

NCOSS Policy Platform 2023: Working together for a fairer NSW

The past three years have been tough for the people of NSW. The state has faced unprecedented upheaval due to ongoing extreme events like the fires, floods and pandemic. These events have caused spikes in housing insecurity, homelessness and domestic violence across the state, heightened mental stress and have had negative impacts on children's safety, social development and educational outcomes. Adding to this is the rising cost-of-living with inflation at a 32-year high.

Unsurprisingly, particular regions and community groups are bearing the brunt and are relying on the social service and health sector to support them. But scarcity of resources and depleted finances are making it difficult for organisations to meet the increasing demand.

Our policy platform was developed in consultation with NCOSS members and supported by a rigorous research agenda. It is divided into three sections: immediate cost of living relief, targeted support for the most vulnerable and social sector sustainability.

Immediate cost of living relief

1) Respond to rising energy prices

More and more people living in NSW are waking up each morning and wondering how they will afford to feed their families, pay the bills, and just get by. Energy costs consume a sizable portion of the disposable income of low income households. That's why we are calling on the next NSW Parliament to:

- a. Permanently increase the cap on Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA) vouchers to \$1,600 per year.
- b. Streamline the process to apply for an EAPA voucher.
- c. Ramp up promotion of EAPA vouchers in low-socio economic areas and amongst other vulnerable cohorts.
- d. Make the Low Income Household Rebate a fixed percentage of a person's energy bill, instead of a flat rate.

2) Improve access to dental care

Good oral health is fundamental to wellbeing, yet it is overlooked in our health care system. Many simply can't afford it, causing unnecessary pain and stigma. First Nations communities, particularly in rural and remote areas, experience poor oral health outcomes. While programs are in place, it is not enough to meet demand. That's why it's time to:

- a. Double funding for public dental outreach services to address shortages across NSW, prioritising locations with the highest need and most disadvantage.
- b. Address gaps in the provision of dental services by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services to increase access to this essential care for Aboriginal communities.

3) Make renting more secure and affordable

Renters are the fastest growing tenure type in Australia and low income renters are the most at risk, especially when disasters occur. Across NSW, rental increases and the rising cost of living have placed even more stress on households and increased the risk of homelessness for many. We are calling on the next NSW Parliament to:

- a. Replace no-grounds evictions in the current NSW tenancy law with a range of specified reasonable grounds.
- b. Where tenants are evicted for reasons other than a breach, introduce provisions requiring compensation for moving costs by the landlord.
- c. Introduce a permanent hardship framework to support renters maintain their tenancy and avoid eviction.
- d. Consider the feasibility of a mandatory landlord insurance scheme and/or landlord rental bond scheme to cover the cost of hardship provisions such as rent reductions.

4) Invest in social infrastructure so that essential support reaches those in need

Neighbourhood centres and others such as multicultural services and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations have been lifelines during recent disasters. They are an essential service that provide social connection, psychological support and practical assistance for those most in need, yet don't receive core funding to operate. We need the next NSW government to:

- a. Provide core funding for neighbourhood centres and similar local services that act as community access/distribution points for essential support, social connection and pathways to other assistance during tough times.

Targeted support for the most vulnerable

5) Enhance safety, security and wellbeing for women impacted by domestic and family violence

The housing crisis continues to worsen in NSW, particularly for those who are most vulnerable. Since the pandemic, housing insecurity has worsened for women in NSW. While a long term approach to address the housing crisis is needed, there is an urgent need for immediate relief for women and children placed in untenable circumstances because of domestic and family violence:

- a. Construct social housing for the 4,812 women and their children experiencing domestic and family violence who become homeless or return to a violent relationship because of a lack of housing.

6) Bolster children's safety, social development and educational outcomes

Children in NSW have faced major upheavals over the last three years, as families have dealt with increasing financial stress, and the closure of schools and childcare has impacted learning and social development. Our service system continues to be crisis orientated and families struggle to connect with the right support at the right time. We call on the next NSW Parliament to:

- a. Increase investment in the Targeted Early Intervention Program by 25%, prioritising Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.
- b. Continue evidence-based implementation of high quality school tutoring programs to counter the long-term impacts of lost education due to COVID.
- c. Implement the Family is Culture blueprint through a genuine partnership and shared decision making with Aboriginal leaders, Community Controlled Organisations and communities
- d. Enhance timely access to health and social services for children and their families in disadvantaged communities, by extending the 'School Gateway Project' in its South West Sydney location and to another two school sites in NSW.

7) Limit the harm caused by pokies on vulnerable communities

Across NSW, in the first half of 2022, punters lost almost \$4 billion playing the pokies. This is worrying, particularly when low level income Local Government Areas have the highest number of pokie machines and experience the greatest losses. Evidence supports a well-designed cashless gaming card minimising gambling harm. We call on the next NSW Parliament to:

- a. Mandate use of a cashless gaming card across NSW venues operating pokies, to enable a pre-commitment scheme, voluntary exclusion and other harm minimisation measures.
- b. Overhaul the NSW ClubGRANTS scheme so that it offsets harm by providing transparent, targeted funding for those it was designed to benefit – people on low incomes or who are otherwise disadvantaged.

Social Sector sustainability

8) Strengthen sustainability of the NSW social service sector as a growth industry and key employer of women

Our sector is the largest employer in Australia and is projected to grow even further, contributing \$15.4 billion each year to the NSW economy. In the face of recent upheavals, demand for social services in NSW is rising yet government support remains stagnant. The sector is highly feminised and characterised by low pay, poor conditions and a large gender pay gap. It is time for the next NSW Government to:

- a. Extend standard contract lengths for social service sector grants to seven years and ten years for service delivery in rural and remote communities.
- b. Introduce portability of entitlements, including long service leave, providing incentive for experienced staff to stay in the sector.
- c. Introduce consistent, evidence-based indexation.
- d. Develop a population-based funding model for the sector.

