



Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander Health Research

National Housing and Homelessness Agreement Review

Submission to the Productivity Commission

The Lowitja Institute, March 2022



Housing and Homelessness Review
Productivity Commission
4 National Circuit
Barton ACT 2600, Australia

Dear Commissioners,

Re: The Lowitja Institute's submission to the Productivity Commission's National Housing and Homelessness Agreement Review

The Lowitja Institute is Australia's national institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research, named in honour of our Patron, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG.

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission's National Homelessness and Housing Agreement Review.

As housing is a social determinant of health, we see the next iteration of the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (housing agreement) as an opportunity to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to improve health outcomes for our people and to ensure our children and the next generations have bright futures. This includes improvements to life expectancy, rates of childhood chronic and acute illness, social and emotional wellbeing, and reduced vulnerability to epidemics and pandemics, and climate-related adverse health impacts.

It is our view that the Housing Agreement can align well with the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap and can meaningfully contribute to achieving its targets. To ensure alignment and impact, it is imperative that the Housing Agreement includes the unique experiences and expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and that it enshrines cultural safety, self-determination, and data sovereignty as fundamental principles.

Please find our submission attached. We would welcome the opportunity to further discuss any of the issues contained therein.

Warm regards

Dr Janine Mohamed



1. About the Lowitja Institute

The Lowitja Institute is a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisation working for the health and wellbeing of Australia's First Peoples through high impact quality research, knowledge translation, and by supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers.

Established in January 2010, we operate on the key principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, a broader understanding of health that incorporates wellbeing, and the need for the work to have a clear and positive impact.


The Lowitja Institute has a longstanding commitment to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, as both members of the Close the Gap Steering Committee and in authoring the Close the Gap Report over the past 4 years. We are also members of the National Health Leadership Forum and the Coalition of Peaks.

Additionally, we are members of the Partnership for Justice in Health. The partnership is an alliance of self-determining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics, legal experts, and national peak health and justice organisations committed to working together to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and justice outcomes. As leaders operating at the interface of the health and justice systems, we are harnessing our leadership, influence, and networks towards realising our vision that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy health and wellbeing that is free of racism in the health and justice systems'.

Based on this experience we offer the following general comments and responses to some of the questions put forward in the Issues Paper.

2. General preamble

Before responding to the Productivity Commission's Issues Paper, we encourage the Productivity Commission to consider the long history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and our sophisticated and



diverse cultures and knowledge systems. Over millennia we have cared for Country and for our communities in this place now called Australia. Despite the traumatic and ongoing consequences of colonisation and institutional racism, we continue to maintain and develop our cultures and knowledge systems.

*'Before colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people designed housing to respond to the cultures and locations of communities. It was about more than physical shelter—it also catered to families' health, economic and social needs, and served as a central point for community life.'*¹

From the early days of European settlement in Australia in 1788, racism against our peoples has taken many forms, including murder, exploitation and dispossession from our traditional lands and cultures. Our peoples were forced onto missions, reserves, and into housing commissions with prohibitive rules that prevented our peoples from connecting with family, community and culture.² This removed us from the connected and strong communities, cultures and Country that had previously sustained our good health and social and emotional wellbeing. The housing and health inequity imposed on our peoples since colonisation persists to this day, with profound health impacts across multiple generations.


To better understand these intergenerational impacts and our peoples' aspirations and goals for a brighter future, we encourage the Productivity Commission to examine 'housing' as a fundamental concept within their review. The dominant cultural conception of 'housing' as something that people *live within* – as pertaining to shelter, lodging³ or dwellings⁴ – is not the same for our peoples.

1 Department of Health, Australian Government 2021, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2023, p. 46.

2 Anderson, I., Baum, F. & Bentley, M. (eds) 2004, Beyond Band-aids: Exploring the Underlying Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health. Papers from the Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health Workshop, Adelaide, July 2004, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin, p. 27

3 See the Merriam-Webster definition of 'housing': Housing Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster

4 Productivity Commission, Australian Government 2022, National Housing and Homelessness Agreement Review: Issues Paper, p. 3. Accessed on 3 March 2022 at: [Issues paper - National Housing and Homelessness Agreement Review \(pc.gov.au\)](https://www.pc.gov.au/issues-paper-national-housing-and-homelessness-agreement-review)



We view housing as much more than shelter. Our homes are tied to our traditional lands and waterways, to our connection to Country, culture and our kinship ties. When we think about the future of housing and health, our duties as Traditional Custodians to nourish and protect our traditional lands and waterways are foundational. Being able to access and live on Country is a requisite part of sustaining our culture, identity, health and wellbeing.

It is therefore imperative to take a holistic view of housing as connected to climate change, and any decisions or actions, such as planning decisions, development, or mining activity that impact on housing. For example, Rio Tinto's destruction of the Juuken Gorge was an irreversible destruction of *Puutu Kunti Kurrama* and *Pinikura* peoples' traditional home, and such displacement cannot be undone. This was an act of colonisation, which is ongoing in this country. Until the dominant culture within Australia explicitly condemns and stops such actions, colonisation will not have ended, and our peoples will continue to experience this form of housing insecurity.


It is widely agreed by several Peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, including the Lowitja Institute, the Coalition of Peaks and the Close the Gap Steering Committee, that housing is a social determinant of health. That is, there is a direct relationship between housing and health outcomes. Housing is also recognised as a social determinant in the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021*,⁵ which encourages cross-sector solutions that include health and housing.⁶

As experts and Aboriginal Community Controlled Peak organisations have highlighted, the 'construction of Aboriginal housing has been plagued by inappropriate design, use of cheap, substandard materials and inconsistent maintenance'.⁷ Poor build quality, inadequate basic infrastructure such as plumbing, energy poverty, inequitable access to public and private housing

5 Department of Health, Australian Government 2021, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2023*, pp. 20 & 46. Accessed 2 March 2022 at: [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2031](#)

6 Objective 1.4; Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations and all Australian Governments 2020, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*. Accessed 25 January 2022 at: *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, p. 25.

7 HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, *Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 18.



markets and issues such as overcrowding must be addressed. The new National Agreement on Closing the Gap's housing Target 9 seeks to address overcrowding, and as per the February Data Dashboard we are not on track to meet this target.⁸ But there is a need for much more work to be done towards additional outcomes in the housing policy space as well.

For the past four years the Lowitja Institute has authored the Close the Gap Report on behalf of the Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee. A consistent theme of the last three reports has been the call for governments to commit to improving the state and availability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' housing. We repeat and amplify this call now.

The 2022 report highlights why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be prioritised in housing policy. Inadequate housing and infrastructure increase the risk of experiencing family and domestic violence, infectious disease, and other adverse health impacts resulting from natural disasters, such as climate change and pandemics.


As Norman Frank Japurrurla writes in his moving call to action last year:

But like the old Blackfellas say, when Wumpurrarni talk to Papulanyi [non-Indigenous peoples] it goes in one ear and out the other. When it comes to climate change and our children, this is not good enough. Papulanyi must hear us and act.⁹

The next housing agreement provides an opportunity for federal government and State and Territory governments to hear and answer calls from our communities, and align future actions with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. State and Territory governments are currently in the process of reviewing the efficacy of year one of their Closing the Gap Implementation Plans and are looking at ways to strengthen and improve

⁸ The Productivity Commission, Socioeconomic Outcome Area 9, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and needs. Accessed 2 March 2022 at: [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need | Closing the Gap Information Repository - Productivity Commission \(pc.gov.au\)](#)

⁹ Quilty, S. & Jupurrurla, NF. 2021, Climate change: A Wumpurrarni-kari and Papulanyi-kari shared problem, *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, vol. 57(11), pp. 1745–48. Accessed 31 January 2022 at: [Climate change: A Wumpurrarni-kari and Papulanyi-kari shared problem - Quilty - 2021 - Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health - Wiley Online Library.](#)



them. The development of the next housing agreement provides government with an opportunity to support State and Territory governments to embed key principals and actions from the housing agreement into State and Territory implementation plans.

However, the need for the housing agreement to be adequately funded, monitored, and evaluated in line with data sovereignty and governance is essential. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be at the centre of driving solutions and in determining how we measure and name success.

To achieve this, it is our view that the next housing agreement should be strengthened by including several guiding principles, which we expand on below.

3. Specific Terms of Reference

Housing as a social determinant of health

As noted above, it is widely acknowledged by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts and peak health organisations, that there are several ‘non-medical and behavioural influences on health’.¹⁰ The constellation of these ‘social and cultural determinants’, including housing, impact significantly on the health and wellbeing of our peoples and communities. These determinants can be influenced, and any adverse impacts ameliorated through sound policy changes¹¹ and system reform.

Quality housing that is affordable, safe and sustainable can protect against a range of health issues. For instance, access to plumbing and proper hardware¹² such as showers, taps and washing machines in addition to

10 Anderson, I., Baum, F. & Bentley, M. (eds) 2004, Beyond Band-aids: Exploring the Underlying Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health. Papers from the Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health Workshop, Adelaide, July 2004, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin, p. x-xi

11 Anderson, I., Baum, F. & Bentley, M. (eds) 2004, Beyond Band-aids: Exploring the Underlying Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health. Papers from the Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health Workshop, Adelaide, July 2004, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin, p. x.

12 The importance of ‘health hardware’ is explained in Clement, Tracey 2020, “This is not a wicked problem”: Healthhabitat is making housing better for Australia’s Indigenous communities, Planning and Policy, Foreground, accessed on 15 March 2022 at ["This is not a wicked problem": Healthhabitat is making housing better for Australia's Indigenous communities \(foreground.com.au\)](https://www.foreground.com.au/this-is-not-a-wicked-problem-healthhabitat-is-making-housing-better-for-australia-s-indigenous-communities/)

potable water, can facilitate food safety and good hygiene. Proper sewerage systems are also imperative to a sanitary home environment. However, when these are not available, the impacts can be significant. Simple behaviours such as handwashing to mitigate the spread of certain diseases is not possible without running potable water and adequate plumbing. This is starkly illustrated in the COVID19 example below. Water quality in remote communities often fails to meet national standards (Office of the Auditor General Western Australia 2015) ¹³ and many do not have access to safe water sources.¹⁴

This combined with other housing issues such as overcrowding can exacerbate negative health outcomes and requires immediate action.

One in three (33%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are living in houses with major structural defects or plumbing or electrical issues.¹⁵



As outlined in the national *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan*, these issues can result in physical health issues, including:

- ⦿ skin infections
- ⦿ acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease

13 Lowitja Institute 2021, *Close the Gap Leadership and Legacy Through Crises: Keeping Our Mob Safe*, Close the Gap Campaign Report 2021, The Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee for Indigenous Health Equity, p. 26.

14 Anderson, I., Baum, F. & Bentley, M. (eds) 2004, *Beyond Band-aids: Exploring the Underlying Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health*. Papers from the Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health Workshop, Adelaide, July 2004, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin, p. 79.

- ⊗ trachoma
- ⊗ otitis media
- ⊗ post-streptococcal glomerulonephritis – which is linked to chronic kidney disease and caused by strains of group A streptococcus (which also causes acute rheumatic fever)¹⁵
- ⊗ increased spread of infectious diseases, and
- ⊗ increased risk of childhood illness, which can lead to chronic illness.¹⁶

According to Paul Torzillo, only 8% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander houses have the facilities for families to store, prepare and cook food.¹⁷ Further, when people are experiencing housing stress, they are less likely to engage in preventative health measures such as exercise or ensuring a healthy diet.¹⁸

Lowitja's 2021 *Climate and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health* paper highlights that 'current funding and policy approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public housing are inadequate to meet demand and improve existing stock.'¹⁹ This paper found that while the National Indigenous Housing Guide²⁰ is available as a resource to policy makers, the recommendations contained therein are rarely adopted. Tenancy and property management is ineffective and there is minimal oversight of construction and maintenance.²¹

¹⁵ Department of Health, Australian Government 2021, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2023*, p. 46.

¹⁶ Swan, Norman, 2019, The links between housing and health, On Health Report, ABC Radio National 25 February 2019. Accessed on 15 March 2022 at: [The links between housing and health - Health Report - ABC Radio National](#)


¹⁷ Swan, Norman, 2019, The links between housing and health, On Health Report, ABC Radio National 25 February 2019. Accessed on 15 March 2022 at: [The links between housing and health - Health Report - ABC Radio National](#)

¹⁸ Anderson, I., Baum, F. & Bentley, M. (eds) 2004, *Beyond Band-aids: Exploring the Underlying Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health*. Papers from the Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health Workshop, Adelaide, July 2004, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin, p. 12.

¹⁹ HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, *Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 20.

²⁰ [housing guide info intro.pdf \(dss.gov.au\)](#)

²¹ HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, *Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 20.



We urge the Productivity Commission to view housing through a health policy lens that centres our peoples. As Paul Torzillo notes in a 2019 ABC interview, in his 25 years of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia he has seen the significant ways in which housing intersects with health.²² His recommendation is that housing be incorporated into health policy, noting that NSW²³ is the only example of such a policy approach to date.²⁴

COVID19 and housing's role in decreasing vulnerability to infectious disease

The success stories from many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community led responses during the pandemic clearly show that our communities know how to keep our people safe, healthy, and well. As written in the 2021 *Close the Gap Report*,


There are countless individual and community level success stories in Indigenous-led health policy, service delivery and human rights sectors. At times of crises true leadership steps up. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders moved rapidly to safeguard communities when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold. Their actions were decisive and designed with each local community in mind and avoided a potential catastrophe. Some of our homelands, once threatened with closure by governments in the past, became some of the safest places in Australia. We know what is best for our people.²⁵

22 Swan, Norman, 2019, The links between housing and health, On Health Report, ABC Radio National 25 February 2019. Accessed on 15 March 2022 at: [The links between housing and health - Health Report - ABC Radio National](#)

23 NSW Health, NSW Government, Housing for Health. Accessed on 15 March 2022 at: [Housing for Health - Aboriginal environmental health \(nsw.gov.au\)](#)

24 Swan, Norman, 2019, The links between housing and health, On Health Report, ABC Radio National 25 February 2019. Accessed on 15 March 2022 at: [The links between housing and health - Health Report - ABC Radio National](#)

25 Lowitja Institute 2021, Close the Gap Leadership and Legacy Through Crises: Keeping Our Mob Safe, Close the Gap Campaign Report 2021, The Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee for Indigenous Health Equity, p. 2-3



One example is the effective local Aboriginal leadership and pandemic response in the Kimberley region in Western Australia. At the pandemic's outset, the community moved quickly, learning from previous experiences with infectious diseases, including Swine Flu. They enacted a pandemic plan and worked with other Aboriginal organisations and government departments via the Kimberley Aboriginal Taskforce to respond swiftly to the identified housing concerns, including overcrowding.²⁶

As Ms O'Donnell, CEO of the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service and Chair of the Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia said:

We knew you only had to have one positive case in a remote community and that would spread immediately, because there has been very little investment for decades by WA Governments in basic infrastructure—housing, water, sewage—in remote communities.²⁷

Unfortunately, there are also examples in which governments ignored advice from community leaders. These examples expose the deep housing inequity that our communities experience, as well as the key role that housing plays in health outcomes for our people.


As the 2021 *Close the Gap Report* highlights, there is a heavy cost when government fails to listen to the advice of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations and community leaders.²⁸

Overcrowding and an inability to isolate due to inadequate housing supplies in remote communities led to rapid spread of COVID19 through vulnerable households. As Ms Donna Ah Chee, CEO of Central Australian Aboriginal Congress said:

26 Lowitja Institute 2021, *Close the Gap Leadership and Legacy Through Crises: Keeping Our Mob Safe*, Close the Gap Campaign Report 2021, The Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee for Indigenous Health Equity, p. 21

27 Lowitja Institute 2021, *Close the Gap Leadership and Legacy Through Crises: Keeping Our Mob Safe*, Close the Gap Campaign Report 2021, The Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee for Indigenous Health Equity, p. 20.

28 Lowitja Institute 2021, *Close the Gap Leadership and Legacy Through Crises: Keeping Our Mob Safe*, Close the Gap Campaign Report 2021, The Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee for Indigenous Health Equity, p. 23.



We were meant to be social distancing, yet in many places we've got 20 or 30 people living in a house, so the pandemic magnified a number of critical health issues that ACCHSs and the Close the Gap campaign have been advocating on for so long. That's one of the big lessons from the pandemic, the need for governments to work much closer with local communities and leaders and to really take their advice seriously.²⁹

We call on the Productivity Commission to recommend that the next housing agreement recognises the role that housing policy plays in protecting communities against infectious diseases, in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It must include a mechanism to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities lead the design, implementation and evaluation of housing policy. This should include adequate governance systems to enable meaningful partnerships with government at all levels.

Ensuring a climate focused housing policy

There are multiple health risks associated with climate change that are exacerbated by historical inequities and current poor quality housing, including extreme heat, cyclones, poor water and air quality, and exposure to infectious diseases.

While the issue of inadequate housing and infrastructure has been raised by our peoples for a long time, in recent years we are seeing those issues intensified by the impacts of climate change and global warming. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Indigenous peoples around the world are at the frontline.

This is in part due to inadequate policy responses that fail to center Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, a lack of funding, and delayed and insufficient action on climate change that centers our peoples and the

²⁹ Lowitja Institute 2021, *Close the Gap Leadership and Legacy Through Crises: Keeping Our Mob Safe*, Close the Gap Campaign Report 2021, The Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee for Indigenous Health Equity, p. 23.



unique knowledge that we have as Traditional Custodians of these lands and waters.

In the Lowitja Institute's recent discussion paper, *Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (2021)* and the associated roundtable event, experts discussed how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been excluded from national conversations and policy decisions about climate change.³⁰ Systemic and structural racism were identified 'as underpinning much of the apathy to addressing climate change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.'³¹

This is true also of housing policy more broadly, but in particular where it intersects with climate change policy. Participants in the roundtable 'highlighted the need to leverage existing policy frameworks to implement greater action on climate change and centre the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples'.³² These 'powerful tools for change' include:

- ⊗ The Uluru Statement from the Heart
- ⊗ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)
- ⊗ United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
- ⊗ The Paris Agreement
- ⊗ The National Agreement on Closing the Gap,
- ⊗ The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan, and
- ⊗ The Victorian Treaty and Truth-telling Yoo-rook Justice Commission.³³

30 HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, *Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 1.

31 [HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, *Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 1.](#)

32 [HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, *Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 5](#)

33 [HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, *Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 5.](#)



We add the National Indigenous Housing Guide for the purposes of this review.

We call on the Productivity Commission to recognize and advocate for centering our expertise, our voices and our communities in policies and actions that impact us, and to advocate for the federal government to uphold Australia's commitments to the above instruments. This includes adequate resourcing and a true understanding of the significant role that housing policy has in this space.

More specifically, housing policy connects with climate change and health in the following ways:

Extreme heat and energy equity

Poor housing conditions and unsuitable housing design also reduce residents' ability to control indoor temperatures, leading to high indoor temperatures during heat waves. For example, in the Torres Strait, despite humidity levels of greater than 90-95% during summer and extended periods of extreme heat, most homes have no air conditioning, putting people at risk of heat stress.³⁴


Energy poverty is also a significant issue for our communities. It is predicted that 'climate change will increase demand for energy', driving up energy costs and making electricity even more unaffordable for low-income Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households.³⁵ For example, Central Australian housing is often not built to standards, and it is frequently unsuitable for the climate. There is widespread lack of insulation and power supply is both unreliable and costly.³⁶ Residents are hesitant to run air conditioners due to high running costs. Instead, they 'stay outdoors in shaded areas and sleep outside during the night.'³⁷

34 HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 4.

35 HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 30.

36 HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 4.

37 Horne, R; Martel, A; Arcari, P; Foster, 2013, Living Change: Adaptive housing responses to climate change in the town camps of Alice Springs, National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility,



Energy poverty causes stress for families and communities, as residents worry about ‘disconnection, inability to cool down from heat, food spoiling as fridges can’t stay on, and medications [that] can’t be kept appropriately cool with refrigeration,’ such as insulin.³⁸ In Central Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are being forced to choose between food or electricity. No matter which they choose, there are ill health consequences for either option.³⁹

Frustratingly, the Northern Territory government continues to ignore community concerns; it willingly provides housing to non-local health staff or other workers, but not for the local community.⁴⁰

There are also significant health risks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in urban centres due to rising temperatures. In particular, the ‘urban heat island’ effect means that cities are at risk of further increased temperatures. Urban buildings are often unable to mitigate against extreme heat.⁴¹

Communities in urban coastal regions also face additional increased risks posed by sea level rises and storm surges, which will have adverse health impacts.

Mosquito borne infectious diseases

Poor housing and infrastructure also increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples risk of exposure to infectious diseases, including those carried by mosquitos. For example, in Northern Queensland, the population

QLD quoted in HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 30.

38 HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 4.

39 HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 4.

40 HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 4.

41 HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 13.

of Aedes mosquito, which carry Dengue Fever, are expected to increase in distribution both south and west due to the changing climate.⁴²

This will put more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities at risk. In situations like the Central Australian example above, where families are forced to sleep outside due to increased temperatures and energy poverty or inadequate housing, they are at an increased risk of such infectious diseases.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led solutions

As Norman Frank Jupurrurla illustrates, the solutions are simple and within reach. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities know what they need:


Before, I used to live in a tin shed [A space literally made of uninsulated corrugated iron and nothing more, a structure that some residents still feel lucky to reside in]. But now, that iron, it is too hot, it is like an oven, you cannot even stand in one now on a hot day.

A safe house should fit in with our climate, where we are from. What I want on a hot day is a fan, a fridge, safe, clean, reliable water and shade. I'd have a house up on stilts, so the air could go through, a breeze-catcher, I need solar power on the roof, so I do not have to pay for electricity. That's all we need. That's all you need when it's really hot – not a tin house.⁴³

We call on the Productivity Commission to recommend that the next housing agreement commit all governments to specific and targeted policy approaches in both rural and urban environments to mitigate the impacts of extreme temperatures. These approaches need to be led by the Aboriginal

42 HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 29.

43 Quilty, S. & Jupurrurla, NF. 2021, Climate change: A Wumpurrarni-kari and Papulanyi-kari shared problem, Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health, vol. 57(11), pp. 1745–48. Accessed 31 January 2022 at: [Climate change: A Wumpurrarni-kari and Papulanyi-kari shared problem - Quilty - 2021 - Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health - Wiley Online Library.](#)



and Torres Strait Islander peoples that are most impacted. Solutions must be sustainable and respect the Traditional Custodianship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Housing policy and design must be placed-based and co-designed with whole communities.

An example of a government not following this approach is in the Northern Territory. NT Housing has not utilised solar for power in public housing. Instead, the government continues to rely on traditional electricity sources despite having the opportunity to take advantage of solar power. The process to put solar panels on public housing was described as “a nightmare of red tape” with so much paperwork to fill out it is a disincentive to change to renewable energy.⁴⁴ Such sustainable and cost-effective options should be easily accessible for our peoples.

Guiding Principles for the next Housing Agreement


1. ANTI-RACISM AND CULTURAL SAFETY

As has been identified throughout this submission, racism and the ongoing impacts of colonisation have been inherent within housing, climate and health policy. This means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise has not been recognised, our leaders have been ignored and left out of decision making, and policies do not serve our communities.

The next housing agreement can break free of this pattern by including a foundational commitment to eliminate racism. The agreement itself must recognise the role that racism and colonisation have played so far within its own history and the policy context. Cultural safety is a powerful tool for creating meaningful change from this foundation.

“A powerful characteristic of cultural safety is that it asks people to step into their responsibility and to be agents for

⁴⁴ HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 4



change in systems – Aboriginal and Torres Strait people cannot do this alone.”⁴⁵

In this spirit, we call on the Productivity Commission to recommend that the next housing agreement embeds cultural safety as a key principle and specifically commits governments to anti-racism in their housing policies.

Embedding cultural safety as a key principle in this agreement should be accompanied by strengths-based dialogue, which is holistic, asset-based, and culturally centred.


2. MONITORING, REPORTING, IMPLEMENTATION, DATA SOVEREIGNTY AND ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER LEADERSHIP

For policy and its impact to effectively represent and serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and our aspirations and goals, it must be underpinned by ethical frameworks that recognise the right for Indigenous peoples to be intrinsically involved in policy development, implementation, data collection, monitoring and reporting. Lowitja calls on the Productivity Commission to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and data sovereignty as foundational elements within the next housing agreement.

Our families and communities are best placed to identify the housing issues that we are most impacted by and to determine appropriate solutions. When it comes to how we measure success, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have specific housing needs that may not be reflected in the performance indicators outlined in the Productivity Commission's *Issues Paper*.⁴⁶ We recommend that the Productivity Commission consults with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts, including health experts, in determining the most appropriate performance indicators for the next housing agreement.

⁴⁵ Lowitja Institute 2020, *Culture is Key: Towards cultural determinates-driven health policy – Final report*, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne. DOI:10.48455/k9vd-zp46

⁴⁶ Productivity Commission, Australian Government 2022, *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement Review: Issues Paper*, p. 11. Accessed on 3 March 2022 at: [issues paper - National Housing and Homelessness Agreement Review \(pc.gov.au\)](https://www.pc.gov.au/issues-paper-national-housing-and-homelessness-agreement-review)



Similarly, our communities and Peak organisations need to be leading data collection, evaluation and monitoring activities as well as driving implementation on the ground for their communities. Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the past has often consisted of consultation rather than leadership roles. Meaningful engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at any point in implementation, monitoring, data collection and evaluation cycle will add value and ensure that targets are achievable rather than aspirational.⁴⁷ The Lowitja Institute's Research Seeding Grants program is a great example of a self-determined method of enabling communities to lead their own research agenda.

It is also important to recognise the work already being done by commonwealth, state and territory governments under the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The Productivity Commission should ensure that the next housing agreement aligns well with Closing the Gap Implementation Plans, including work being done in the data space.

3. INTERSECTIONALITY

We welcome the *Issues Paper's* observation that there are several policy areas that intersect with housing.⁴⁸ We urge the Productivity Commission to take an intersectional approach to their review.


*No person has a singular or unitary identity; intersectionality and anti-essentialism mean that “everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties and allegiances”.*⁴⁹

For example, an Aboriginal person with disabilities, who has mental health and health challenges, experiences of violence and housing insecurity will be impacted by all these policy areas. In the housing space this may translate into needing to ensure the availability of culturally safe and accessible emergency housing that is near appropriate health and mental health

47 Kelaher, M., Luke, J., Ferdinand, A., Chamravi, D., Ewen, S., & Paradies, Y. 2018, An Evaluation Framework to Improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

48 Productivity Commission, Australian Government 2022, National Housing and Homelessness Agreement Review: Issues Paper, p. 13. Accessed on 3 March 2022 at: [issues paper - National Housing and Homelessness Agreement Review \(pc.gov.au\)](https://www.pc.gov.au/issues-paper-national-housing-and-homelessness-agreement-review)

49 Watogo, C., Singh, D. & Macoun, A. 2021, Partnership for Justice in Health: Scoping Paper on Race, Racism and the Australian Health System, Discussion Paper, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p. 8



supports. Housing can play a crucial role in the outcomes of different intersecting sectors and conversely, those sectors can also contribute to housing outcomes. As June Oscar AM highlights, current systems fail our people because they lack holistic integration:

Women have described being trapped in the revolving door of constant referral processes onto services that are not equipped or contractually obliged to respond to their multiple and diverse needs, such as family violence, mental health, drug addictions and housing.⁵⁰

The key to ensuring best alignment between policy areas is in meaningful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities, experts and Peaks; and in facilitating their leadership in these spaces.

⁵⁰ Australian Human Rights Commission 2020, Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future Report, AHRC, Sydney, p. 147. Accessed 27 January 2022 at: Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report (2020) | Australian Human Rights Commission.