

AHCWA Submission

National Housing and Homelessness Agreement Review

14 February 2022

***In this document, unless quoting directly, the term Aboriginal is used in preference to the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of Western Australia. For the purpose of this document, the term Aboriginal is also inclusive of Torres Strait Islander peoples.*

Background

The Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia (AHCWA) is the peak body for 24 Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) in Western Australia (WA).

AHCWA exists to support and act on behalf of its Member Services, actively representing and responding to their individual and collective needs. WA ACCHS are located across geographically diverse metropolitan, regional, remote, and very remote locations. They respond to complex health issues across the life course, and provide diverse services Aboriginal communities.

ACCHS deliver the most effective model of culturally safe, comprehensive primary health care for Aboriginal people, and are in a unique position to identify and respond to the local cultural and health issues of Aboriginal people and their communities across WA.

In addition to this, AHCWA is the only WA peak body representative on the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, which was formed for the purpose of negotiating and collaborating with governments to develop and implement the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

This submission responds to the December 2021 Issues Paper released by the Productivity Commission in relation to the review of the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (the Agreement), and advances some further general propositions in regard to Aboriginal housing outcomes.

The focus of this submission is primarily on the lack of funding for Aboriginal housing, especially in remote communities, as well as the lack of commitment from the Commonwealth Government for this matter.

The Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia advocates on behalf of 24 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services in Western Australia, to ensure that the health needs of the State's communities are represented at all levels.

Commonwealth responsibility in regards to housing & homelessness

AHCWA welcomes the review of the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, highlighting that housing is a critical social determinant of physical health, education and employment outcomes, as well as social and emotional wellbeing.

A review of the Agreement would provide an ideal opportunity to bring all jurisdictions together in a dialogue around a national approach and strategy regarding housing and homelessness.

The current Agreement is not linked to any national strategy or plan, nor does it place any obligation on the Commonwealth to develop a housing or homelessness strategy that incorporates policy levers at a Commonwealth level.

This is despite the fact, that external policy settings and drivers, such as taxation, social policy, immigration settings, as well as infrastructure policies, which have a severe impact on the housing system, require national leadership. Therefore, housing and homelessness should not be made the sole responsibility for State governments.

In addition to this, an agreement that is placing the onus on State governments to achieve outcomes, without acknowledging the contribution of Commonwealth policy setting jeopardises an effective and coherent approach to improving housing outcomes.

In this regard, AHCWA believes that the revised Agreement should provide policy leadership, coordination and resources necessary to improve housing affordability and reduce homelessness.

This should include the development of a coherent and coordinated national strategy on housing and homelessness matters, which should be supported by a clear definition of roles and responsibilities, adequate funding, opportunities for collaboration and coordination across States and Territories, as well as accountability and transparency.

In addition to this, AHCWA believes that there should be a commitment at all levels of government to support the housing needs of Aboriginal communities, including the development of policies, procurement processes and service models that recognise the importance of Aboriginal community-controlled and culturally appropriate service models.

There needs to be a clear commitment from the Commonwealth in regards to housing outcomes for Aboriginal communities, as otherwise it will be unattainable to make real progress on the Closing the Gap targets.

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Distribution of funding

In addition to this, the review of the Agreement should also be seen as an opportunity to review the current funding arrangements set out through the Agreement.

Currently, under the Agreement, funding is allocated on a per capita basis, and not according to the level of need or number of existing public housing dwellings in each of the jurisdictions.

However, this funding approach is neglecting jurisdictional variations, with some state having a substantially larger social housing portfolio in relation to their overall population.

Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged, that the cost of growing and maintaining dwellings varies significantly between regions and states, for instance, Western Australia incurs substantially higher costs in servicing remote communities and more geographically dispersed populations.

Hence, consideration should be given to developing a model for the distribution of funds that is acknowledging the widely differing costs of providing comparable services.

Aboriginal housing funding

In general, the future status of funding and policies for Aboriginal housing still remains unclear. At a population level, Aboriginal people are experiencing disproportionately high levels of housing stress, overcrowding and homelessness. In addition to this, among Aboriginal public housing tenants, around one-third live in housing that does not meet basic acceptable standards.¹

Therefore, any future genuine national effort to improve housing affordability and homelessness must include specific policy commitments, dedicated resources and appropriate governance arrangements to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people.

In addition to this, any future policy development must expand on opportunities for Aboriginal communities to participate in the development of policies and active representation at Commonwealth and State level.

The future Agreement needs to encompass policy initiatives to support Aboriginal housing in the different settings. A majority of Aboriginal households are located in urban and regional areas, and continue to suffer poorer housing outcomes and discrimination, especially in the private rental market.²

Hence there needs to be attention and commitments on a Commonwealth level to address these issues.

¹ AIHW (2021). Housing assistance in Australia. Retrieved from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia/contents/about>.

² Ibid.

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Furthermore, further attention needs to be targeted towards funding and policy commitment for remote housing. Following the completion of the ten-year investment through the National Partnership Agreements, as well as the one-off funding contributions from the Commonwealth government in 2018/19 for remote indigenous housing in WA, there have been no long-term sustainable funding commitments from the Commonwealth towards the ongoing costs of remote housing.³

AHCWA believes that supporting remote communities should be a shared responsibility, particularly in light of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Closing the Gap

Under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement), there are a variety of mechanisms that might potentially play a pivotal role in improving housing outcomes for Aboriginal communities.

These include the effective implementation of the four priority reforms. In particular, under Priority Reform One and Two, there are commitments to develop cross-jurisdictional partnerships encompassing joined up approaches to priority policy areas, including housing (clause 38 of the National Agreement), as well as sector strengthening plans to be developed in a variety of sectors by 2022, housing included (clause 50 of the National Agreement).

In addition to this, Target 9b on community infrastructure has been added to the socio-economic targets of the National Agreement in December 2021, with the target stating that 'by 2031, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households within discrete Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities receive essential services that meet or exceed the relevant jurisdictional standard.'

Even though these are all useful mechanisms to improve policy delivery, significant financial investment is required to adequately address the current issues that Aboriginal people face in regards to housing and homelessness, such as overcrowding.

³ <https://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/McGowan/2018/12/State-accepts-Commonwealths-121-million-dollar-offer-on-remote-communities.aspx>

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