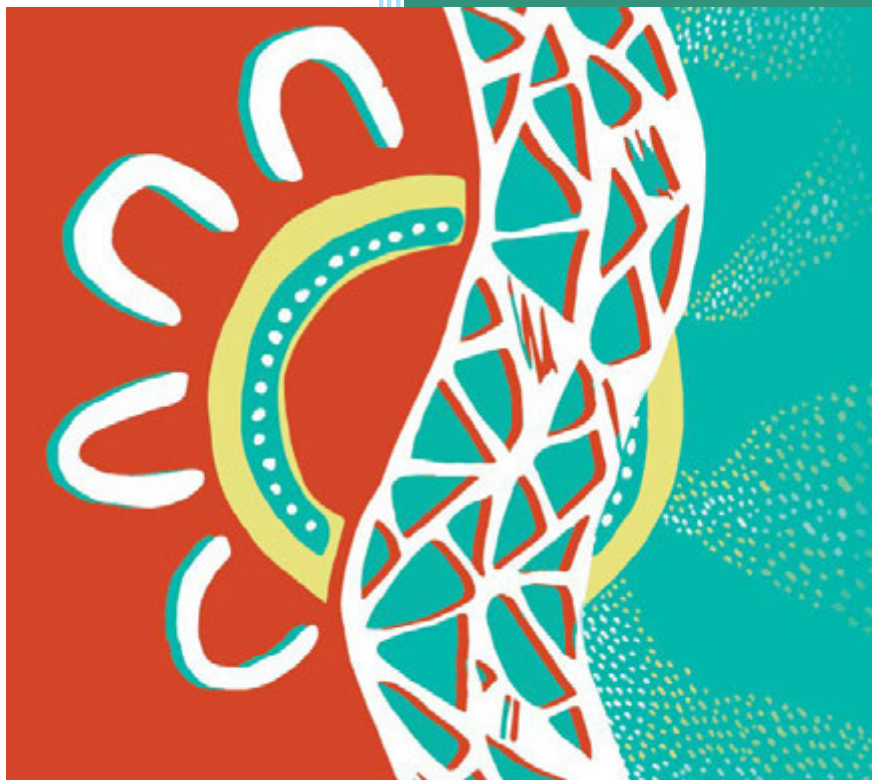


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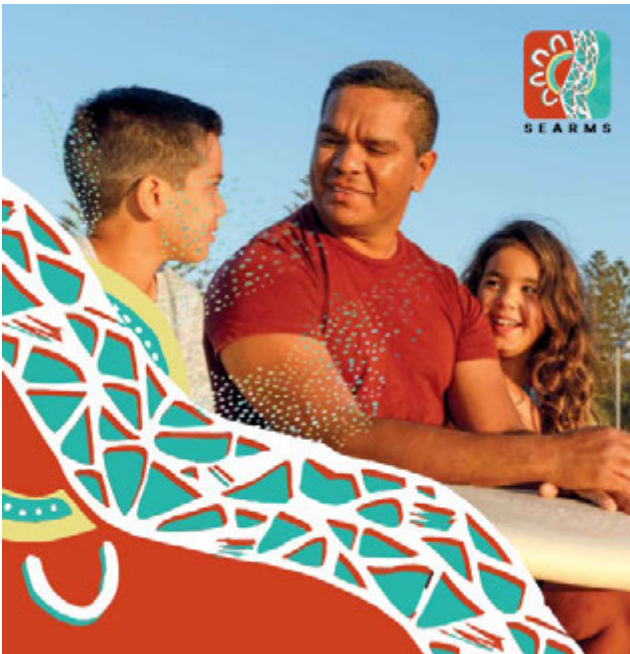
Housing and Homelessness Agreement Review



Submission by:

**SEARMS Aboriginal
Corporation**

18 March 2022



We respect and honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge the stories, traditions and living cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on this land and commit to building a brighter future together.

For further information please contact:

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SEARMS Aboriginal Corporation
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The Hon Josh Frydenberg, Treasurer
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

18 March 2022

Dear Minister

Inquiry into the National Homelessness and Housing Agreement

On behalf of SEARMS Aboriginal Corporation I am pleased to contribute to this Parliamentary Inquiry. As one of Australia's most respected Aboriginal-run not-for-profit housing providers, we wish to draw on our experience to help Government develop policies that end the scourge of homelessness and 'close the gap' for Indigenous people. I also want to contribute my insights as an Aboriginal Elder involved in the housing movement across five decades.

Many homelessness challenges are faced by people regardless of whether from our country's first or second nations, they live in town or country, are men or women, or are young or old. But failure to address homelessness challenges over the years suggests to me that 'one size fits all' policies are not the answer. We need to look at specific challenges facing particular groups, then design tailored solutions.

Indigenous people have faced, and continue to face, considerable challenges. Some people think these together form a 'wicked problem' that is near impossible to solve as it is just too complex and interconnected. Yet a problem's complexity is no excuse for inaction. Address appropriate and affordable housing and reducing homelessness is quite simple; it is about moving people currently in unstable housing into homes providing security, and keeping people who are already adequately housed in stable accommodation. Following the 'housing first' way of thinking, we need to move people into safe and permanent housing before we can address the other many challenges they may have in their lives.

Regional Indigenous homelessness

SEARMS's experience is with the housing and cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people living in regional areas in the south-east of NSW. Indigenous people need culturally appropriate services and support, provided by organisations who understand their locality and community.

Far more Indigenous people are homeless than non-Indigenous. They are more likely to be rough sleepers, and less likely to live in boarding houses, or be in over-crowded accommodation. Housing choices are more limited due to lower levels of home ownership, discrimination in the private rental market and therefore an over-representation in social housing and Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) accommodation. These latter services struggle to meet demand, and are generally run as 'mainstream' services with few allowances for the needs of Indigenous people.

Most State and Commonwealth Government funding for housing and homelessness support has been concentrated in remote areas or larger capital cities. This is where homelessness is most visible. Yet affordable housing and homelessness remains a scourge in the rest of the country, including country towns and regional communities. SHS services are thin on the ground in the regions, as is social housing, and the private market cannot cope. Hidden homelessness is a critical problem, and one needing tailored solutions.

Ways forward

Our experience at SEARMS shows an Aboriginal-run organisation can have strong governance and leadership, and tailor service provision to what our community needs. The 'mainstreaming' of Indigenous housing and homelessness services has failed: we need to give authority and responsibility back to regulated yet culturally appropriate locally run Aboriginal corporations. The lack of investment in Indigenous housing assets generally combined with exclusion from design and quality control of housing stock exacerbates the issues.

We have seen in recent years the innovation brought by community housing providers, rather than delivering social housing through public sector agencies. And several of these housing providers are now run by and serve Indigenous communities: SEARMS, Aboriginal Housing Victoria and others show this is possible. Why can't we move in the same direction for housing and homelessness services? And in regional areas where service organisations are thin on the ground, why cannot Indigenous housing, housing development and homelessness services be provided by the same Indigenous organisation?

Much has been written about Indigenous housing and homelessness issues. My view, and that of the SEARMS team, is we need more action and less paperwork. Therefore in Section 3 of this submission we make a number of very practical suggestions:

- Build the capacity, as well as the funding, of Indigenous housing and homelessness organisations
- Better coordinate between different layers of Government, and engage more with local councils on service delivery as they better understand the needs of their communities
- Focus more on 'housing transitions' than 'transitional housing'. We need to work harder to stop Indigenous people falling into homelessness, and for that exiting homelessness there needs to be more longer-term secure, culturally appropriate accommodation
- Support Aboriginal community housing providers to develop new larger multi-generational family homes, as well as build 'granny flats' for Elders on existing social housing sites

I would be happy to discuss the recommendations in this paper with you at any stage.

Yours sincerely



Tom Slockee, Chairperson

Chairperson, SEARMS Aboriginal Corporation

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1. ABOUT SEARMS

1.1 OUR HISTORY

SEARMS was established in 2003 under the Regional Management Model of the NSW Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO) as a co-operative between six Aboriginal housing providers to improve efficiencies and services.

In 2011 SEARMS transitioned into an Aboriginal Corporation under the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act, under which the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC) is the governance regulator.

As we provide contracted Aboriginal housing services, we are also regulated through the AHO's Provider Contract and Performance Management process under the Aboriginal Housing Act 1988, NSW. In addition, on 29 January 2020 SEARMS achieved registration as a Tier 3 Community Housing Provider (CHP) under the National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH).

According to an independent assessment by consultancy firm Housing Action Network, in April 2021, SEARMS is:

- One of only 31 Aboriginal CHPs (ACHP) registered under NRSCH or the Victorian equivalent. Only organisations achieving the highest levels of governance and financial viability are NRSCH registered, and through detailed compliance monitoring our on-going meeting of national housing standards is monitored.
- The fourth largest ACHP in NSW.
- Ranked number 65 nationally out of all 350 registered CHPs, both mainstream and Aboriginal.

1.2 WHAT WE DO

SEARMS provide housing and tenancy management services to Aboriginal communities in south eastern NSW, and across the Capital Region (Australian Capital Territory). Our offices are at Batemans Bay and Canberra. We also have an outreach office in Nowra (by appointment only).

We do this as owners and managers of our own housing portfolio and on behalf of the AHO, and other Aboriginal organisations including Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs).

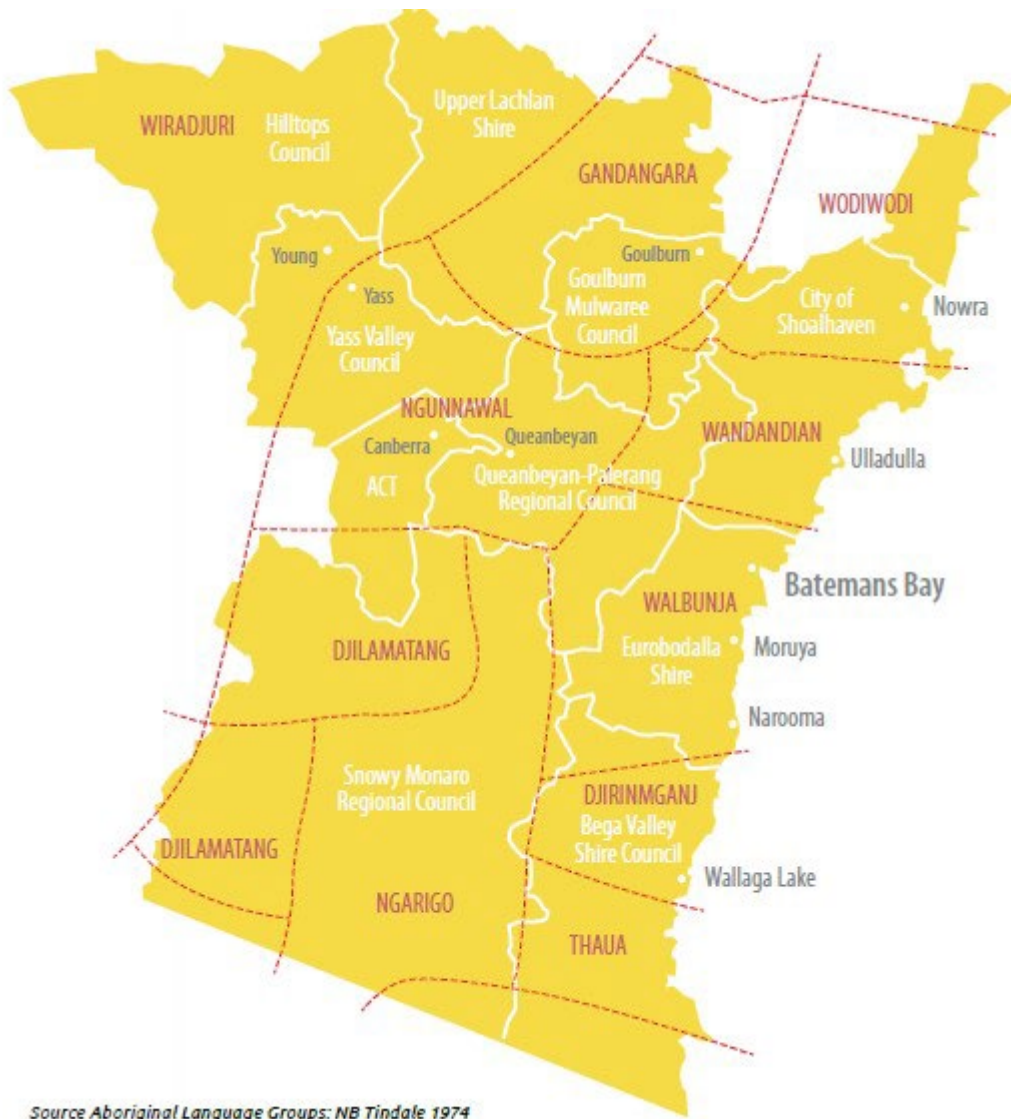
Our property management portfolio comprises of around 400 properties, across townships and communities from Nowra down the coast to the Victorian border, and across to Queanbeyan, Yass, Young and Goulburn.

In July 2021, we commenced development activities with the rebuild of bushfire destroyed homes and new builds in the Batemans Bay and Wallaga Lake areas.

Our services include:

- Tenancy management - local, social and affordable tenancies
- Asset management

- Housing policy recommendations - including rent setting and arrears management options for owner organisations
- Development services – including project management

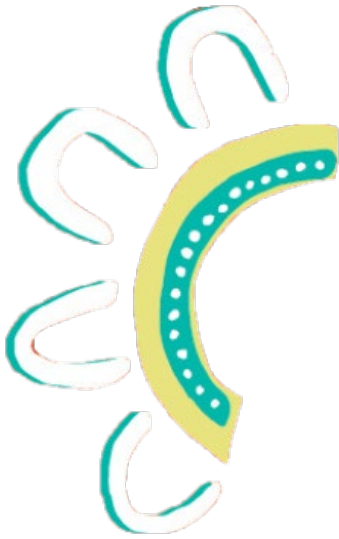


Where possible, we use and promote Aboriginal employment, in our procurement of contractors and services.

Education and consultation with our stakeholders - from tenants, client organisation boards and members through to local service providers - is key to us being able to meet our respective responsibilities and obligations to ensure culturally appropriate and sustainable housing outcomes.

1.3 OUR VISION, VALUES AND GOALS

Our vision is to be the leader in providing culturally appropriate housing and services to our tenants and communities. There are five core values we follow:



Leadership: we pursue excellence to achieve results. We act with courage in the best interests of our organisation, our people and communities, and Country.

Integrity: our policies and processes are open and transparent. We take accountability in our role as custodian of our assets, people and community.

Innovation: we are continually learning and improving our practices. We learn from others and actively invest in developing skills and capabilities in our people.

Kinship: we work collectively with our people, communities and stakeholders to maximise collective strengths to achieve our goals.

Equity: we champion equal opportunities in status, rights and opportunities for our community both individually and collectively

Strategic goals

Following a period of capacity building and professionalisation, culminating in achieving registration under the NRSCH in early 2020, our four year strategy looks to build on our new status as a 'Growth Provider'.

We aim to be the Aboriginal social housing provider of choice in the areas in which we operate, and to accommodate a growing proportion of the 1,700 households in our area currently living in social housing. SEARMS also believe Aboriginal people deserve more housing choices right across the housing continuum.

Our key strategic goals are to:

- Deliver high quality service to our tenants, partner organisations and communities
- Provide leadership and innovation to the Aboriginal community housing sector
- Strengthen organisational viability through growth and diversification
- Continue transforming SEARMS into an efficient and resilient community business

We believe housing is the foundation for better social, economic and health outcomes for Aboriginal families and communities. It is essential to move members of our community from poverty to prosperity.

1.4 REGULATION AND GOVERNANCE

Responsibility for governance is through a **Skills-Based Board**, with members appointed for a two-year term based on their expertise in five key areas: financial acumen, strategy and governance, property development, Quality assurance in community housing and commercial experience.

The board's **Finance and Audit Committee** assists SEARMS discharge its corporate governance responsibilities to exercise due care, diligence and skill.

The **Development Committee** plays a key role in assessing and monitoring the progress of new development projects.

The **Chief Executive Officer** is appointed by the board and is delegated to operationalise and report back on the implementation of board strategy. 10 staff are employed by SEARMS, supported by clear leadership and up-to-date training to ensure they carry out their work professionally.

Our rolling four-year **Strategic Plan** is updated each year, and a separate and more detailed **Annual Plan** details key targets and performance indicators. Progress on achieving goals in these plans is reviewed regularly at board meetings to ensure SEARMS remain on target to achieve our desired outcomes.

SEARMS's position in the housing sector

Nationally, SEARMS is one of only 31 Aboriginal CHPs registered under NRSCH, and the fourth largest ACHP in NSW and is ranked 65th nationa

Most Aboriginal CHPs are modest in size, serving their local communities. According to research by consultancy Housing Action Network, SEARMS is one of the four largest Aboriginal CHPs in Australia and the largest Aboriginal CHP operating just in NSW.

The AHO launched a tender in September 2019 to 'select and allocate resources to ACHPs with growth potential - by size, cohort, or service diversification, and are interested in working in partnership with the AHO'. In March 2020 SEARMS was selected as one NSW's first Aboriginal CHP Growth Providers and received an additional 153 properties in late 2021 from the AHO for management.

Uncle Tom Slokee, SEARMS Chairperson

Tom was born in a hessian bag house and grew up in a Aboriginal community who, although poor, cared for each other and shared everything they had. After time in the Army, Tom settled in Batemans Bay and started Budawang Housing Corporation after he couldn't find a house to rent because of racial prejudice. Later he was instrumental in setting up the South Eastern Aboriginal Regional Management Service (SEARMS).

Tom was approached by NSW Government to lead the Aboriginal Housing Development Committee (ADC) which was the forerunner the Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO). He was the inaugural Chairperson of both.

As a Pastor, Tom is driven by his faith and his mission is to serve and represent those who find life a struggle. His wider roles such as Deputy Mayor of Eurobodalla Shire Council, director of Campbell Page and Director for Aboriginal Hostels Ltd put him in a good position to advise on ways to address the housing and homelessness problems our communities face.



2. NHHA REVIEW ISSUES

2.1 NHHA SHARED ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

This section summarises the housing and homelessness challenges and issues facing Indigenous people and support SEARMS position that the NNHA has failed to address Indigenous housing in any meaningful or measurable outcome.

Our experience is mainly with Aboriginal people living in south-eastern NSW. Using the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS's) remoteness classifications, SEARMS's business covers **Inner Regional** and **Outer Regional** locations. The perspectives in this submission are therefore useful as much discussion of Aboriginal homelessness focuses on Major Cities and Remote locations.

Regional Aboriginal profile

SEARMS's operating area spans nine Local Government Areas (LGAs) in NSW, and the ACT. Across this area there are just under 20,000 people identifying as Aboriginal out of a total population of 715,721.

As shown in the table, Eurobodalla and Shoalhaven LGAs have the highest percentage of Aboriginal people compared to total population. The average figure across NSW is 2.9%. However, it should be noted census data might under-record Aboriginal people and households

Regional Aboriginal population from 2016 Census

LGA (ranked by Aboriginal percentage)	Aboriginal population	Aboriginal percentage
Eurobodalla Shire	2,081	5.6%
City of Shoalhaven	5,496	5.5%
Hilltops Council	819	4.4%
Goulburn Mulwaree Council	1,185	4.0%
Bega Valley Shire	1,042	3.1%
Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council	1,722	3.1%
Yass Valley Council	400	2.5%
Upper Lachlan Council	176	2.3%
Snowy Monaro Regional Council	448	2.2%
ACT	6,508	1.6%
Total for SEARMS areas served	19,877	2.8%

There are 9,210 households in SEARMS's operating area which contain one or more Aboriginal people (classed as 'Aboriginal households' by ABS). The largest numbers of Aboriginal households are in the ACT (3,254), Shoalhaven LGA (2,429), Shellharbour (1,182) and Eurobodalla LGA (874).

Regional Aboriginal housing tenure

The table shows housing tenure from the 2016 census, excluding 'other or not stated' data. The highest percentages of Aboriginal people in the region living in social housing are in NSW coastal areas and the ACT.

Of 'Aboriginal households' as defined by ABS, across SEARMS's operating area there are 271 in community housing and 1,462 in public housing, making a total of 1,733 households. Note that as respondents self-declare their housing tenure in the census, community housing numbers are often under-stated.

Regional Aboriginal housing tenure from 2016 Census

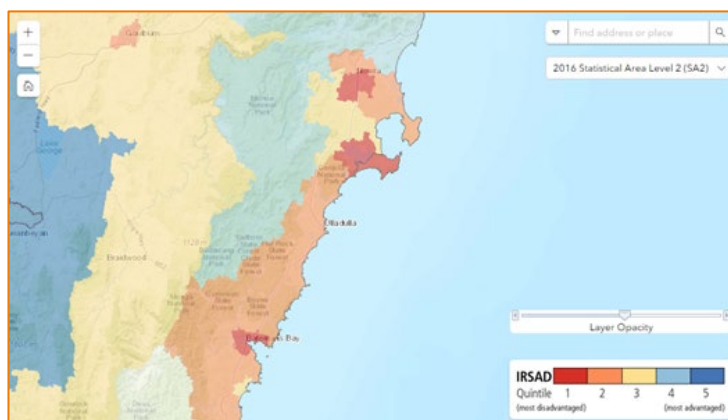
LGA (ranked by social housing percentage)	Owners/ mortgage	Private renters	Social renters
Eurobodalla Shire	41%	29%	31%
Bega Valley Shire	50%	25%	25%
ACT	51%	25%	24%
Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council	52%	25%	23%
City of Shoalhaven	51%	29%	20%
Yass Valley Council	69%	11%	20%
Goulburn Mulwaree Council	57%	24%	18%
Upper Lachlan Council	78%	12%	10%
Hilltops Council	60%	31%	9%
Snowy Monaro Regional Council	67%	26%	7%

The tenure mix of Aboriginal households in SEARMS's operating area is very similar to the average for NSW with 52% owners, private renters and 22% social renters. Aboriginal owner-occupation is highest in non-

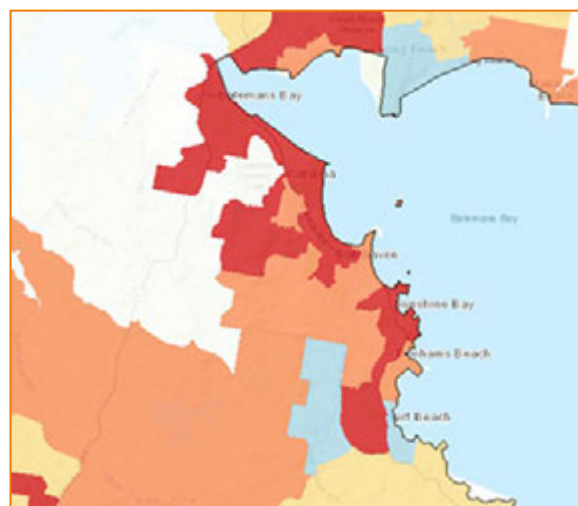
coastal areas, led by Upper Lachlan (78%) and Yass Valley (69%). It is lowest in more expensive coastal areas such as Eurobodalla and Bega (50%) LGAs.

Regional disadvantage

While south-eastern NSW is a physically attractive area, popular with holiday makers and second home owners, there are a number of underlying challenges faced by local communities in general and Aboriginal communities in particular. Wage levels are lower outside major cities, there are fewer higher paying jobs, work can be seasonal and transport to work options limited and often expensive.



ABS collates census information to calculate an Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) using Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) scores. The maps show these scores in 2016 with the colour red showing locations in the top 20% of disadvantaged areas in Australia. Many of the areas where SEARMS operate are in the top 20% or top 40% of disadvantaged areas in Australia (first map) .

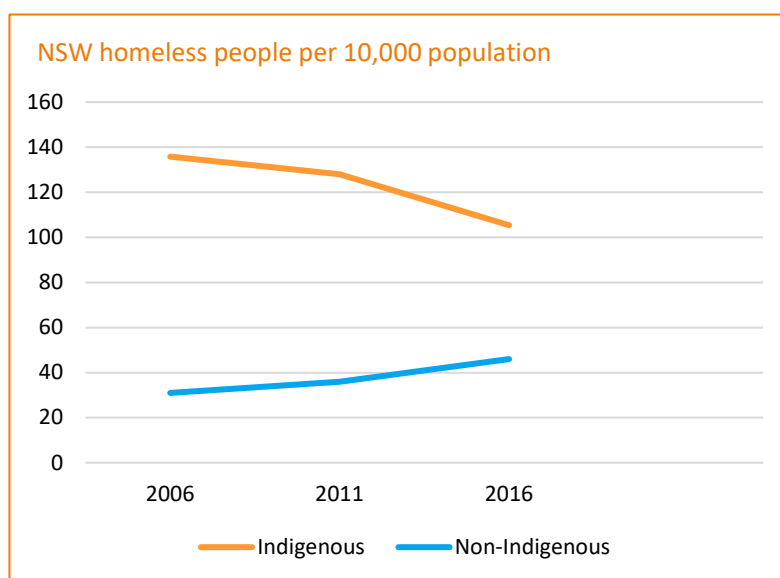


The second map shows the urban area of Batemans Bay in greater detail. This shows many individual neighbourhoods experience high levels of social and economic disadvantage.

Indigenous homelessness incidence

From 2016 Census data, 105 people per 10,000 identifying as Indigenous were homeless in NSW. The rate of homelessness for Indigenous people in NSW is 2.3 times the rate for non-Indigenous people.

While there has been a gradual lowering of the rate of Indigenous homelessness since 2006, there is still a marked difference in homelessness rates depending on whether or not person is Indigenous or not.



Total numbers of homeless Indigenous people have continued to increase in NSW, from 1,881 in 2006 to 2,278 in 2016.

Regional homelessness

ABS 2016 census count showed 116,427 people were homeless in Australia, a rate of just under **50** per 10,000 persons. The rate of homelessness is much higher in certain urbanised locations: the ten metro Sydney LGAs listed in the table had a homelessness rate of **90** per 10,000 persons in 2016. Excluding these 10 LGAs, the homelessness rate in the remainder of NSW was **33** per 10,000 persons in 2016.

The table shows homelessness numbers and rates in south-eastern NSW and the ACT. In many areas where SEARMS operate the rates of homelessness are above or around the NSW average rates (excluding 10 metro LGAs).

NSW regional homelessness from 2016 Census

Area (ranked by homelessness rate)	Homeless people	Rate per 10,000
Snowy Monaro Regional Council	89	44.02
ACT	1,599	40.24
Bega Valley Shire	114	34.28
Eurobodalla Shire	121	32.50
Goulburn Mulwaree Council	93	31.41
Upper Lachlan Council	24	31.19
Yass Valley Council	46	28.50
City of Shoalhaven	279	28.00
Hilltops Council	41	22.16
Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council	121	21.60
NSW ex 10 Sydney metro LGAs (1)	16,941	32.68

(1) City of Sydney, Cumberland, Canterbury-Bankstown, Fairfield, Inner West, Blacktown, Liverpool, Central Coast, Parramatta, Campbelltown

Homelessness is a major challenge in regional areas, not just cities. It is high in both Inner Regional and Outer Regional remoteness locations.

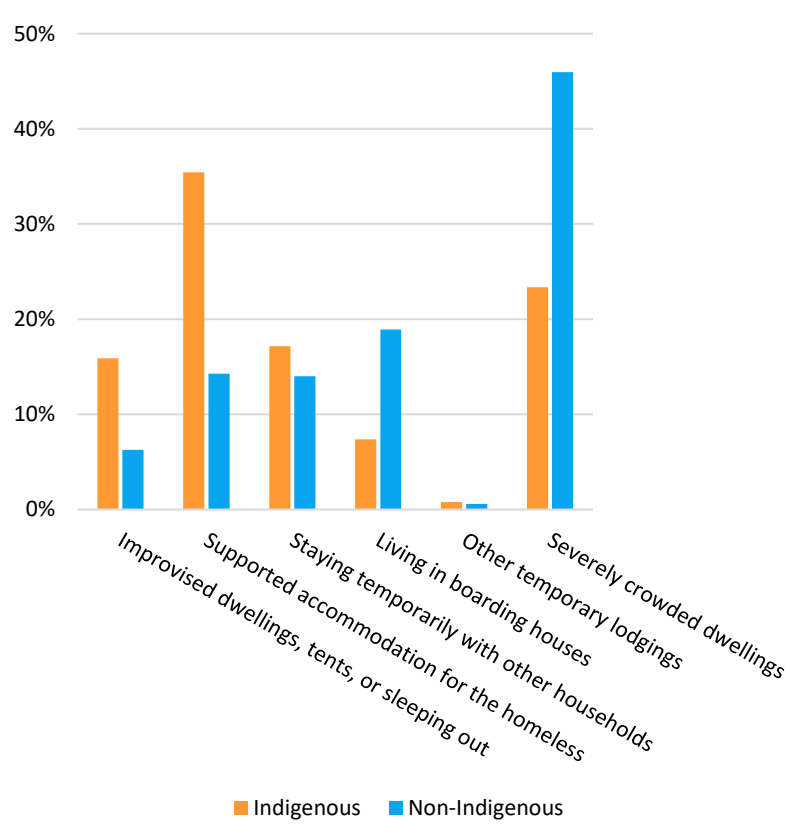
Types of homelessness

The ABS defines six different homelessness categories, shown in the chart. Indigenous and non-Indigenous homelessness conditions vary considerably by living type. The most significant living type for Indigenous homeless people in NSW is supported accommodation (35%), whereas for non-Indigenous people the main living type is overcrowded accommodation (46%).

The least secure, most hazardous type of homelessness living is 'improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out' – sometimes referred to as 'primary homelessness'. In NSW 363 Aboriginal people in 2016 were primary homeless, with an **Indigenous rough sleeping rate 2.5 times the rate for non-Indigenous NSW people**.

Far fewer Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous NSW people live in boarding houses. This suggests discrimination faced by Indigenous people accessing boarding house accommodation and/or a lack of suitable boarding houses in places needed by Aboriginal people. This latter issue is significant factor in regional NSW.

Proportion of homeless living type, NSW



2.2 NNHA EVIDENCE IN ACHIEVING OUTCOMES

The NNHA has not measurably improved Indigenous outcomes. Disproportionate and increasing levels of homelessness is also a critical issue that must be addressed. SEARMS position is that this is due to culturally inappropriate government procurement practices that award service contracts for Indigenous outcomes to mainstream providers.

Cultural factors

Many Indigenous Australians have a different set of cultural values of home, land and community than the mainstream population. As a result of colonisation, discriminatory policies and racial discrimination, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people have become disconnected from their country, customary law and kinship group.

As a more mobile population, some Indigenous people might find it harder to fit within the rigid rules for social housing tenancy transfers or fulfilling private rental obligations through to end

of a lease (hence not building an unblemished rental history). Indigenous people can experience homelessness when they travel to and from country to use health services, attend cultural gatherings or to be with kin in the event of a death in the near or extended family (sorry business).

'The legacy of colonisation is deeply implicated in the contemporary disadvantage of many Indigenous people that forms the context of homelessness. Low income, the absence of affordable housing, discrimination, and cultural differences in the meanings of 'shelter' and 'home' have resulted in high levels of housing exclusion ... This is compounded by policies of past and present governments which have resulted in distrust when it comes to Indigenous people engaging with 'white' services, including homelessness services

AHURI report 272, 2016



Uncle Tom's reflections

This is an example of the life of many Aboriginal families: an Aboriginal man and wife have two small girls (5 and 3) and nowhere to live. They alternate by staying at either the man's fathers place (Social Housing) and the wife fathers and mothers place (again Social Housing). They both love and care about their parents but they do bring pressure on both households. They do not report the staying to the community housing organisation nor do they apply for housing. The travelling costs are expensive but it's the only way they can find somewhere to live.

They say the forms are too complicated and invasive. This family is homeless and these people are invisible, non-existent on statistics. Aboriginal community organisations like

Data issues

Many Indigenous people do not consider themselves homeless because they are staying on country, or couch-surfing, and this likely results in an undercount of Indigenous homelessness on census night. Rough sleepers are harder to identify in rural and regional areas where geographical distances can result in them remaining the 'hidden homeless'. Street counts only take place in major cities such as Sydney and Wollongong. Under-counting the numbers of homeless people leads to lower resource allocation in regional and remote areas. More funds go to the cities where homeless people are more visible.

Disadvantage

Indigenous Australians experience higher levels of **social and economic disadvantage** than the wider population. They are significantly over-represented in the prison population, and the June 2020 Black Lives Matter protests provide a grim reminder of Australia's high rate of Aboriginal deaths in custody.

There is also a higher incidence amongst Indigenous people of family breakdown, family violence, alcohol and drug issues and mental health challenges. All these factors are likely to increase the chances of falling into homelessness.

'Too many Indigenous Australians experience unacceptable levels of disadvantage in living standards, life-expectancy, education, health and employment. Rates of chronic disease, mental illness and hospitalisation are significantly higher for the Indigenous population than the non-Indigenous population ... The gulf that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in these critical areas remains significant and, in some areas, is widening'.

Closing the gap report, 2009

Racism

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to experience **discrimination** in the housing market making it difficult to access private rental and even sometimes social housing. This could be through direct discrimination where Indigenous applicants are told by landlords or real estate agents that dwellings are not available for rent when in fact they are available. Indirect discrimination can come through strict requirements for evidence of private rental histories, which Indigenous households are less likely to have.



Uncle Tom's reflections

The opportunities for Aboriginal people to find decent housing is hindered by the racist attitudes and behaviour of private landlords and real estate agents. I would ask my Aboriginal friend who has light skin to approach the real estates and ask if they had properties for rent. He would be received favourable, and usually told yes there were homes for rent. However when the Aboriginal family in desperate need would front up to the office, they would be told that the houses were all gone. I experienced this myself when I left the Army and had the resources to rent privately but kept getting negative answers in my search for a place to rent. I eventually moved into a condemned property

Housing markets

Indigenous people have **less choice and security in the housing market**. Only 38% of Indigenous households in Australia are homeowners, compared to 69% for non-Indigenous households (2016 census). Home ownership has proven a successful way over the last two decades especially for people to build capital, and only a minority of households fall out of homeownership.

Some 21% of Indigenous households live in social housing (5% for non-Indigenous households), and of these 64% live in 'mainstream' public housing. **Social housing tenure has become less secure** in recent years, with many state governments imposing a 'three strikes and you're evicted' rule, and ending tenure for life. 'Mainstream' public housing agencies do not have discretion to allow for specific issues and challenges based by Indigenous people, nor are they led by Indigenous people.

Overcrowding

While overcrowding is a factor contributing to an increase in homelessness for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, it is a more acute problem for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. Indigenous households are more likely to include broader kinship groups and be multi-generational.

'Aboriginal households tend to be larger and more complex, often including a number of family sub-groups, but all of whom are inter-related by descent. Household sizes of six to 12 people are common, and much larger multi-generational ones of up to 20 members can be regularly encountered'

AHURI report 141, 2011

There is a significant shortage of large or very large houses available for social rent, or affordable rent or purchase in the private sector. For several Indigenous households, their accommodation is not just 'overcrowded' as defined to meet the minimum definition for homelessness - but 'severely overcrowded'. These severely overcrowded homes might be additionally insecure as both social and private sector landlords could seek eviction if the maximum number of residents is exceeded.

Government policy changes

Current accommodation options for homeless people and people facing homelessness such as boarding houses and supported accommodation (provided through Specialist Homelessness Services, SHSs) seldom have a major focus or understanding of Indigenous cultural values and lifestyle characteristics. As noted by SEARMS's chair in the box below, this was not always the case.



Uncle Tom's reflections

I remember when government once funded an Aboriginal men's refuge. The funds were allocated to an Aboriginal organisation that managed the place and designed and run the programs to up-skill Aboriginal People who came and stayed. The Aboriginal People loved it and used it. Aboriginal Elders and community leaders were involved in the programs.

Homeless Aboriginal People and those who has issues with the police and the courts would stay and get the support they needed to get back on their feet and be reconnected to their families. Aboriginal People were employed as staff to care for the residents and to manage the programs.

Having the Centre managed by Aboriginal People did have positive impacts on the residents, their families and locally. Besides relieving the problem of having to sleep under the stars or in the bush or on the streets, we were building the skills and confidence and 'transitioning' Aboriginal clients which mainstream shelters generally cannot. The

Between 2012 and 2014 the NSW 'Going Home Staying Home' changes to SHS service provision led to most homelessness services being delivered by larger, mainstream organisations. Smaller specialist SHS providers, especially those focussing on supporting women escaping domestic violence and organisations specialising in Aboriginal homelessness across youth, older people, men, women were often defunded.

As KPMG noted in their 2015 post-implementation review: ‘it is clear that larger service providers found it easier to accommodate the tender process, and that many smaller providers struggled with the process ... In particular, it appears that Aboriginal organisations were not fully aware that there would be no separate service packages for Aboriginal organisations in some Districts’.

Services in south-eastern NSW

Except for the Wollongong-based Illawarra Aboriginal Corporation, all homelessness services for Aboriginal people south of Sydney are provided by **non-Indigenous organisations**.

In Eurobodalla Shire for example, SHS services with ‘a strong focus on responses for Aboriginal people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless and is accessible to people from culturally and linguistically diverse background’ are provided by Anglicare.

‘No Commonwealth or state program specifically targets supporting homeless Indigenous people or those at risk of experiencing homelessness. Services for homeless Indigenous people are overwhelmingly ‘mainstreamed’ with SHS funds going to Indigenous organisations but no targeted support or coordination with programs which are targeted at Indigenous Australians’

AHURI report 279, 2017

Faith-based community service groups are prominent in NSW SHS provision, though remain associated within some Indigenous communities with running missions for Aboriginal people and administering the stolen generation policy and therefore trigger trauma for many of our people who will not engage with them.

Lower use of services

Cultural memories of colonisation and a distrust of ‘white fella’ services make some **Indigenous people reluctant to use mainstream services** even when they have high needs. SHSs providers need direct knowledge and understanding of their client group, but this knowledge can be absent from mainstream organisations especially if they do not employ Indigenous staff. This may act as a barrier to the willingness of Indigenous people to access the service.



Uncle Tom’s reflections

In the Eurobodalla Shire there are homeless services that are funded to meet the needs of young homeless people. The Youth Homelessness Support Services that provides support to single young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, through personalised assessment and case management, never engages or connects to Indigenous people. The Youth Refuge offers 24 hour, 7 day per week crisis accommodation and personalised support services for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness but Indigenous young people do not use the place.

Indigenous people hardly ever use these services because that are managed by non-Aboriginal mainstream organisations and our people often complain that they are racist or completely do not understand Aboriginal People and our cultural ways. They do not engage with the Aboriginal Elders or leaders of the Aboriginal organisations in the area.

Poor regional service provision

Regional areas which are home to relatively high numbers of Indigenous people - such as south-eastern NSW where SEARMS work - have fewer SHS service providers, fewer homelessness workers, poor public transport options, shortages of affordable accommodation and substandard housing.

'Our findings also suggest a substantial mismatch between the distribution of homelessness and specialist homeless service capacity ... Most SHS capacity is located in and around capital city areas with less capacity in regional and remote areas ... Service mismatch is most obvious in the areas where Indigenous people are living in overcrowded dwellings'

AHURI report 313, 2016

These regional disadvantage issues further entrench Indigenous homelessness.



Uncle Tom's reflections

In regional towns we have Aboriginal People living in the bush, close to the town, in makeshift tents. Many are the drifting homeless, moving from place to place just to survive.

They won't fill in the white fella forms to register their homelessness because the forms are complicated. Most have given up hope. Can't get private houses, racial prejudice exists. Can't get into Community Housing. Centrelink and Job Provider breach them all the time. Have no constant form of income. Can't get work. Homeless and without hope what a

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

A national policy and funding approach needs to be taken to solving the entrenched challenges and issues around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing across Australia. This should be a key priority for the next National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) that ought to include a new National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Strategy and funding program.

The funding program needs to include contributions from all Governments, particularly the Commonwealth which has the financial muscle and overarching responsibility for achieving parity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The decision by the Commonwealth in 2018 to not renew the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing is not supported. It was taken without any consultation with representatives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and was made despite an independent review recommending it be renewed. Nor did the Commonwealth negotiate with the States and Territories to secure their agreement to take over responsibility for Indigenous housing, particularly in remote areas.

The Commonwealth's position that Indigenous housing is the responsibility of the states and territories is not supported, amounts to cost-shifting and contradicts history. In fact, following the 1967 Referendum, the Commonwealth took policy and funding responsibility as far back as 1968 and it has always had substantial ongoing allocations for this purpose in its Budget every year until 2018.

The Commonwealth's decision not to renew the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing has resulted in a significant saving to the Commonwealth's budget that is estimated to be as much as \$5 billion over ten years. These funds should be reinstated in the Commonwealth's Budget for Indigenous housing regardless of location.

The new national approach needs to be developed and implemented in genuine partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled housing sector, particularly NATSIHA and its State and Territory partners.

The new national strategy and program ought to go to securing better housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across all parts of Australia, urban, regional, and remote.

The new national approach must include strategies which provides strong leadership from the Australian Government which both gives clear direction to State and Territories and allows appropriate flexibility to ensure that the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are met in each jurisdiction.

It is vital that the implementation of the 4 priority reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap form the backbone of the new national strategy and program.

The 4 priority reforms are:

1. Formal partnerships and Shared Decision Making
2. Building the Community-Controlled Sector
3. Transforming Government organisations
4. Shared Access to Data and Information at a regional level

No service sector is in more need of these 4 priority reforms to be implemented than the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled Housing sector where outcomes must improve if closing the gap is to be achieved.

A community-controlled housing sector was built across Australia starting from the 1970s (lobbying commenced many years prior and maybe 'several generations' would be more suitable), led by the Commonwealth and reflecting its policy of self-determination. The Commonwealth stopped supporting that community-controlled sector after ATSIC was dismantled but must fulfill its commitments to supporting it again in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Governments need to support the Closing the Gap Housing Sector Strengthening Plan which is about building capacity in governance and management in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Community-Controlled Organisations and to achieve sustainability.

The policy of Australian Governments needs to shift away from using a public housing model to meet the housing needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander to support a community housing model that is focused on developing the community-controlled sector that is regulated through the National Regulatory System for Community Housing and equivalent Community Housing regulation in Victoria and West Australia to meet their needs.

3.1 INCREASE THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS ORGANISATIONS

Many issues of Indigenous homeless are linked to cultural values and norms. Organisations run by and largely employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people will be better placed to deliver SHS services, especially in making it easier for Indigenous people to feel comfortable accessing services. Additional help is often needed to navigate the language, form-filling, and regulations.

High capacity Indigenous organisations are best placed to address Indigenous homelessness. 'Mainstreaming' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island services has not worked

Homeless Services for Indigenous people, run by Indigenous people, differ radically from mainstream services. When managed by Indigenous people themselves they are much more effective in being the solution for homeless Indigenous people

Over the last decade the Aboriginal Housing Office - a NSW Government agency, run by an Aboriginal board - has invested in and supported building capacity of Aboriginal Community Housing Providers. The leader organisations in this sector such as SEARMS are now regulated under the same strict rules as non-Indigenous CHPs. We suggest the same approach is needed for SHS providers.

While funding is important (and more needed), Governments need to invest in building the strength of the Indigenous organisations that are best placed to deliver these services, as well as look to reform and modernise regulatory structures.

3.2 EXPAND THE ROLE OF ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY HOUSING PROVIDERS

Budawang Aboriginal Corporation and SEARMS Aboriginal Corporation has been providing Aboriginal people in south-eastern NSW with accommodation for over 40 years. The organisation has both housed

many Aboriginal families who otherwise would have remained homeless, and sustained Aboriginal tenancies so people avoided becoming homeless.

Organisations such as SEARMS work hard to help achieve Government policy objectives. Our capacity has been built over a number of years, and we now function as effective social enterprises. Community housing providers are more transparent and can demonstrate greater accountability (through regulation) than the public housing agencies, have a lower cost base, and can access private finance.

Aboriginal community housing providers' approach and work is informed by a legal relationship with the tenant, and through broader knowledge of the household complement, family groups and community ties. As such, SEARMS works 'unfunded' with other Aboriginal groups specialising in health and justice to negotiate/broker appropriate referral and support pathways to help sustain tenancies.

Aboriginal community housing providers offer regional employment opportunities for younger Indigenous people, allowing them to build economic independence and avoid marginal housing situations. Organisations such as SEARMS both directly employ Aboriginal people, and encourage businesses providing maintenance and other services to offer apprenticeships and jobs to Indigenous applicants.

In regional and remote areas, and perhaps in capital cities, Government should be supportive of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous CHPs spanning both community housing provision and specialist homelessness services. This has a proven track record. In Victoria, many of the larger housing associations (CHPs) also provide homelessness services. For example Bendigo-based Haven Home-Safe employs 150 staff in regional Victoria and has 2,000 community housing properties along with providing SHS services and support for private sector renters to sustain their tenancies.

SEARMS is currently delivering new housing product in the Batemans Bay and Wallaga Lake areas.

3.3 BETTER COORDINATE HOMELESSNESS SERVICE DELIVERY

With the 'wicked problem' of Indigenous homelessness, government cannot solve this issue alone. And nor can one level of government, nor single government department adequately address multiple and complex needs.

We need to prevent a siloed approach through coordinating housing and homelessness approaches, and synchronising the work of State and Commonwealth Governments with community organisation such as SEARMS who are well placed to deliver solutions. The work of National Cabinet during the COVID-19 pandemic shows what can be achieved through inter-governmental cooperation.

Many existing homelessness services do a good job with non-Aboriginal clients and at times try to accommodate and care for Aboriginal People, but there is no transition into more security housing. Aboriginal housing organisations could work more effectively in partnership with homelessness services if we had properties designated for transitional Aboriginal housing

In regional areas in particular, local councils play a key role in community coordination. Councils should be encouraged and supported via Commonwealth and State Government incentives to assist Aboriginal community housing providers develop new housing stock that meets the needs of their local communities. Approaches could include reductions in development costs/fees, and development of a targeted housing

Publicly funded initiatives to address deep-seated issues faced by Aboriginal communities will achieve little unless they are well coordinate, and adapted to different conditions in urban, regional and remote locations

strategy that provides diversity in housing types across the housing continuum (crisis, transitional, social and affordable rental housing).

3.4 DEVELOP A MORE NUANCED INDIGENOUS HOUSING APPROACH

Government responses to homelessness need to recognise the different household structures of Aboriginal family and kinship groups. Indigenous households often accommodate the 'hidden homeless', where the legal tenant tries to maintain their tenancy while fulfilling family and cultural obligations. The Elder often bears the financial brunt of additional household members with increased costs of utilities and household necessities, as well as higher wear and tear on the property itself.

Housing stock is often not suitable for elderly Indigenous residents ageing in place, requiring higher disability modifications which are difficult to obtain from aged care packages or through NDIS packages. Some Indigenous people enter aged care when they qualify at lower age of 50 years due to the higher chronic disease and lower life expectancy.

We need targeted public funding to develop new homes and modify existing social housing so they can better accommodate Indigenous people. A straightforward option would be to build secondary properties ('granny flats') into which Aboriginal Elders could move freeing up the main residence for their family. Regional areas need additional large and very large fully accessible homes for Indigenous families. Mixing private finance with grants, Aboriginal community housing providers can help government deliver these new properties.