren't so highly paid. We have a community services section within our shire council that worked directly with community service organisations within our community. This close and cooperative relationship, helps to promote the various organisations and in some cases assist in keeping operating costs relatively low. However the most important issue is, more funding is needed. It's as simple as that, but one that I commit to working in close with community organisations in these areas to ensure the funding is appropriately directed to specific programs that have the best benefit and outcome</p>