

Neighbourhood Houses in
Tasmania - connecting people
and supporting their
communities.

Budget Priorities

2021-22

www.nht.org.au



**Neighbourhood Houses
Tasmania**

Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania - Budget Priorities Statement 2021-22

Background

NHT is the peak body for the 35 Neighbourhood Houses across Tasmania. The Houses and NHT are all part of one united Network that works together as a whole to improve the wellbeing of Tasmanian communities. Our goal is to help Houses do what they do best – use a community development approach to support local communities in ways that make a real difference in people’s lives.

Neighbourhood Houses have been operating in Tasmania for over 40 years and their purpose is to be local community-led organisations that build community capacity using a community development framework. Community development involves working in ways that empower individuals and groups of people to make changes in their community on issues that affect them. It is an inclusive, fair and responsive approach to creating solutions with communities. Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania, the peak body, supports the Network to work towards their goals.

What Houses do

- We respond to community needs
- We build community capacity
- We represent community views
- We enable delivery of community programs and services

The Network Goals

1. Connect community

Neighbourhood Houses build, connect and support community Networks of inclusiveness, involvement, trust and cooperation to improve community spirit, cohesion and wellbeing.

2. Support people

Neighbourhood Houses support the development of the personal skills, knowledge, abilities and resilience of people to improve the health and wellbeing of themselves and their communities.

3. Create opportunity

Neighbourhood Houses support skills development, life-long learning, ^{SEP}training and employment readiness opportunities to improve people’s social engagement and economic opportunities.

4. Local leadership

Neighbourhood Houses are community operated organisations, led by a Board of Governance consisting of volunteers living or working in the local community.

Executive summary

The Department of Communities fund 35 Neighbourhood Houses around Tasmania to support vulnerable people. The people supported by Houses are generally experiencing poverty and/or hardship due to lack of income and resources; lack of family and other support; domestic violence and lack of safety; hunger; loneliness, isolation and poor physical and mental health and well-being. Many House participants have and/or continue to experience trauma and are detached from family relationships and community connection.

Communities needing support

During 2020 and in 2021 to date, Houses are experiencing increased demand for services and support and are observing new and higher-level needs of participants, particularly in relation to mental health and loneliness.

Increased cost of housing and the distress caused by border closures and other COVID-19 related restrictions have changed the way people live and for many vulnerable people require more support.

The needs that Houses have identified apply across all age and population groups – particularly seniors and those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The specific needs that have been identified include mental health support and referral; access to nutritious and affordable food; human interaction and connection; financial stress and relationship breakdowns.

The House Network has also expressed concerns that the demand and severity of need will continue to increase as the support packages such as Jobkeeper are reduced.

The Network has also experienced challenges in relation to maintaining and supporting volunteers in recent months – as many of them are seniors and have put their volunteering on hold to reduce potential exposure to COVID-19.

At a Network level, Neighbourhood Houses have experienced an increase in and more complex demands for information and support from Houses. The areas in which support is being requested includes: COVID-19 information and procedures; governance and contract compliance; and advocacy and policy development. Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania is observing increased levels of pressure and stress on House Boards and House managers and needs the necessary resources to be proactive and able to be there to support Houses during this particularly challenging period. We need additional capacity to keep strengthening Houses and grow their ability to meet increased community demands.

Neighbourhood House's plan to support communities

Neighbourhood Houses are established organisations in vulnerable communities with a history of addressing poverty, hardship and distress in communities. To continue to meet community needs and growing demands and more complex needs, Houses seek funding as follows:

\$ 1,390,119 per year to employ a 0.5 FTE x 34 Houses to increase House's capacity to provide: individual and family support and mental health support and referral, and /or increased community connection and participation through food security projects; and work to restore the volunteer workforce in Houses.

Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania's plan to support Houses

To meet the growing and more complex needs of the House Network, Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania seeks funding as follows:

- \$ 92000 per year to employ 0.8 FTE to deliver sector development to meet the growing support needs of the Network in the areas of ongoing development and growth of House Boards and the governance structure and capacity of Houses; Service Agreement/Contract compliance and reporting; human resource management support (both paid and unpaid); policy and procedure development; service design and development and sharing; and representation of lived community experiences and circumstances to government and other policy/decision makers.

Increased community needs and demand are evident and appear to be growing and becoming more complex. The government currently invest in Neighbourhood Houses in vulnerable communities. This model has strong foundations and has delivered life-changing outcomes to individuals and built stronger and more able communities.

The Government provide over \$ 8 million that has established a base and existing structure, where the fixed costs are already covered. This proposal creates an opportunity to achieve additional positive change for people and communities for a relatively minimal additional investment of \$ 40,886 per House.

Providing this funding will mean:

- the 35 Neighbourhood Houses are more able to address some of the negative impacts poverty, hardship and distress; respond quickly and appropriately to changing community needs; and continue to strengthen and build the capability of their communities; and
- Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania will be able to provide the additional support to enable Houses to better respond to growing community needs

INVESTMENT

We make the following request for investment in Tasmania's communities:

Activity	Outcomes	Investment
New jobs which support communities	More community members receive support for mental health and wellbeing, leading to greater confidence to seek employment. Create stronger connections and reduced reliance on services into the future.	<p>\$1,390,118 per year over 4 years</p> <p>For up to 17 FTE (0.5FTE per 34 Houses) at a cost of \$40,885.85 pa</p>
Peak organisation funding for provision of peak body activities	Puts NHT in a stronger position to support the growing needs within Houses, in a sustainable way. Create skills in community governance, professional support in recruiting and managing staff, and engaging the community in decision-making.	<p>[\$368000] over 4 years</p> <p>Add .8 FTE to additional hours for NHT for increased capacity to drive policy support for NHT advocacy and to assist with improved support to the Network for Outcomes reporting.</p>
TOTAL		

OPPORTUNITIES

Resourcefulness and social connection is a strength of Tasmania's communities. Through place-based investments in Houses we have an opportunity to build on those strengths and create healthy, resilient, safe communities into the future.

Neighbourhood Houses have a track record of delivering place-based support to communities facing systemic challenges such as lack of access to transport, doctors, and dentists as well as affordable housing, access to services for drug and alcohol, mental health and legal services. Houses provide individuals with opportunities for work, training and volunteering. They collaborate and partner with other place-based services including Child Health and Parenting Centres, Child and Family Centres, Integrated Care Centres and Communities for Children initiatives.

Members of the Network have reported that people are connecting locally and that community resilience is strong despite the pressure people are experiencing. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic Houses have shown themselves to be resourceful, flexible and adaptable. They have innovated and collaborated, delivering supports and services for community members like outdoor pop shops, outdoor gym and exercise spaces, phone trees and online conversation clubs, activity packs and family support packs. Houses have also run online activities such as bingo, scrabble, knitting circles, yoga and tai chi as well as cooking and gardening classes. These activities help reduce social isolation for vulnerable members of our communities, providing connections and opportunities for people to maintain and improve their wellbeing.

It is vital through the COVID-19 recovery period that investments are made in place-based approaches that are tailored to the unique circumstances of each community.

CHALLENGES

The Houses have experienced first-hand the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 including the financial, emotional and mental stress caused by border closures and other restrictions. Houses have felt the impacts of the loss of essential human interaction and connection for both their organisations and within communities more broadly. These impacts have been felt most strongly by the most vulnerable in our communities.

Impacts of COVID-19 on communities

More community members are seeking support from Houses for anxiety and stress due to relationship breakdown, food insecurity, lack of affordable housing, unemployment and uncertainty about future job prospects, and the impact of trauma of lockdown on children. While financial pressure eased due to the increase in JobSeeker payments and the provision of JobKeeper, anxiety is now returning as those supports are reduced. There is an expectation that the demand for emergency relief support will grow.

“People receiving the extra JobSeeker (payments) have talked about how they have been able to finally catch up with things and do the extras like put tyres on the car and other maintenance.” (House Manager, November 2020)

“The continuing rise in rental costs and lack of availability is pushing marginalised folks out to rural areas where they are faced with limited or no support/transport. There are currently only 14 rentals in our catchment area, the cheapest is a one-bed studio at \$230 per week. There is one two-bed house at \$280 per week and the rest are all over \$300 per week with the dearest being \$520 per week! I would struggle to pay these prices on a full-time wage, it is well above the means of those on Centrelink benefits and low incomes.” (House Manager, November 2020)

The experiences vary among population groups. Older people who are not digitally connected are feeling isolated and are especially vulnerable. More young people are presenting with suicide ideation, psychotic episodes, mental health issues and eating disorders. Families are stressed and available support services are limited. Women and children are experiencing increased domestic violence and family relationship breakdowns while men are seeking help for anxiety relating to loss of income and housing, as well as suicide ideation, especially in rural areas. Rural areas also experience increased barriers to services, particularly a lack of affordable public transport. In addition, many people in rural areas experience a lack of access to funded service providers. Many providers are limited in their capacity, time, or financial resources, which in turn prevents them from reaching many people in rural and remote areas.

Migrants and asylum seekers are reliant on community organisations because they do not qualify for government payments and are experiencing anxiety about what the future holds.

These added stresses are leading to more people seeking mental health supports, and they now face long waiting times for counsellors and psychologists. Existing staff in Houses are not generally qualified or resourced to specifically offer mental health support to community members, but Houses are ideally placed as welcoming venues from which to offer these services and supports.

In addition, the pandemic has required Houses to operate differently, with only essential activities in operation, requiring the closure of some programs and activities, and a consequent loss of volunteers who were no longer needed, or in many cases were themselves vulnerable people and needing to isolate. Many of those older long-term volunteers are yet to return, and in some instances are becoming further at risk through their own ongoing vulnerability and isolation.

Capacity of Houses to meet additional needs

The pressure will continue to grow on House staff and volunteers as the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 are felt in communities. Without an adequate investment in local resources the sustainability of Houses is at risk.

A 2020 survey of Houses revealed nearly half had reported a 10-30% increase in new people seeking assistance, with one-quarter reporting a 10-30% increase in people looking for help with drug and alcohol issues. The increase in demand, along with the public health requirements of COVID-19, such as cleaning and compliance, has added to an already overburdened workload of Houses.

At the same time volunteer hours have decreased due to vulnerable volunteers stepping down during the COVID-19 outbreak and the challenges in re-engaging them. The value of volunteers in the Network is estimated to be \$6.5 million per year. In 2019-20 there were 1540 volunteers registered across the Network contributing 167,800 hours of work (an average of 109 hours per week per House). This is the equivalent of 2.9FTE per House. Across the State rates of volunteering have been declining over the past five years. According to Volunteering Tasmania, during COVID-19 Tasmania saw a reduction in volunteer hours of higher than 70%. In the Houses the number of volunteering hours has declined from 267,300 hours in 2018-19, which is a drop of 60 hours per House per week.

Houses are currently only funded for up to 2FTE staff and they respond to, on average, 450 contacts from members of the community per House per week, a total of over 750,000 over the year.

Community survey responses demonstrate the impact of the work of Neighbourhood Houses. In 2019-20:

- 71% of participants said they had connected with other people in the community
- 70% of respondents reported increased awareness of services and supports available
- 73% were connected with the services and supported needed
- 76% reported increased confidence
- 75% reported increased knowledge and skills
- 71% reported an increased sense of safety in community.

SOLUTIONS

Investing now in Houses will mitigate the impacts of unemployment and the social pressures such as access to food, financial stress, housing affordability, mental health and wellbeing, relationship breakdown. The investment will enable Houses to build on the resources that exist in communities to strengthen relationships and prepare for a potential second wave of COVID-19 and the impacts of climate change.

Houses are an ideal entry point for fostering belonging and connection. They provide a safe, familiar, secular, non-clinical environment for residents to receive the supports they need. The *Thriving Communities Healthy Families – Final Evaluation Report*¹, found that Houses were successful in engaging ‘at risk’ people as they delivered programs flexibly, had local autonomy and built the capacity of participants. The low-level, informal support and connection provided by Houses mitigates the need for higher level, more costly interventions. For example, workshops in parenting, mindfulness and emotional health build skills and create connections that can sustain people through challenging times without the need to seek services elsewhere.

1. New jobs for supporting communities

We propose the creation of up to 17 new jobs in Tasmania’s communities through an investment of \$1,390,118 per year.

The funding represents an increase to the core funding for Houses and would employ one 0.5 FTE in 34 Neighbourhood Houses across the State.

The investment in Houses would enable them to operate sustainably and manage future demand. These positions would enable the current staff to continue to facilitate and support others to run the day to day activities of the Houses, and enable a new focus on the individual and family support needs of people attending Houses. The new jobs would deliver outcomes for local communities through a focus:

Supporting mental health

- Deliver support for mental health and social, and emotional wellbeing through new specific roles within House teams that require suitable qualifications, experience or demonstrated skills to provide one-on-one support, group work, training and program delivery.

Fostering participation

- Lead food security projects including training for kitchen and garden staff; and

¹ University of Tasmania, Thriving Communities Healthy Families – Final Evaluation Report, 2016.

- Run events, activities and programs tailored at improving connection for isolated and vulnerable community members.

Managing volunteers

- Re-engage volunteers, recruit and train new volunteers, and support Neighbourhood House activities that are flexible and responsive.

The increase in core funding would give each House the flexibility to determine the staffing resources that will best meet the needs of communities. Additional funding allows for the increased compliance, cleaning and communications demands of COVID-19, and enables Houses to find more innovative ways to address social isolation, loneliness and provide social connection.

A focus on mental health and wellbeing support

Tasmanians are waiting too long for appointments with counsellors, psychologists and other mental health specialists. The impacts are being felt at the Houses where local residents are presenting with high levels of anxiety, depression, relationship stress and family violence. There are fears that the rising unemployment and reduction of JobKeeper and JobSeeker will increase financial stress and lead to the exacerbation of mental health issues. Houses are seeing the impacts on children with cases of trauma and depression.

Over the years Houses have delivered mental health and wellbeing support through a range of programs such as Thriving Communities, Integrated Family Support (IFS) and Wellways. In recent years the West Moonah Community Houses has provided a position of counsellor on site, paid for by fundraising. The House recognised that members of the community needed more one-on-one support and that the community valued being able to see the same person for appointments. The counsellor also provides workshops and group sessions. Clients often progress from appointments to undertaking community programs and volunteering at the House. This approach has now been replicated at Okines and Woodbridge.

The model has been tested and we know that it works. We now seek an ongoing investment to provide certainty to the communities that these valued services will continue.

An investment in House-based counsellors or community support workers would help to lift the capacity of the community to address such issues as addictive behaviours, improving relationships, managing mental health and improving self-confidence. By increasing individual support, community resilience will also improve.

As noted in the recently released Productivity Commission report, there are economic benefits in ensuring people can access the treatment and support they need. Improving access to services in local communities will help to prevent 'physical and mental distress, disruptions in education and

employment, relationship breakdown, stigma, and loss of life satisfaction and opportunities'.² The Report identifies billions of dollars worth of benefit nationally due to improvements of quality of life and economic participation generated through a person-centered mental health system. It notes that 'services that help a person engage with and integrate back into the community, can be as, or more, important than healthcare in supporting a person's recovery'.³

2. Funding to meet the requirements of a peak body

The social and economic impact of COVID-19 on Tasmania's communities cannot be underestimated. If Neighbourhood Houses are to respond to the consequences, prepare for a potential second wave or another pandemic, and deal with the impacts of climate change, there needs to be an investment in the organisations that support the people on the ground. As the peak body, NHT seeks to support the Houses to better serve their communities and build resilience for the long term. An investment in staffing at Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania will enable the peak organisation to better respond to the growing demand and complexity of needs within the Houses.

While NHT are extremely grateful for the increase to their core funding they received in 2019, there remains a gap between our capacity and the demands on a peak body by a dynamic and community based network. Our current core staffing is 2.8 FTE to service 35 Houses with 70 FTE paid staff and up 1400 volunteers (leaving aside other project specific funding for Governance and Eating with Friends etc.) Of the current funding, 75% is spent on wages and staff support (LSL, Prof Development EAP etc).

The expectations on the Houses, their staff and the volunteers, particularly volunteer board members is growing, particularly in relation to governance and compliance. The Network need a strong peak body to be able to support that increased expectation. The governance requirements for not-for-profit boards are the same as corporate boards, but board members are not paid to undergo training and professional development. NHT seeks to provide governance training for House managers, staff and board members. This includes coaching and leadership training for managers, board and frontline workers, as well as financial and audit training for managers and board members.

In 2020-21 Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania received project funding for a Project Officer to support Governance in the Network which is already yielding very positive results for the Network,

² Productivity Commission Inquiry Report Volume 1, Mental Health, No 95, 30 June 2020, p2.

³ Productivity Commission 2020, p2

and seeing strong steps in improving resources and support to the Houses. The demand from Houses for continued support towards good governance in the Houses will continue for many years.

NHT also wishes to fulfil its commitments to the State Government in the wake of COVID-19 through the 'Shared commitment to collaboration: A protocol for working together for the benefit of local communities'.

The investment being sought is an increase in NHT core funding of 0.8 FTE, a cost of \$92,000/year. This investment will improve the capacity of NHT to be able to much more effectively meet the requirements of peak body functions.

The funding will allow NHT to deliver improved services in:

- Community-based governance with facilitation, training, and the development of resources.
- Human resources support to ensure Houses have timely and accurate information for recruitment and management of staff.
- Policy and advocacy to ensure the voices of people with lived experience are heard in the development of policy, programs and services.

Current staffing (FTE)		Increased investment (FTE)	
Role	functions	Role	functions
1 CEO	CEO oversight of the organisation and staff (.6) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy and representation • Sector development • Governance • Partnerships 	1.0 CEO	Org Oversight <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead on advocacy • advice and representation to government • member management • strategic partnerships
0.8 Administration		1.0 Administration	Information dissemination
0.8 Development officer	Conference, Communications Governance training Liaison and support to Houses	0.8 Sector development	Sector development and, support in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outcomes • governance, • community development • conference
		0.6 Consultation, advocacy and policy	Sector consultation to inform advocacy and advice
0.2 Finance		0.4 Finance and HR	Support to the peak and the Network in compliance and policy and procedures
	TOTAL 2.8 FTE		TOTAL 3.6 FTE

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to the Tasmanian State Government Budget Priorities for 2021-22.