

The Uniting Church recognises that our faith in Jesus Christ has practical and political implications. For example we support measures to enhance social justice, shaped by a sense of human dignity and a commitment to human rights:

Social, political and economic arrangements should reflect the dignity and worth of human beings and respect for the planet. Through the prophets and the life and words of Jesus, God calls people to work for justice for the poor and vulnerable.

(Dignity in Humanity, Resolution from Assembly 2006)

This document summarises a number of issues that have been of concern to UnitingCare NSW.ACT over the last four years, and the proposals also reflect past submissions and public comments by the Synod. **We encourage members to prayerfully consider these issues, and your own responses to the proposals, when considering how to cast your votes in the NSW Election on 24 March 2007.** We also encourage congregations to organise public meetings and deputations to discuss these issues with your candidates.

There is not space to include all of the issues of concern to UnitingCare NSW.ACT in this election briefing document. The issues that we have included in this document are some of those that arise out of the work of UnitingCare NSW.ACT with people and communities who experience disadvantage and marginalisation.

A Matter of Opinion

When considering your vote, it is helpful to consider past performance and future commitments.

Over the last four years, the Australian Labor Party (ALP)-led government has implemented a number of important initiatives advocated for and welcomed by UnitingCare NSW.ACT. These include very substantial increases in spending and improved policy frameworks on mental health, disability services and community services. In particular, the government appears to have now grasped the critical importance of adopting an early intervention approach to these services, something we have been advocating for the last decade, to the extent that this principle is being enshrined across all areas of government service delivery. We also welcome the NSW Government's protection of workers in public services from the Federal WorkChoices legislation and its continuing support for the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre (auspiced by UnitingCare NSW.ACT).

On the other hand, the Government has become less accountable than ever, continues to erode its own planning and environmental policies to support large developers, completely failed the residents of Minto public housing estate in the way it began the redevelopment of the estate, and failed to increase funding in critical areas such as English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching and, until recently, pre-schools.

It can be difficult to judge the Opposition parties in relation to these matters. In some cases, such as the increased mental health funding, the Opposition Leader (representing the Liberal-National Coalition) welcomed the policy. In some there has been silence (eg. Minto and environmental planning setbacks). In other cases, such as the workplace relations legislation, the Coalition actively opposed the changes, and the Opposition Leader has repeatedly said he would close the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre.

Ageing

Population ageing has a major impact on cities and regional centres and this affects almost every portfolio for which the NSW Government has responsibility. There are opportunities and challenges associated with an ageing population.

The provision of adequate care and quality of life for all people, no matter what their financial circumstances becomes a critical issue for not-for-profit providers of aged care. Older people, in particular, in their later stages of life, need assurance that they will receive adequate and appropriate aged care services, preferably in their own homes for as long as possible. The NSW Government, through its responsibility for Health and associated long-term care programs like the Home and Community Care Program (HACC) must provide this assurance to older people, their families and carers.

We think that the next NSW Government should:

- Develop a Vision Statement for NSW on how population ageing impacts on the work of Government;
- Develop a NSW state aged care plan that acknowledges the ageing population as vital contributors to society and focuses on providing a range of care options that meet the needs of people in metropolitan and rural areas;
- Recognise the increasing need for providing community care services that are adequately funded, responsive to the needs of the population and are flexible enough to cope with changing care needs;
- Raise the profile of ageing and the importance of long term care by having clearer and more effective portfolio responsibility for this area;
- Reduce the costs of worker's compensation insurance for aged and community care providers. The existing costs are prohibitive and hinder the provision of quality care;
- Ensure the Retirement Villages Act reforms are aimed at maintaining a viable and responsive industry for consumers and providers;
- Review the Seniors Living Policy so that appropriate and adaptable housing can be developed close to existing and planned new infrastructure;
- Create new and innovative housing and design options for an ageing society in consultation with aged care providers and their clients;
- Improve access to and affordability of public transport for older people across NSW;
- Develop and widely promote a Mature Workers Program and create opportunities for career change and new employment opportunities for mature aged workers.

Early Childhood Education

NSW has the least accessible and least affordable system of early childhood education in Australia. An estimated 10-20% of children in NSW miss out on early childhood education and care in the year before school, compared to a 95% participation rate in most other states and territories. Total NSW government real expenditure on children's services, per child, is less than any other state or territory. **There is strong evidence of the benefits of quality early childhood education and care, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.** Investment in early childhood education is probably the most economically efficient way to remediate the disadvantages caused by adverse family environments.

We think the next NSW Government should:

- Fund two days a week early childhood education, with specialist early childhood teacher, for all children in the two years prior to school, affordable to all families.

Education

NSW has a generally excellent public education system. However, despite our best students recording among the highest scores in international literacy and numeracy tests, we also have one of the largest equity gaps. The truth is that **socioeconomic status remains the best indicator of a child's educational achievements.** However in recent years there have been attempts to cut back on the already small amounts of extra funding for schools catering for disadvantaged children. In addition, capital expenditure remains far below what is needed to manage the critical backlog of work and ESL teacher funding has not increased since 1993, despite 40,000 additional migrant and refugee students needing this help.

We think the next NSW Government should:

- Increase targeted assistance program funding for children from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- Increase the number of ESL teachers so that all migrant and refugee children have the chance to learn English;
- Increase capital funding to ensure public schools provide an adequate physical environment for learning and growing.

Environment

The environment, and climate change in particular, has rocketed to the centre of public consciousness in recent months and will feature in the election campaign. The ALP-led government has taken important steps on land and water quality, biodiversity protection, renewable energy and sustainable building design in recent years. However, **NSW continues to face critical problems in environmental management and sustainability**, most notably in terms of sustainable water supply to a number of cities, continued land clearing, and the constant erosion of environmental controls in favour of big development projects.

We think the next NSW Government should:

- Increase renewable energy targets as part of a comprehensive strategy to address climate change;
- Ensure energy policies and decisions are consistent with a serious response to the threat of global warming;
- Improve incentive schemes for public participation in local water capture and recycling and solar power generation;
- Strengthen environmental planning controls – and actually enforce them.

Dental Health

In some areas of NSW the waiting time for adults seeking general care in the public dental system is over four and a half years and rising. Waiting times for children and young people for general care can be up to two and a half years. **In 2004/2005, NSW had the lowest per capita dental expenditure compared with other states and territories.** It was less than half that of the Northern Territory and Queensland, the jurisdictions with the highest per capita funding.

The best available evidence suggests that fluoridated water reduces the prevalence of decay. Although approximately 90% of residents in NSW have access to fluoridated water, only 59% of the population outside of Sydney have fluoridated water. To achieve 100% fluoridation in rural NSW would mean promoting the benefits of fluoridation to approximately 60 councils.

We think the next NSW Government should:

- Increase per capita funding for public dental services to at least that of Queensland, the state with the highest per capita funding;
- Introduce legislation to give NSW Health the responsibility for decisions around fluoridating public drinking water.

Housing and Homelessness

There is a housing affordability problem in NSW. There are 156,000 NSW households living in private rental and 83,000 lower-income home purchasers in “housing stress” (paying more than 30% of gross income). At present there is a dearth of Government initiatives to improve access to affordable housing.

There are also over 25,000 people who are homeless in NSW. Current efforts to deal with homelessness are fragmented across program and agency boundaries, working against effective policy development and planning.

We think the next NSW Government should:

- Develop an Affordable Housing Strategy that includes incentives for private landlords, affordable housing provisions in approvals of new development projects and explicit affordable housing targets;
- Develop a comprehensive ten year NSW Homelessness Strategy encompassing a ‘whole of government’ approach, in partnership with the non-government sector;
- Develop innovative solutions with private partners, such as the churches, to increase the supply of community housing.

Indigenous Justice

Indigenous people continue to measure lower than non-Indigenous people on almost every key social and economic indicator. Their income is lower than non-Indigenous people, and this causes Indigenous people to be disadvantaged in other areas as well, including health, education, life expectancy, housing, substance abuse, social participation, crime and violence. In the last term a positive framework for partnership between the NSW Government and Indigenous people called “Two Ways Together” was launched, but this partnership is already being broken by the Government over proposed development of The Block in Redfern and in other areas including education and community services.

We think the next NSW Government should:

- Develop meaningful, fully funded action plans to deliver on the promising but challenging targets for overcoming Indigenous disadvantage developed over the last few years;
- Negotiate in good faith with the Aboriginal Housing Company over the proposed redevelopment of The Block, accepting its own commitments to honour Indigenous self-determination as a guiding principle.

Law and Justice

In past election campaigns, both major parties have sought to outbid each other in being 'tough on crime', through increased sentences and removal of bail rights. However, these policies do not actually reduce crime. They do lead to ever-increasing prison populations (now over 9000 in NSW) at terrible cost to both the individuals' lives and the public purse.

NSW also has the highest repeat offending rate in the country, in part because of a severe lack of rehabilitation services. Considering how many offenders have mental disorders, UnitingCare NSW. ACT has supported recent tentative moves by the NSW Government to expand alternative court processes such as the Drug Court and the mental health screening service beyond its current pilot stage.

We think the next NSW Government should:

- Reduce the over-representation of Indigenous people as well as those with severe mental illness and/or intellectual disability through appropriate diversionary programs such as circle sentencing and Drug Courts;
- Maintain judicial discretion in sentencing, to take account of various factors that impact on the appropriateness of a sentence on a particular offending (ie. no mandatory minimum sentences);
- Reduce the rate of re-offending by ensuring adequate rehabilitation services and post-release programs.

More Information

Sign up for the Update: Closer to the election, we will release an update with details of the election commitments of each party to the issues raised above (and others of critical importance). This will be posted on our website www.unitingcarenswact.org.au, or you can sign up to have it sent by email by sending a blank email to electionupdate@nsw.uca.org.au

A great place to get more information about the political parties and their plans for government is their websites:

Australian Labor Party	www.nsw.alp.org.au
Liberal Party of Australia	www.nsw.liberal.org.au
National Party	www.nsw.nationals.org.au
NSW Greens	www.nsw.greens.org.au

UnitingCare Burnside is also playing a leading role in an important campaign to address the issues of poverty and social exclusion faced by disadvantaged children, young people and families across NSW. The website comes complete with fact sheets and ways you can get involved. Check out www.everykid.net



About UnitingCare NSW.ACT

UnitingCare NSW.ACT is a Board of the NSW Synod of the Uniting Church and is responsible for the work of community services, chaplaincy and social justice advocacy. All our work is inspired and guided by the principles of justice and compassion.

Services include aged care and disability programs, services for vulnerable families, children and young people and quality preschool education and care. UnitingCare NSW.ACT also manages the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre. As well as the provision of these services, we demonstrate a strong commitment to social justice advocacy by publicly speaking out on issues that affect the people we serve.