



# NSW Aboriginal Housing Office Submission to Closing the Gap Refresh

## The Aboriginal Housing Office Board

This submission is from the NSW Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO) Board to the Closing the Gap Refresh. The AHO Board advises the Minister for the Department of Family & Community Services (FACS) on Aboriginal housing issues in NSW.

## Recommendations

1. The refreshed Closing the Gap Framework should include provisions for a range of housing and housing-related initiatives.
2. The refreshed Closing the Gap Framework should give consideration to affordable rental housing, recognising its potential to support Aboriginal people and their families to move along the housing continuum.
3. The refreshed Closing the Gap Framework should consider how the Housing for Health methodology can be applied across Aboriginal communities where overcrowding is an identified health issue.
4. The refreshed Closing the Gap Framework should give consideration to the use of family-centred case-management approaches for Aboriginal people with complex or high-risk issues, particularly where early intervention is possible.
5. The refreshed Closing the Gap Framework must ensure service delivery to Aboriginal people and their families is always culturally appropriate, and wherever possible, delivered by Aboriginal people.

## Introduction

The Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO) is a statutory authority established under the Aboriginal Housing Act 1998 (NSW) and a NSW Government agency. It is governed by an all-Aboriginal Board that provides advice to the NSW Minister for Family and Community Services.

The AHO's vision is to ensure every Aboriginal person in NSW has equal access to and choice in affordable housing. We work in partnership with Aboriginal Community Housing Providers (ACHPs) and the Aboriginal community to develop a future where:

- Aboriginal tenants have greater access to opportunities through secure housing and a better social housing experience.
- Aboriginal tenants have greater access to prevention and early intervention support services where and when required
- Aboriginal social housing tenants will have improved health, education, justice and employment outcomes.

Secure and affordable housing is fundamental to the wellbeing of every individual and an essential component of an inclusive and sustainable society. Research (for example, Baldry, McDonnell, Maplestone and Peeters (2003); Robinson (2003); Bridge, Flatau, Whelan, Wood and Yates (2003); Bessant, Coupland, Dalton, Maher, Rowe and Watts (2003); Bradbury and Chalmers (2003)) has demonstrated that housing provides a platform for a range of benefits, including employment opportunities, better health and wellbeing, access to education, connection to the community and a sense of home.



The AHO is committed to providing a suite of culturally appropriate housing and housing-related products and services to Aboriginal people in NSW, recognising the importance of providing more than just houses to people who need support.

The AHO sees numerous opportunities under a refreshed Closing the Gap (CTG) Framework, and provides examples below of programs and services in order to demonstrate the type and range of support which could be considered in order to address housing disparity and improve social outcomes for Aboriginal people.

### **1. The refreshed CTG Framework should include provisions for a range of housing and housing-related initiatives.**

#### **Housing**

Aboriginal housing circumstances differ from those of non-Aboriginal people and are characterised by high numbers of households in insecure housing; a high proportion of renters; a high proportion of households in social housing; low levels of home ownership; high levels of homelessness; prevalence of overcrowding; and high mobility (temporary and forced).

The AHO is currently facing increased demand for social and affordable housing, with the population of Aboriginal people in NSW predicted to increase by 31% by 2026. Stable housing provides an opportunity for the AHO and ACHPs to support tenants to access coordinated support services that address the underlying drivers of long-term social housing residency, and supports vulnerable Aboriginal people leverage housing to support non-housing outcomes.

#### Innovative approaches to housing

The majority of AHO's existing stock is 3-4 bedroom houses and best suited to family groups. The AHO recognises the need for innovative approaches to housing Aboriginal people and their families. For example, in South Moree, the AHO is currently leveraging its Innovation Fund to deliver 4 x 2-bedroom adaptable villas targeted for seniors. The increased demand for smaller homes with flexible floor plans has been raised as a key need within communities and highlighted by ACHPs at the AHO's design workshops held in 2017.

### **2. The refreshed CTG Framework should give consideration to affordable rental housing, recognising its potential to support Aboriginal people and their families to move along the housing continuum.**

#### Affordable rental housing

Affordable housing provides an incentive for those who are in full employment to move from social housing without immediately incurring the costs associated with the private rental market. It can also be a stepping stone to home ownership. Compared to non-Aboriginal people, the proportion of Aboriginal people who own their own homes is disproportionately low.

The AHO has a policy direction to increase its affordable housing portfolio by buying or building new affordable housing in well located areas which have good access to services. The intention of the AHO's affordable housing policy is to provide affordable housing as an



incentive to move from social housing to housing independence and to support working households on low to moderate incomes to meet costs.

The AHO is also committed to advocating across government for increased provision of affordable rental housing for Aboriginal families.

**3. The refreshed CTG Framework should consider how the Housing for Health methodology can be applied across Aboriginal communities where overcrowding is an identified health issue.**

Wilcannia overcrowding project

The AHO and NSW Health are currently partnering to deliver the Wilcannia Overcrowding Project. The project utilises the Housing for Health methodology to improve living conditions for tenants experiencing severe overcrowding. The focus of the program is on environmental changes that lead to maximum health gains – for example safety, hygiene, waste water disposal, food preparation and storage and ambient temperature.

Overcrowding disproportionately impacts Aboriginal communities, resulting in increased health risks and is not limited to remote areas.

**4. The refreshed CGT Framework should give consideration to the use of family-centred case-management approaches for Aboriginal people with complex or high-risk issues, particularly where early intervention is possible.**

**Importance of wrap-around service provision**

While housing is a critical enabler of non-housing outcomes, housing interventions on their own are unlikely to be sufficient to bring about measurable change in non-shelter outcomes. For housing to provide the best opportunity for Aboriginal people, housing interventions should be integrated with wrap around services and supports (AHURI 2017).

Services Our Way

Managed by the AHO, the Services Our Way (SOW) program is an example of an individualised and family-centred approach to delivering packaged support to Aboriginal families at risk of child protection notification; families at risk of losing their tenancy and families at risk of breakdown, as well as Aboriginal families in contact with child protection or at risk of losing tenancies. SOW staff work with Aboriginal clients and their families to navigate service systems, leverage brokerage to resolve acute issues, make changes to avoid child protection notifications, maintain tenancies and mitigate family breakdowns. Key features of the SOW model that are unique and critical to its success include:

- Flexibility in design and delivery so local needs and contexts are taken into account
- Aboriginal control of the planning, design and implementation
- all-Aboriginal staff using tools developed and modified ‘on the ground’
- A focus on community involvement and engagement, with trusted relationships
- A holistic approach, working with vulnerable Aboriginal families to address mental, physical and emotional needs for clients, their families, carers and the communities in which they live.



Central to the success of SOW is the service model – an Aboriginal planned, designed and staffed culturally appropriate service. The refreshed CTG Framework should give consideration to the use of family-centred case-management approaches for Aboriginal people with complex or high-risk issues, particularly where early intervention is possible.

**5. The refreshed CTG Framework must ensure service delivery to Aboriginal people and their families is always culturally appropriate, and wherever possible, delivered by Aboriginal people.**

#### **Tenant Support and Education**

Similar to ‘Services our Way’, the AHO’s Tenant Support and Education Program (TSEP) is an example of a successful program delivered by Aboriginal service providers. The AHO established the TSEP funding framework to educate and support tenants and work with ‘at-risk’ tenancies. The program is delivered in remote areas of Western NSW by Aboriginal Community Housing Providers and has helped hundreds of Aboriginal families with housing-related issues.

TSEP was locally designed using a mix of program elements and approaches to suit local needs, priorities and delivery contexts. TSEP comprises six core elements:

- Community engagement
- Tenant education
- Incentive programs
- Repairs and maintenance assistance
- Support for high needs tenants
- Support accessing social housing

An independent evaluation concluded that TSEP demonstrated best practice in design and delivery, with the following program characteristics

- delivery in partnership with the Aboriginal community sector
- delivery involving a high level of Aboriginal employment
- service design adapted to the local context
- knowledgeable Aboriginal, third-party providers delivering a culturally appropriate service.

The success of TSEP is driven by the service delivery model – culturally appropriate services by Aboriginal people, for Aboriginal people.



## References

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