

# Effective consultation for improving built environment outcomes for remote indigenous communities

CONSULTATION IN REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES THAT SEEK TO IMPROVE 'HOUSING' OUTCOMES FAIL DUE TO A DISREGARD FOR CULTURAL AND DOMESTIC ISSUES, A LACK OF COORDINATION BETWEEN SERVICE PROVIDERS, AND THE ABSENCE OF UNIFORM NATIONAL, STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT GUIDELINES. PROTOCOLS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL AND CROSS-DISCIPLINARY CONSULTATION, PROJECT MANAGEMENT FOR COORDINATION AND A DATABASE TO PROVIDE COMMON INFORMATION ARE REQUIRED.

## KEY POINTS

- The current provision of standardised housing and planning for remote Indigenous communities fails to reflect the diverse cultural and climatic issues particular to each community, including the multi-dimensional and interrelated issues of the built environments which cannot be reduced to a narrow definition of 'housing'. A disregard for cultural and climatic contexts, and a lack of co-ordination between service providers can contribute to physically and socially dysfunctional built environments.
- Current consultation approaches used by consultants, service providers and contractors are usually limited by budget and time restrictions and are often based on methodologies and timeframes suited for conventional rather than cross-cultural consultation.
- Participatory consultation and negotiation practices, essential to identifying areas of need in remote Indigenous communities, require both effective cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary consultation in the planning, design and delivery of appropriate built outcomes.
- Consultation requires well-maintained recording of projects, from project inception to completion and occupation. The recording of consultation practices, particularly post occupancy evaluations, is essential information to inform subsequent consultation and facilitate improved outcomes for remote Indigenous communities.
- A regional database of cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary consultation outcomes about built environment programs would be

*This research, by Gini Lee and David Morris of the AHURI Southern Research Centre, investigates the consultation protocols and methods used for built environment projects in remote Aboriginal communities as exemplified in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands of Western Australia and South Australia.*



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of value for clients and service providers, as it would reduce the need for repeated and often invasive consultation, and provide the scope for informed program planning.

- The consultation methodologies required to identify particular community housing and planning needs, are not practiced consistently nor applied uniformly in national, state and local government guidelines and policy frameworks.

## CONTEXT

Currently, Aboriginal communities in remote areas are provided with standardised housing, planning and services based on urban patterns and practices. These practices do not necessarily suit the diverse cultural, gender, age and extended family structures of these communities. Housing provision will continue to reflect the cultural preferences of the consultant/provider, unless the consultation methods used are based on an understanding of Indigenous lifestyle patterns and their design implications.

## METHODOLOGY

An initial literature review identified existing cross-cultural consultation practices for built environment projects. Interviews in remote Aboriginal communities, particularly in the Ngaanyatjarra and Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands of South Australia and Western Australia, were undertaken to confirm the efficacy of cross-cultural consultation practices. This was complemented by seventeen semi-structured interviews with built environment practitioners (including architects, builders and service providers) who worked in remote Indigenous communities. Cross-disciplinary consultation practices between the various agencies and specialist service providers working in remote areas were also investigated. This was undertaken to determine the extent these practices (or the lack of them) affected the delivery of appropriate and sustainable improvements to housing environments.

## FINDINGS

### DEFINITION OF HOUSING

The complex, multi-dimensional and interrelated issues of the built environments of remote Aboriginal

communities, are not recognised by the limited or narrow meaning of housing. While housing may generically imply all forms of shelter, this meaning is usually reduced to the provision of houses and supporting infrastructure. This can lead to the provision of detached houses aligned on contiguous quarter acre blocks for the convenience of service reticulation and road access. But this arrangement does not recognise the variety of housing needs that a community may have such as separating family groups; language groups; gender groups; the elderly; and youth. Nor might it recognise the need for communal shelter for meetings and ceremonies. There is also a general disregard for the extreme climatic and topographical context in which communities are located. This includes such issues as orientation; siting; materials; insulation; shading; heating; cooling; and energy costs, which require a high level of technical expertise to facilitate appropriate outcomes in the consultation process. This is common for communities compromised by remoteness and economic limitations.

### CURRENT PRACTICES

A standardised approach to housing designs and project management has been adopted to provide more shelter in areas of high demand. This practice can lead to less consultation between communities, consultants and service providers. However, effective consultation is widely accepted by practitioners and service providers as pivotal to the delivery of built environment projects appropriate for remote Aboriginal communities. Best practice consultation is a process that is ongoing and cyclical. It facilitates the evaluation and documentation of built environment projects over the life of projects from inception to completion, and continues through to maintenance programs and post occupancy evaluation. Consultation practices needs to be supported by processes that address the absence of uniform national, state and local government guidelines. One approach is the use of standards workshops to debate the management of built environment programs and to share expertise.

### CROSS-CULTURAL CONSULTATION

Cross-cultural consultation refers to consultation practices that acknowledge the diversity of environments; changing housing aspirations; preferences of Aboriginal peoples; and are developed through work-

ing directly with communities 'on the ground'. There are numerous cross-cultural consultation protocols and methodologies that are employed for a wide range of Indigenous projects. Some of the more effective and proven consultation practices have been published, though only a limited number of these are specifically focused on built environment issues. This research identified consultation practices that varied considerably in the level of engagement with communities and the level of appropriate expertise brought to the consultation process. Those practices that did not employ a cross-cultural consultation approach were generally those that resulted in more standardised built outcomes.

The effectiveness of cross-cultural consultation practices is compromised by the failure to integrate, consistently apply and coordinate those methods. There are identifiable barriers to effective cross-cultural consultation, which include limited budget allocations for consultation that are often based on timeframes for conventional rather than cross-cultural consultation; limited cross-cultural communication and consultation skills of consultants; limited architectural design and technical expertise of consultants; and a standardised approach to housing, planning and service provision that offers limited options, inferring less need for consultation and community engagement in planning and implementation processes.

### **CROSS-DISCIPLINARY CONSULTATION**

Strategic planning in communities requires a cross-disciplinary approach to consultation that entails the coordination of a complex range of expertise and knowledge, based upon technical and cultural aspirations for development. Planning processes imposed upon Indigenous communities by service providers and project management regimes are reported to be uncoordinated, numerous and undertaken with a range of consultation styles. The process can only be regarded as effective when successfully evaluated against the built projects produced. It is essential to clarify which organisation(s) are charged with responsibility for the central role of coordination and communication across all parties. Otherwise, a lack of cross-disciplinary consultation between consultants and other service providers and agencies has resulted in decisions being made, external to communities.

When consultants and providers confine their interests to their specific areas of expertise without concern for alternative options, then opportunities for a more integrated, cohesive and appropriate overall built environment outcome can be missed.

### **PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE CROSS-CULTURAL AND CROSS-DISCIPLINARY CONSULTATION**

**Engagement** – gaining negotiated and mutual understanding of the aspirations of clients, consultants, managers and providers, and the adoption of agreed protocols for communication between all parties, at the inception of projects.

**Communication** – developing appropriate communication based upon local conditions and experience, influenced by the negotiation of appropriate and coordinated project specifications, and the documentation and timely implementation of expected outcomes arising from consultation.

**Reciprocation** – enabling inclusive, reciprocal relationship building based upon increasing knowledge and awareness of physical, cultural and environmental conditions and available expertise.

**Feedback** – including use of post occupancy evaluations and extending information gathering beyond physical and technical issues to embrace social, cultural and environmental factors, with the direct involvement of Indigenous clients.

Underlining these principles is the need for continuity in building cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary relationships, through effective and ongoing communication systems. This, in turn, can influence good practice models for project management.

### **PROJECT EVALUATION**

Post Occupancy Evaluation is an essential component of the consultation and negotiation process. Currently, anecdotal reports, documented by project managers or service providers may be used as evidence of the success or failure of planning, buildings or services. However, good practice requires that effective environmental surveys are taken over twelve months to two years to test initial interpretations and ensure they are robust and reflect changing environmental and social influences.

## **PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS**

There are a number of suggested practices that could be implemented to improve built environment outcomes for remote Indigenous communities:

1. Protocols for cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary consultation based upon proven good practice models, to be consistently applied to built environment projects. This would help address the absence of uniform national, state and local government guidelines.
2. Project management policies to foster a consultative and coordinated approach between service providers, consultants and communities, and to facilitate the provision of sustainable planning, housing and infrastructure.
3. A database of cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary consultation to provide an informed, consistent and coordinated approach to consultation across diverse communities and service providers.
4. To undertake Post Occupancy Evaluations, as a necessary component of good consultation practices, and to review evaluations and to report the information back to communities in a consistent manner.
5. Support collaboration between consultants, service providers and communities to develop design standards that promote solutions for innovative, technologically and socially driven reforms.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 40184 entitled *Best Practice Models for Effective Consultation Towards Improving Built Environment Outcomes For Remote Indigenous Communities*. Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website ([www.ahuri.edu.au](http://www.ahuri.edu.au)) by typing the project number into the search function.

The following documents are available:

- Final Report
- Positioning Paper

Or contact the AHURI National Office on +61 3 9660 2300.



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