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**Social Priorities 2010**  
a report on the results of the  
Northern Rivers social priorities  
survey

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In early 2010 Northern Rivers Social Development Council (NRSDC) conducted a survey amongst the regions' community service providers to gauge their views on social priorities. The results from the survey will be used to inform NRSDC in its advocacy role. It will also stand as a resource for other community services to gain an insight into the key social issues faced by the Northern Rivers community and community service system.

Since 2001, initially the Northern Rivers Interagency and now NRSDC have conducted research, consultations and surveys with service providers. The aim has been to identify common social priorities across the region, flag new issues as they arise and monitor the state of those priorities.

Responses from community services of the Northern Rivers to the 2010 Social Priorities survey has revealed that the region's social priorities, as identified in 2002 and revisited in 2006 remain hot issues in the community.

Data from the survey may be considered in different ways. An indication of what responding services had the strongest feelings about can be found by looking at which issues had the most respondents rating them as 9 out of 9 ie the highest level of concern. From this perspective a ranking of the social priorities is as follows:

1. housing 42%
2. transport 40.4%
3. interrelated issues of mental health, alcohol and other drugs and domestic violence (hereafter referred to a complex needs) 40%
4. youth 36%
5. ageing and community based management each at 15.4%

An alternative way of reading the data is to look at the *average* rating of priority (scored 1-9). This perspective tells a slightly different story, better reflecting the *spread* of concern among the sector. For example, no one rated youth on the lower end of the spectrum, whereas housing and transport had a greater range of responses. Regardless of how the issues are ranked it is worth noting that the points between them (on the upper end particularly) are minimal.

1. youth 7.72 (on a scale of 1-9)
2. complex needs 7.64
3. transport 7.58
4. housing 7.08
5. ageing 6.92
6. community based management 6.52

According to the 2010 Northern Rivers Social Priorities Survey, there have been some changes to the status of these issues since previous consultations.

The issue of youth, in particular the wellbeing of young people, has been recognised as a greater concern by service providers. Youth received the highest ranking when taken as an average.

People with complex needs has progressed from being an emerging issue to having become quite critical. Service providers are concerned that people with multiple vulnerabilities are becoming lost in the system. Respondents to the survey strongly believed improved case management and planning is needed to support these people.

Affordable housing continues to be a cause of stress for many members of the Northern Rivers community. It has become a matter around which social and community workers spend considerable resources in attempting to support their clients.

Transport remains stable as an issue. Travel in rural areas and between towns is thwarted by minimal services and high fares. There is still no integrated transport system.

There will continue to be a growth in the ageing population with increased pressure on services needed to support them. Service providers would like to see more work done on restorative service models. A pilot of this type is currently being conducted in the Clarence Valley.

Community organisations seem to be faring better with community based management than they have in the past. There remains considerable interest however, in supporting these organisations with governance and legal issues.

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## SUB ISSUES

A breakdown of the six social priorities showed that community sector workers would like NRSDC to focus on the following sub-issues in this order of priority. Caution is advised however, as many respondents did not find the ranking process appropriate, particularly in areas of housing and youth, as more than one sub-issue were considered equally vital. Hence, being low on this list does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest, but rather that there may be several points of high stress.

### **Youth**

1. wellbeing (health, self image, self esteem, drug and alcohol use)
2. education and employment
3. transport and community access
4. housing and homelessness

### **People with Complex Needs**

1. improving cross agency case planning and management
2. provision of skills development in multi-agency case management protocols and techniques
3. conduct a trial to case manage a complex needs group using web-based client management software across multiple agencies

## **Transport**

1. integration and planning (pedestrian and cycling networks with bus/rail/taxi connections across the region; catering for students, commuters and other needs)
2. high cost of fares
3. bus timetabling and routes
4. transport information

## **Housing**

1. supply of affordable housing
2. homelessness services
3. more crisis accommodation services
4. additional housing support services

## **Ageing**

1. restorative service models (flexible models of service delivery, person and goal focused services)
2. service coordination (improved integration of services)
3. improving access to services, both financial (through statewide policy) and geographical (rural and remote)
4. workforce development

## **Community Based Management (CBM)**

1. provision of support services to assist in management and governance
2. legal assistance for organisations with CBM
3. moving beyond CBM - with companies, mergers and partnerships
4. committee member recruitment

It should be recognised that many of these issues are intertwined. For example, homelessness among women and children is most commonly a result of domestic violence and for men over 25 years, drug and alcohol abuse is the most common reason for seeking support for homelessness (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2010). Both these issues (drug and alcohol and family violence) are components of complex needs. Complex needs then can easily lead to other problems such as homelessness. Additionally, both young people and the elderly are commonly reliant on public transport and vulnerable to housing stress. Hence, community members who have difficulties with any one of these issues may be subject to multiple social disadvantages. These connections suggest a call for collaboration between differing *types* of services.

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## INTRODUCTION

The 2010 Social Priorities Report is based on the results on NRSDC's 2010 Social Priorities Survey. This survey sought feedback from community services to review the six social priorities of the Northern Rivers region. Those social priorities having been identified as: housing, community based management, transport, youth, people with complex needs and the aged.

This report provides a summary of the results of that survey. It also includes a brief discussion on the issues and mentions some current and recent work conducted by the sector and NRSDC to address them.

The survey was not intended to be a definitive study into the current state of the social priorities, but rather as a single point of feedback and input from the sector.

## BACKGROUND

The Northern Rivers region consists of the following local government areas: Tweed Valley, Byron Shire, Ballina Shire, Lismore City, Kyogle Shire, Richmond Valley and Clarence Valley. The Northern Rivers Social Priorities project was initiated in 2001. The Northern Rivers Interagency (of which NRSDC was a member) began the process by consulting locally with community services to determine what they found to be key social issues affecting their service users. The aim was then to determine which, if any, of these issues had regional significance. The findings of these consultations were written up in a report "*Social and Community Services Priorities as determined by the Northern Rivers Interagency*". The report was then presented at the Regional Social Priorities Forum in Ballina 2002.

The identification of five regional social priorities emerged from the Ballina forum: youth, housing, transport, community based management and people with complex needs. Since that time, NRSDC has been reviewing these priorities to monitor their currency.

In 2005 NRSDC revisited the priorities to determine how the sector had been responding to the issues which had been raised. It examined what work had been undertaken and what had been achieved. The findings from this project can be found in *Northern Rivers Social Priorities Project: Moving From Consultation to Action*, 2005. In 2006 NRSDC added a sixth social priority: ageing as this was considered to be a growing issue across the community.

NRSDC facilitated three forums across the region in late 2006. These forums were attended by over 100 representatives from a diverse range of Northern Rivers community service organisations. These consultations focused on the now six social priorities.

The most recent ranking of regional social priorities was as follows: housing, community based management, transport, youth, people with complex needs and the aged.

The regional approach taken by NRSDC to social issues is a vital one, particularly as the Northern Rivers Interagency is no longer functioning. An examination of shared social issues across the region, paves the way for community services to work in partnership and collaboration across local boundaries. This may result in greater opportunities for advocacy, a stronger sector and ultimately better outcomes for service users and the broader Northern Rivers community.

The purpose of this report is to analyse the results of an online survey. The 2010 Regional Social Priorities survey again sought feedback from community service organisations on the six regional social priorities to determine if there have been any significant changes since previous consultations.

In addition, this survey sought to determine which aspects of these priorities services providers would like to see NRSDC focus on – ie 'what are the most critical sub-issues?'. NRSDC will use this information to inform it's advocacy efforts. The community sector will find the results a useful gauge of current social concerns.

## METHODOLOGY

Subscribers to NRSDC's e-newsletter were invited to participate in the 2010 Northern Rivers Social Priority Survey on 24 February 2010. They were provided with a link to an online survey, hosted by Survey Monkey, in a special edition of NRSDC's e-news. Subscribers were encouraged to respond to the survey with a chance to win a \$200 voucher at a major retailer. A reminder notice, inserted into the regular e-newsletter, was issued three weeks later. The survey closed for responses on Friday 19 March 2010, after a total of four weeks.

The 2010 survey sought feedback on how important each of the 6 social priorities were considered to be on a scale of 1 (very low) to 9 (very high). Respondents were then directed to a breakdown of each priority into sub issues. They were asked to identify which points they thought NRSDC should most focus on by ranking them in order of priority.

Respondents were able to leave a question unanswered if they chose, so response counts were variable. This reflects the fact that service providers have greater experience and knowledge in particular areas. For example a youth worker may not feel qualified to comment on aged issues. Respondents were also asked whether NRSDC should change a priority, and if so, what should be removed. The final question was an open one, to give respondents the opportunity to discuss any other issues that were affecting them, which NRSDC should know about: "Is there anything else you would like to tell us?" The results were then collated and analysed to determine any changes in priority and to see what themes had emerged.

# RESULTS

## Introduction

The survey was completed by 77 respondents (roughly 11% of the 696 NRSDC e-newsletter subscribers). These respondents had an average of 8 years experience in the Northern Rivers social and community services and they had experience working with communities in each of the region's seven local government areas (LGAs). A significant majority came from Lismore City LGA (67.1%), followed by Ballina Shire (31.4%) Richmond Valley (27.1%), Byron Shire (22.9%), Tweed Valley (22.9%), Kyogle (18.6%) and lastly Clarence Valley (14.3%). The total came to greater than 100% as respondents were able to state that they had experience in more than one LGA.

These response rates indicate that some LGAs have a greater number of services than others. It also suggests NRSDC has stronger ties with the locations to which it has geographic proximity. This suggests a need for NRSDC to enhance engagement with the sector in the further reaches of the Northern Rivers.

There was some concern among respondents about having to rank the sub-issues. Comments overall, and in particular with regards to youth and housing, argued some or all of the sub-issues were of equal importance. A measure of caution then must be taken when reading a ranking of these issues. A lower ranking does not necessarily equate to minimal concern.

The regional social priorities, as initially identified by the Northern Rivers Interagency and subsequent consultations by Northern Rivers Social Development Council, are the primary social concerns held by service providers in 2010. 80% of respondents (36 people) argue they should not be changed. 11% (5 people) would be happy to see CBM removed as a regional social priority, 6.7% (3 people) thought people with complex needs were not a high priority and 2.2% (a single person) would like to see transport removed from the list. The response to this and other questions indicates CBM is not as great a concern to organisations as it has been in previous years.

While there was limited support for additional priorities, Aboriginal equity and people with a disability were highlighted as important. As one respondent argued, "*all these are pressing issues on the North Coast but all these are amplified if you are a person with a disability*". Informal feedback to NRSDC during the survey period also consistently highlighted Aboriginal equity issues. Other priorities mentioned included: drug and alcohol *across the ages*, sustainability, information and communications technology access and literacy, and a general need to develop community resilience.

Responses received from the final question "is there anything you would like to tell us?" ranged from several respondents applauding the social priorities project to frustration with the survey design, eg, 'This is the worst survey I've ever done'. One respondent noted that fear of "the system", or fear of being seen as a failure for accessing it, was sometimes a psychological barrier

for people who might otherwise benefit from community services. Interestingly there were comments made by various respondents about the prime importance of each of the social priorities, the only exception being CBM.

*“(Youth services) need to be innovative, non judgmental and accessible – the issue of self care and care of others could be integrated into education and employment initiatives and housing initiatives”*  
 survey respondent

RESULTS

Youth issues are considered a major concern by service providers in the Northern Rivers. This issue received the highest *average* rating of 7.7 out of 9. 36% of respondents (18 people) rated this issue a 9, (very high) and a further 24% rated it 8, with no one rating it below a level 5. No one suggested youth be removed as a social priority.

In 2006, when the social priorities were last ranked, youth was identified as social priority number 4. The 2010 survey suggests youth issues have become more of a concern to community workers. When taken as an average rating, youth was the highest priority expressed in this survey.

Wellbeing (health, self image, self esteem and drug and alcohol usage) was rated as the most important sub-issue for NRSDC to focus on by 45% of respondents. This was closely followed by education and employment (42%), transport and community access was third (15%) and then housing and homelessness (5%). Two respondents commented that all were of a high priority. The *range* of responses to this question suggests all of these sub-issues are a high priority for Northern Rivers’ youth.

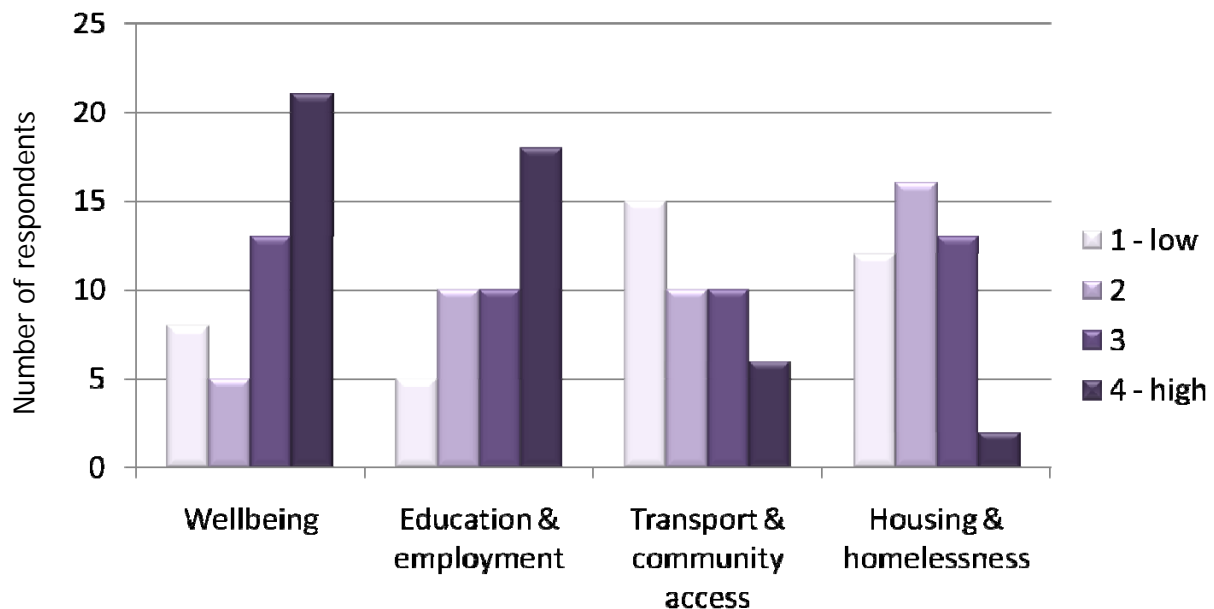


Chart 1 - Which Aspects of Youth should NRSDC Focus on in Order of Priority?

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## COMMENTS FROM RESPONDENTS

Comments regarding youth included concern about young people being both victims and perpetrators of crime and acts of aggression, the role of disintegration of the family unit, the need to support families who support young people and the lack of appropriate social venues and transport.

Being part of a minority group may add another layer of disadvantage. For example, a respondent noted that young Aboriginal people are frequently the victim of racism and discrimination.

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## DISCUSSION

Concerns about wellbeing are reflected by young people themselves in the national data. Mission Australia's survey of 11-24 year olds (the largest in Australia), found 'body image, drugs and conflict are the biggest worries for 11-24 year olds, with one in four regarding each as a major concern'. They note that concerns about drug use among young people have grown in recent years (Mission Australia, 2008). They caution however, that concern does not necessarily mean usage. Young people may be worried about experiencing peer group pressure or concerned for the wellbeing of others around this issue.

Housing and transport are significant regional issues in their own right, as well as being issues in particular for youth. This indicates that problems for the general community may be magnified for young people. This may be because often young people have fewer resources (financial and experience) at their disposal. It points to there being potential value for collaboration between service providers working across different fields.

The other issues of education/employment, transport and housing are interconnected. Many young people cannot afford their own vehicle and so are reliant on public transport. Transport services in the region are limited and expensive compared to metropolitan areas (see *Transport* page 11). This is especially so if a person needs to travel between towns, be that for work or study, and this effectively limits their choices. Anecdotal reports tell of young people who are committed to work or study, but get stuck if they finish after buses have stopped running (as is often the case at Wollongbar TAFE, for example), who resort to hitchhiking. Relying on this method of travel is unsustainable, unreliable and unsafe. It follows that if a person struggles to get to work to earn an income, they will have difficulty securing housing, particularly as there is currently a shortage of affordable rental properties on the market.

If a young person is connected and engaged with their fellow young people and with the broader community, they are more likely to experience a sense of wellbeing. The alternative is disengagement and alienation, which may place the young person at risk of poor self esteem, drug use, antisocial behavior and social isolation. Several youth services in the region therefore facilitate engagement between young people at risk and relevant community services. An effective way of doing so has been through regional high schools. This form of early intervention aims to support young people before problems can escalate.

An example of a successful Northern Rivers program is REALskills. REALskills is conducted by the Family Centre in Tweed Heads. The program aims to improve relationships within the school, develop life skills and improve linkages with other community services. As the Family Centre (2010) describes it "REALskills builds a bridge between the school community and the wider community of social and health service providers, in an integrated way." This relationship building between schools and the community sector is increasingly relevant as schools realise their child protection responsibilities under the Keep them Safe reforms.

The New School of Arts in Grafton has recently been awarded funds under the Binge Drinking Initiative to reestablish the successful street cruise project, conducted in Grafton, South Grafton and Yamba 2007-2009.

Byron Youth Service (BYS) facilitates a number of innovative programs. Several programs aim to keep young people connected to their community, education and employment and others to promote their safety as they live in a binge drinking culture. One such example is Project U Turn, which aims to educate and engage young people on ways to reduce levels of risky drinking (BYS 2010).

NRSDC runs a Reconnect early intervention youth homelessness program, with caseworkers located at five sites across the Northern Rivers. It also conducts GIT (Getting it Together) for 12-18 year olds with alcohol and other drug abuse issues. It aims to help young people make positive changes in their lives.

Mainstream public transport can be an issue for young people on a day to day basis. However there are schemes that provide alternative, flexible arrangements for groups of transport disadvantaged young people. These schemes are run under the umbrella of Community Transport Organisations and include Bat Bus in Byron region, Yaxi in Lismore and Richmond Valley and RYDON services around Murwillumbah and nearby coastal villages. Plans are also underway to develop a service in the Clarence Valley.

## People with complex needs

*“The coordination of service packages involving numerous agencies is at best difficult and at worst a nightmare. It is invariably confusing for the client...”*

survey respondent

Complex needs is a relatively new concept and definitions can vary considerably according to the field and context. For the purpose of this report, people with complex needs are defined those having “combined and inter-related issues of mental health, alcohol and other drugs and domestic violence as they affect families” (NRSDC 2006, p.41).

### RESULTS

People with complex needs were rated by 40% of respondents as level 9, or very high. Its *average* rating was 7.64 out of 9, so by either measure complex needs is a very high priority for the Northern Rivers.

When the regional social priorities were last ranked in 2006, complex needs was seen as social priority number five. In 2010 it ranks second, suggesting perhaps both a growth in, and greater awareness of, the problem.

By far the greatest concern expressed was for improving cross agency case planning and management, with 56% of respondents rating that as highest priority. This was followed by provision of skills development in multi-agency case management protocols and techniques (27%). Little interest was expressed in conducting a trial to case manage a complex needs group using web-based client management software across multiple agencies (18% ranking it highest). Most respondents rated it lowest of the three priorities to work on.

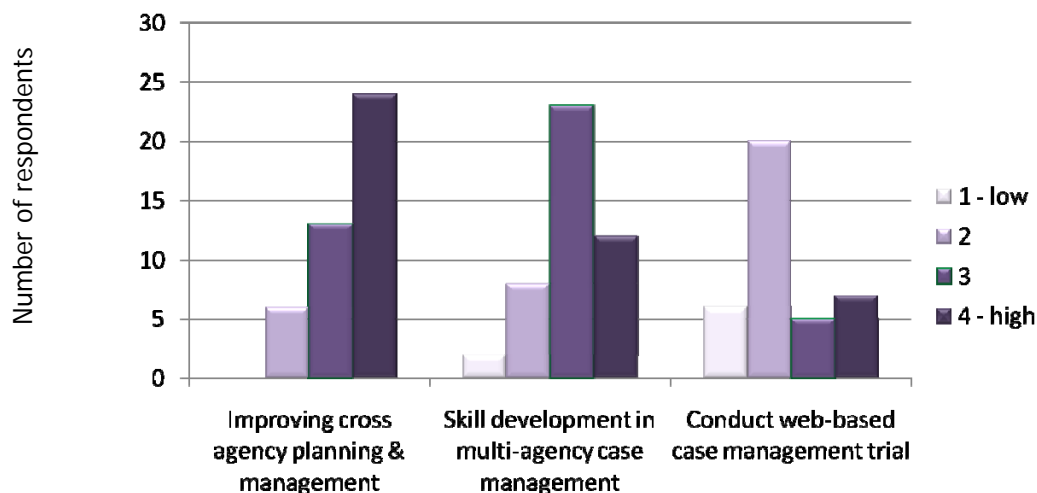


Chart 2 - Which Aspects of People with Complex Needs should NRSDC Focus on in Order of Priority?

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## COMMENTS FROM RESPONDENTS

7 comments were made on the complex needs issue. Comments ranged from concerns about clients needing support to navigate a 'complex system', the need to improve interagency communication and that greater responsibility for complex needs should to be taken up by state agencies such as DoCS, Housing, Police and Education. A counselor also commented on witnessing an increase in family instability that may be contributing to this problem. Comments generally reflected the stated sub-issues. Essentially, service providers believe that improved communication and planning between agencies is needed to help people to find their way through the system so they do not become lost.

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## DISCUSSION

The concept of people with complex needs being a distinct target group is still a fairly new one. Finding new ways to work effectively to support people with complex needs and their families is a continuing task around which considerably more understanding and work needs to be done. This is complicated by the fact that the term can have different meanings depending on the agency you speak with.

A consultation conducted by the Victorian Government Department of Human Services (2006, p.12) focusing on agency partnerships for clients with the combined issues of alcohol and other drugs, mental illness and family violence found the following factors key to inter-agency collaboration:

- active support by agency management and leaders
- commitment to the time and other resources needed to build and sustain partnerships
- communication and respect - success depends on the strength of interpersonal relationships
- formal mechanisms for communications, information sharing and mutual skill development
- sharing understanding of professional roles and responsibilities; and
- government policy direction promoting collaboration between services.

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## CURRENT AND RECENT WORK

The Nimbin Integrated Services (NIS) Project was developed as a trial in response to community concerns around people with complex needs. It targets with people who have both mental health and drug and alcohol issues. A nurse practitioner delivers a clinical service within a community based setting at the Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre (NNIC), a soft point of entry. The service is well used and interestingly most clients either self refer or are referred by family members or friends, for many this is their first contact with mental health services. The project works as an integrated service delivery model and is jointly delivered, managed and supervised by the North Coast Area Health Service (NCAHS) and NNIC, whilst being overseen by a steering committee. The NSW Departments of Premier and Cabinet, Police and Community Services, along with NCAHS, Nimbin Hospital and NNIC work in partnership on the project.

Another innovative program to take a holistic approach to complex needs in the Northern Rivers was MISA (Mental Illness Substance Abuse). This program was administered by The Buttery and funded by the Attorney General's Department. A lifestyle support program for clients with mental health and drug and alcohol issues, MISA offered outreach support services to clients and their families, early intervention programs and community education throughout the region. Unfortunately, despite being a finalist in 2009 National Drug and Alcohol Awards for excellence in treatment and support, funding for MISA expired in early 2010 and the service has been forced to close (Northern Rivers Echo 23/3/10; The Buttery 2010).

In response to the emerging challenge of people with complex needs, NRSDC convened a conference in October 2008 'Complex Needs – Turning the Tide'. This two day event, held in Tweed explored ways for service providers to better manage the care of people with complex needs. Contributions were made by several well respected local, national and international key note speakers and included discussions on innovative programs and current research as well as government policy direction.

An effective response to complex needs will require continued commitment by funders and service providers to explore innovative ways to work in partnership and collaboration.

*“If you don’t own a car in this region, you are seriously disadvantaged. Accessing and benefitting from services becomes problematical if you are dependent on public transport, especially when you need to travel from one town to another, because of the cost and the poor services...in the majority of instances low income persons who don’t own a car become isolated and only access immediately local services.”*

survey respondent

## RESULTS

Transport was considered to be of very high (level 9) importance by 40 % of respondents. It had an average rating of 7.58 out of 9.

This would place transport among the top three regional concerns. It has remained steady in this place since 2006.

Integration and planning are the clear priority areas with 55% of respondents ranking this the highest, followed by the high cost of fares (33%) and then bus timetabling and routes (17%). Considerably fewer respondents (5%) thought the provision of transport information of high priority, with almost half respondents (48%) giving it the lowest ranking.

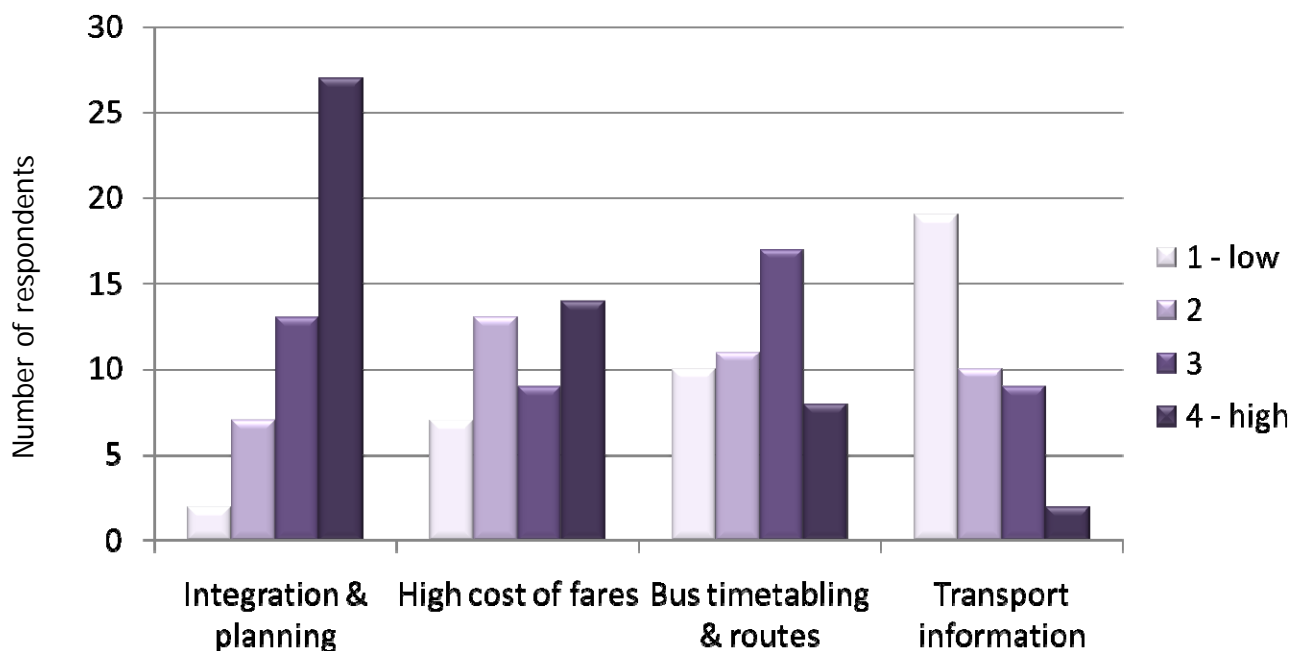


Chart 3 - Which Aspects of Transport should NRSDC Focus on in Order of Priority?

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## COMMENTS FROM RESPONDENTS

18 respondents were moved to comment on transport, more than any other single issue. 5 of these expressed frustration about the lack of transport in outlying areas where people must rely on school buses, which are not always appropriate, particularly for older people. Despite it being six years since the demise of the Casino – Murwillumbah rail line, there remains strong community feeling about it, with 3 survey respondents arguing for its return. Sustainability issues were also raised eg: *'People must be made to face the great problems associated with using cars & trucks & then they may accept the necessity of rail (both freight & passenger) and greater bus use'*. The issue of health transport was raised twice.

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## DISCUSSION

The Northern Rivers has a high number of dispersed towns and villages and travel between them presents distinct difficulties, both financial (fares) and infrastructural (services). An integrated transport system for the Northern Rivers is a priority and a challenge, particularly as any major structural changes are essentially reliant on the commitment and resources of the State Government. There has been fare relief for some people on low incomes, but there remains considerable disparity between metropolitan and regional fares. As transport disadvantage can be a precursor to social isolation NRSDC will continue to advocate for improvements.

2009 saw some significant improvements in travel fares for disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW. There has been an increase in parity with metropolitan areas, at least for concessionary travelers. Lobbying by NRSDC and other organisations resulted in the introduction of the RED (Regional Excursion Daily) ticket. This ticket allows those holding a Pension Concession Card or NSW Seniors or War Widow Card to travel all day on the local transport network for \$2.50.

In addition, senior secondary and tertiary students, along with apprentices and trainees can now apply for ½ fare concession cards, which can be used for general travel. Previously concession cards had only been valid for travel to and from study. However, anecdotal reports suggest concession cards are difficult to obtain. This may simply be due to it being a new arrangement and the process could improve as the agencies involved (learning institutions and employers) become more experienced administering it.

Intra regional fares remain high, making travel prohibitive for many. There remains considerable inequity between metropolitan and regional fares, with travel over similar distances costing up to twice as much outside of the major centres of NSW. Maximum bus fares are set by NSW Transport and Infrastructure, based on a system of sections set along bus routes. Some examples of one way, full price fares are given below (Northern Rivers Buslines 2010; Blanch's Bus Company 2010). Note that child and concession fares are ½ this amount and a return fare would be double.

Kyogle to Lismore	\$15.80	(44km)
Grafton to Lismore	\$28.10	(132km)
Byron Bay to Ballina	\$9.60	(38km)
Lennox Head to Ballina	\$6.40	(12km)

Transport operators in regional areas are now contractually committed to consult with their local communities in order to better plan services to meet community needs. They must also collaborate with neighboring operators in order to maximise efficiency of services (Transport NSW 2009).

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## CURRENT AND RECENT WORK

In partnership with NOROC and Regional Development Australia Northern Rivers, NRSDC continues to advocate for a regional, integrated transport plan. This plan is necessary to properly outline passenger transport needs. As a part of a broader integrated transport network, NRSDC, along with TOOT (Trains on our Tracks), has argued for the introduction of a light rail commuter service along the old Casino – Murwillumbah line, which would then connect to Queensland. NRSDC considers that securing a rail corridor into South East Queensland to be a priority action. However the *Report of the Cross Border Taskforce* (Transport NSW 2009) concluded that despite the numerous pro rail submissions received, on the grounds of economic sustainability it would not recommend either a passenger service on the Casino-Murwillumbah line nor further study into connecting that line with Queensland.

One innovative solution to the high price of bus fares and insufficient service integration was the introduction of Northern Rivers Car Pool in 2009. An online database matches people with similar travel needs and facilitates their connection. At June 2010 there are 450 carpoolers across the region (Northern Rivers Carpool, 2010). This project was initiated by Lismore City Council, with assistance from Ballina Shire Council, Byron Shire Council, Richmond Valley Council, Tweed Valley Council, Southern Cross University (SCU), North Coast Area Health Service (NCAHS) and NRSDC.

There is a strong community perception that the Northern Rivers has little or no public transport and people are often surprised when they realise what services are available. For example, one comment on this issue was *'we have bugger all transport whatsoever ...having ANY transport at all is the real issue...'*. NRSDC continues to publish the Transport Information Pages in the Telstra Yellow Pages, which provides basic route and concession information as well as contact details for transport operators across the region. NRSDC's *Going Places* website [www.goinplaces.org.au](http://www.goinplaces.org.au) was completely overhauled and relaunched in 2009. This website has all the above information, plus links to operator websites and timetables in an easy to navigate format.

NRSDC works across a range of transport issues with a range of partners, for example:

- active transport – walking and cycling
- travel patterns and data gathering
- transport to health services
- transport disadvantaged groups such as Aboriginal people, young people and people with a disability.

# Housing

*“The lack of affordable housing is endemic across the region and worsens as you get closer to the coast...Health, welfare and community service agencies spend an inordinate amount of time, often futilely pursuing housing solutions for their clients”.*

survey respondent

## RESULTS

Housing had a strong response rate with 42% of respondents (or 25 people) giving it the highest rating of 9. This was the issue given highest rating, by the highest amount of respondents. Conversely, however, 5 respondents rated it level 1 or very low. Thus an *average* rating for housing reflected these diverse views coming in at only 7.08 out of 9, or number 4 out of 6 in that order of priority.

Housing had previously been ranked as the number one social priority. A current ranking, if determined by averages, would see housing rated as social priority number four. However, given the known data around homelessness and housing affordability in the Northern Rivers, this would be a controversial change.

Supply of affordable housing was nominated by the most respondents at 66%, as being what NRSDC should most focus on, making it by far the most significant sub-issue. Homelessness services (26%) and crisis accommodation services (19%) were also considered a high priority, followed by additional housing support services (11%). That said, some commented that all were of equally high priority. If affordable housing is taken out of the equation, the graph can be seen to be fairly flat, demonstrating a similar level of concern around the other questions. The issues are interrelated, as a shortage of affordable housing in the first instance would result in greater pressure upon crisis and homelessness services.

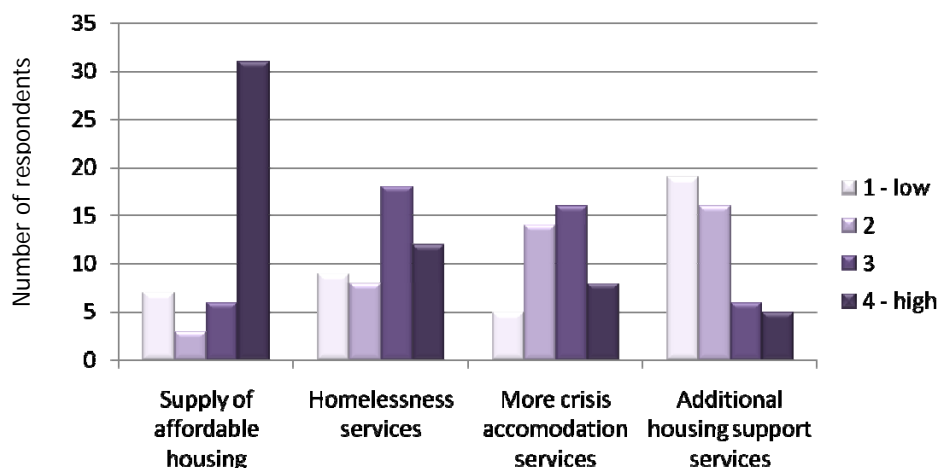


Chart 4 - Which Aspects of Housing should NRSDC focus on in Order of Priority?

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## COMMENTS FROM RESPONDENTS

6 of the 13 comments were related to the lack of affordable housing and two comments were about the need for services to support tenancies. As one respondent stated: *'it has become a vicious cycle where they (the client) lose one property only to be caught homeless and looking for further affordable housing'*. Other comments were in support of the conversion of the Winsome Hotel in Lismore into a shelter, but that more crisis accommodation is needed throughout the region. Concern was also expressed for support housing for those with a disability, particularly as carers age and can no longer fulfill their role. This can result in the person requiring care needing to move away from friends and family in order to receive support.

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## DISCUSSION

According to 2006 census data, the Northern Rivers is home to 15% of the state's rough sleepers, despite having only 4% of the state's general population (ABS, 2006). Anecdotal reports suggest the problem has grown significantly since this time, possibly up to three times what it was at last count (ABC, 2010). Housing affordability is a significant piece of this puzzle. When a household spends over 30% of its income on rent or mortgage payments, this is generally considered to be the measure of housing stress. Data from Housing NSW Rent and Sales Report (2010), suggests the average household on the Northern Rivers spends 46% of their income on rent, compared with the rest of NSW which is 31%. This tells us that almost half the Northern Rivers population, being those on low and moderate incomes, may be stretched to meet their other essential needs.

As part of the National Building Economic Stimulus Plan, new properties have been built and granted to social housing providers around Australia through a tender process. In the Northern Rivers region, 27 new properties in Lismore, Grafton and Ballina were granted to North Coast Community Housing and 126 properties in Ballina, Lismore, Casino, Murwillumbah and Tweed to On Track Community Programs. While this new social housing stock is welcome, the region has not yet secured a fair share of the NSW stimulus housing. By comparison to the rest of NSW, the Northern Rivers has a significantly lower proportion of public and community housing. 11% of rental stock in the region is public housing, compared to 15% in Sydney.

Another measure to increase affordable housing is the National Rental Affordable Scheme (NRAS). The scheme provides financial incentives in the form of an annual contribution from the Australian Government as a tax offset or grant, and an annual State/Territory Government contribution of at as financial and/or in kind support (Housing NSW, 2009). So far Baptist Community Services and Uniting Care, both in Lismore, and Community Housing Limited in the Clarence have been beneficiaries of this scheme.

The supply of affordable housing is of very high concern for the Northern Rivers. Relative to the rest of NSW there are high housing costs and conversely low incomes. Community services report their clients are having difficulty in finding and maintaining suitable accommodation and there is insufficient crisis accommodation available. It is hoped that new resources to be provided for social

housing and the Regional Homelessness Action Plan will make a significant contribution to keeping people securely housed in the Northern Rivers.

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## CURRENT AND RECENT WORK

There have been several recent local initiatives to address the problem of homelessness. In 2009 the Winsome Hotel in Lismore was taken over by the Lismore Soup Kitchen. The Winsome now provides 18 rooms of crisis accommodation with assistance for residents to transition to private or social housing. In 2010 Byron Bay saw the opening of Fletcher Street Cottage, a drop in centre which provides the homeless with a place to store belongings, take a shower and enjoy the safety and support provided by the space. According to Katie Thompson, Community Service Centre coordinator, the centre is being used by 30 – 50 people a day (Northern Star, 12 April 2010). This suggests there are an alarmingly high number of rough sleepers in this regional town.

The Regional Homelessness Action Plan for the North Coast includes funding for three new projects under the National Partnership on Homelessness. There will be tenancy support for people at risk of homelessness, a support service for young people leaving care and thirdly support and accommodation for young people with complex needs exiting Juvenile Justice custody.

In 2010 NRSDC has secured funds through the National Homeless Research Fund to investigate models of homelessness service coordination, to assist services to be more effective in a regional context. The study reflects a growing understanding that homelessness is a significant issue in regional and rural Australia that may require different strategies to those used in metropolitan areas. Strategies to improve service coordination will be developed and tested collaboratively with core services and service clients.

NRSDC ran an Affordable Housing project from 2006 until 2009. This project worked towards increasing the supply of affordable housing in the region across all levels, from public housing to social housing, subsidised rent and market rent. It took a partnership approach between the public and private sectors as well as not for profit organisations. The aim of the project was to locate any potential housing/homelessness funding opportunities and to position the Northern Rivers region to be able to access those opportunities.

NRSDC remains committed to continued advocacy to address housing and homelessness issues. NRSDC is a member of the Regional Homelessness Committee, which will support development, implementation and monitoring of the Regional Homelessness Action Plan. NRSDC also participates in the Northern Rivers Housing Forum Executive. The Housing Forum meets regularly to share information on a number of issues broadly relating to changes in the housing field. A staff member of NRSDC is co-president of Youth Accommodation Association. Staff members are also actively involved in the National Youth Coalition on Housing and Shelter NSW.

*‘We need creative and easily accessible service models for the ageing population of the Northern Rivers due to the diverse community’.*

survey respondent

## RESULTS

The issue of ageing was nominated by 15% of respondents as level 9 or ‘very high’ concern, with an average of 6.92. Taken as an average weighting of priority, or by the amount of people ranking it as very, ageing is ranked as 5.

Ageing was first identified as a social priority for the Northern Rivers in 2006. At that time it was ranked as social priority number 6. It’s status can be considered to have moved up one level since that time.

Two subissues were identified as high priority areas within ageing. Respondents were almost equally concerned about creating improved access to services (financial and geographical) (42.9%) and 42.5% believed restorative service models with flexible delivery should be the first priority for NRSDC in this area. Improved service coordination (29%) and services for Aboriginal people (9%) rating somewhere in the middle. Conversely, workforce development was rated lowest in order of priority (6%), with almost half of respondents rating it lowest on the scale.

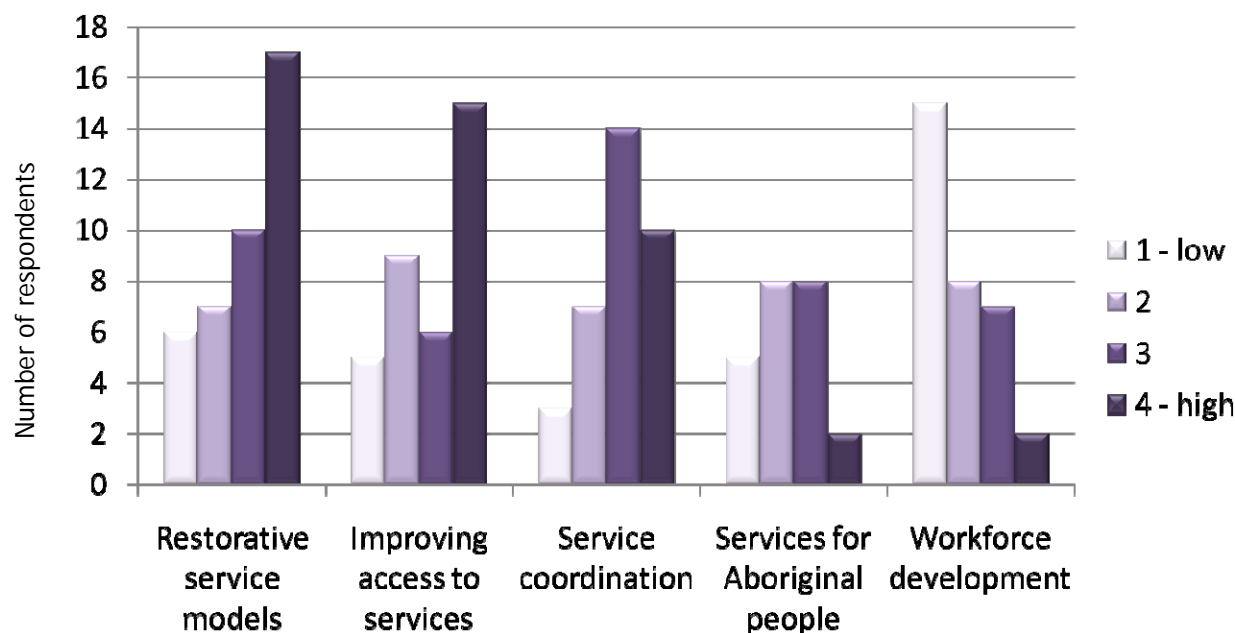


Chart 5 - Which Aspects of Ageing should NRSDC Focus on in Order of Priority?

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## COMMENTS FROM RESPONDENTS

Comments on ageing covered a range of concerns. Two comments were received about the need to improve 'the built environment' to increase accessibility for our older population, for example more scooter routes and crossings. Also mentioned was the need for greater flexibility in care, particularly in regard to the Aboriginal community, support for dementia sufferers and their carers, fragmentation of services related to government contracting out to numerous smaller agencies, financial disadvantage and the problem of self funded but under resourced retirees being required to pay full fees for services.

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## DISCUSSION

Whilst ageing was not considered by respondents to be among the higher priorities for the region, the ageing population both nationally and regionally continues to grow. Hence there will be increasing implications for the community and for service providers. As the NSW Chamber of Business (2008, p.5) states: 'The median age for the (Northern Rivers) region is expected to rise from 39 to 51 (by 2031), mainly due to a doubling of the number of people over 65. This rapid ageing will put additional pressure on health and ageing services and infrastructure across the region'.

Over the last decade there has been a move towards models of care that take a capacity building approach, rather than a worker simply doing things *for* the service user. An increase in independence is thought to improve an older person's quality of life, as well as resulting in more efficient service provision. Various terms have been used for this new approach including active ageing, wellness, restorative and re-ablement (Aged Services Learning and Research Centre [ASLARC] 2009, pp.1-2). Reablement is a particular model which is described by ASLAC (2009) as having the following key components: capacity building to increase independence and quality of life, an holistic focus including promotion of active decision making and the provision of flexible and timely services.

Older people in rural and regional areas often suffer transport disadvantage and this affects their ability to access services. When older people lose their driving license their transport options are considerably narrowed and getting to services and community participation becomes an issue. Community transport is available to those who meet HACC eligibility criteria (this is generally seen as being frail enough not to be able to walk 40m), however many fall into the gap of being insufficiently mobile to get to the bus stop and board or alight from a bus, but ineligible for community transport services. According to NCOSS (2010) the gap can contribute to social isolation. This is especially a threat in rural communities and outlying towns, because bus services between towns and villages can be sparse. For example, an elderly person wanting to get from Kyogle to Lismore to receive health care, assuming she can get to the bus stop, has access to only one bus a day to and from Lismore. The alternative is to rely on friends, family and neighbours to assist with transport.

It is noted that the sub-issue of services for ATSI people was ranked low as a priority within ageing. This may represent a poor level of awareness of the discrepancy between the ATSI community's low level of access to services and conversely high levels of need. Further work may be required to address this issue within the sector.

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## CURRENT AND RECENT WORK

Southern Cross University in conjunction with the Department of Ageing Disability and Homecare (ADHC) is conducting a yearlong re-ablement pilot project in the Clarence Valley, which will commence in August 2010. The project will involve frail older people working with a multidisciplinary team with the aim to improve their capacity and function over a period of 6-12 weeks. This is part of the ADHC's *Better Practice Project* which includes two other components, one being gathering and mapping information about innovation and good practice in the HAAC sector, the other based on awareness raising on the benefits of a strengths based enabling approach (ADHC 2009).

NRSDC conducted an Elder Abuse project from 2007-2009. This project researched and reported on the prevalence and nature of elder abuse in the Northern Rivers. It then carried out awareness-raising within community services and the broader community. The project produced an interagency training manual and NRSDC continues to conduct training for the sector. NRSDC is currently developing proposals to promote and facilitate positive intergenerational interactions within the Northern Rivers community, for example within the school environment.

NRSDC researched HACC fees in 2008. It found that 'current fees and billing processes within some HACC service types may exclude some people, particularly within the HACC special needs group (Aboriginal people, financially disadvantaged people and rural and isolated communities) from services and/or allow people to move into debt' (2008, p.7). This is a concern, particularly as many older people suffered significant superannuation losses during the global financial crisis of 2008. The report suggests more people will face financial stress in meeting their essential needs. The HACC Fees Report recommends funding bodies develop client fee guidelines and models that are affordable, flexible and sensitive to the particular needs of the client and community. NRSDC will continue to work with services in the region to develop and test new models.

In 2010, NRSDC is facilitating several workshops and seminars to support agencies and individuals who care for the ageing population including:

- HACC orientation
- Working with Clients and Families Dealing with Dementia
- Dementia Carer's Education (a free seminar for carers)
- Experiencing Dementia
- Abuse of Older Adults
- Reablement Seminar

NRSDC will also continue to work with aged care interagencies to progress issues related to ageing.

## Community Based Management (CBM)

*'There is a burden of responsibilities that many communities are unable to fulfill, and the expectation that local communities have the resources and capacity to manage funding and service delivery is unrealistic and verging on the abusive'.*

survey respondent

### RESULTS

CBM has rated the lowest of the six social priorities, with only 15% rating the issue as very high. Responses to CBM were rather evenly spread from 1 to 9, this resulted in it receiving an average rating of only 6.52.

CBM was found to be the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest social priority issue in 2005. At that time it was felt to have become 'so complex it was a barrier to efficient services' (NRSDC 2005). In 2010 it appears to have become less of a problem for services as it currently rates as regional social priority number 6. A number of respondents (5 or 11%) suggested it be removed a social priority.

In so far as what should be focused on as a priority within CBM, the greatest response was for provision of support services to assist in management and governance, with 41% of respondents rating this the highest. There was some interest expressed in moving beyond CBM with companies, mergers and partnerships (34%) and also in legal assistance with CBM (18%). Recruiting committee members has declined as an issue with only 5 respondents (12%) believing NRSDC should make it a high focus priority and 42% rating it low.



Chart 6 - Which Aspects of CBM should NRSDC Focus on in Order of Priority?

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## COMMENTS FROM RESPONDENTS

Comments received on the subject of CBM included concern about recruiting volunteers, board and committee members and the need to support agencies in a '*climate of complexity and change*' as doing so ultimately supports the end users. One respondent expressed particular concern about community-based organisations in the sport and recreation field: '*When I run funding training for these groups I am frightened by how many do not even know what incorporation, GST etc is, or how their organisation is legally incorporated. I find that in comparison, CBM in the community sector is very highly skilled and knowledgeable...*'

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## CURRENT AND RECENT WORK

In 2010 NRSDC is providing a number of training sessions to support CBM. These include

- Not for Profit Human Services Non-Clinical Work Place Supervision
- Not for Profit Human Services Governance
- Supervising Case Managers

NRSDC'S monthly e-newsletter supports CBM by advising the sector on relevant upcoming training, potential funding sources, forums and conferences. The newsletter also provides analysis of current issues of concern for the sector, for example around taxation, industrial relations and other relevant legislative changes.

From a capacity building perspective, perhaps the most important role for NRSDC is to bring together organisations, both government and not for profit, in partnership and collaboration. In these times of competitive tendering, during which trust and collaboration between agencies is challenged or reduced, it is important that the sector retains its strength to work together for the benefit of clients and the sector itself. NRSDC facilitates several transport working groups and a finance officers group. NRSDC has also held recent forums and conferences on issues of regional interest such as The Aged (2006), Complex Needs (2008) and Housing (ongoing).

Community based management places additional pressure on community based organisations in terms of resources, time and skills in an environment of complexity and change. However CBM appears to have become less of a pressing issue for community organisations on the Northern Rivers in recent years. This suggests many organisations have increased their capacity to meet their CBM requirements. There remains a strong interest in receiving support with governance issues, as was shown in the survey and reflected in the level of interest expressed when NRSDC facilitates or promotes training on the issue.

## CONCLUSION

Community service organisations across the Northern Rivers of NSW continue to identify with the six regional social priorities: youth, people with complex needs, housing, transport, the aged and community based management. The most notable change in the status of these issues since previous consultations has been a rise in concern about people with complex needs. More work is needed to gain a better understanding of how services can work effectively and collaboratively to alleviate the multiple stresses of this group of people and their families.

On a positive note, community based management seems to have become less of a concern for community organisations regionally. That a lower need has been expressed for assistance with CBM may indicate that organisations have become better placed to meet their regulatory commitments. However, there remains interest in receiving assistance with management, governance and legal issues.

It is apparent that many of the social priorities are interconnected. A single aspect of social disadvantage may lead to multiple vulnerabilities. For example, a lack of affordable housing may force people to move to areas where there are less services including transport. Hence they have reduced access to opportunities such as employment and training or health services. Some sections of the community such as young people and older people face particular challenges to help them stay connected and healthy.

Survey respondents also drew attention to barriers faced by Indigenous people such as discrimination and a need for more culturally appropriate services; as well as people with a disability who face barriers with transport, housing and infrastructure generally. These are both considerable issues for some members of the Northern Rivers community and certainly warrant greater attention from NRSDC and the sector.

Northern Rivers Social Development Council, along with the community sector, has been working consistently across these priority issues for a number of years. Changes to the region's demographics, along with social, political and economic forces make for a dynamic social environment. NRSDC will continue to monitor that environment by consulting regularly and widely with the sector. With a solid understanding of the issues faced by members of the community and the services that work to support them, the community sector is better placed to work collaboratively, across LGA's and service types, to ultimately improve the wellbeing of the broader Northern Rivers community.

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*We work together for  
community wellbeing  
across the Northern Rivers*

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