

# How is social housing best delivered to disadvantaged Indigenous people living in urban areas?

**AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH TO THE PROVISION OF SOCIAL HOUSING FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE LIVING IN URBAN AREAS WOULD MAXIMISE OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIPS AND WORK WITH INDIGENOUS ORGANISATIONS. THIS APPROACH HAS THE POTENTIAL TO DELIVER MORE DIVERSE HOUSING CHOICES AND ADAPT SERVICES TO LOCAL CULTURAL NORMS.**

## KEY POINTS

- Adopting an intercultural approach requires more flexible, adaptive and accountable policy and service responses that acknowledge the cultural norms and circumstances of Indigenous clients.
- Fostering close working relationships between Indigenous agencies/networks and the mainstream service system offers great potential to improve services at the local level. Engaging Indigenous organisations in policy-making and planning processes at an institutional level would support this.
- Indigenous employment strategies to attract, train and retain Indigenous housing workers remain important. Non-Indigenous housing workers also need training to further develop their skills and understanding of how best to support Indigenous clients.
- Tenancy management, allocation and rent setting policies need to be culturally responsive.
- Specific planning, resource allocation and accountability frameworks designed to promote better outcomes for Indigenous clients in urban areas are required at the institutional level.

*This bulletin is based on research conducted by **Associate Professor Vivienne Milligan, Dr Hazel Easthope, Dr Edgar Liu and Professor Susan Green** at the AHURI UNSW-UWS Research Centre and **Ms Rhonda Phillips and Professor Paul Memmott** at the AHURI Queensland Research Centre. The research explored policies and practices for delivering social housing to Indigenous households in urbanised settings, using case study and consultative methodologies.*

## CONTEXT

Reliance on social housing services among Indigenous households in urban areas is high and increasing. This is explained by the broader social and economic exclusion processes impacting on many Indigenous people; these include profound economic disadvantage, discrimination in the private rental market, comparatively poor mental and physical health and a lack of culturally appropriate housing forms. The vast majority of social housing services to Indigenous clients are provided by state housing authorities, supplemented by a small contribution from specialist Indigenous-run housing organisations and community housing providers.

There are examples of good practice and service innovations that are responsive to the needs of Indigenous clients in the social housing system. This research focuses on forms of service provision in social housing that are appropriate for Indigenous Australians, the respective roles of mainstream and specialised housing agencies in urban settings, and how the connections between these agencies operate.

## RESEARCH METHOD

A workshop was held with highly experienced Indigenous housing workers from five jurisdictions. In-depth case studies were undertaken at two regional urban sites (Dubbo, NSW and Townsville, Qld) and one metropolitan site (Dandenong, Vic). These locations were chosen because they have significant numbers of Indigenous households living in urbanised settings and multiple mainstream and Indigenous-specific government and community housing services in operation.

The case study research involved consultation with community leaders, interviews (41 people), informal discussions, focus groups (31 people) and site visits. The case studies offered instructive examples of what happens on the ground in the housing service delivery system, as well as showcasing many positive examples.

An important element of this research was ensuring

that the voices of Indigenous housing service providers and households were heard and that all research methods were culturally appropriate. Indigenous participation was achieved throughout the case studies and in the workshop.

## KEY FINDINGS

### ***Adopting an intercultural approach to the provision of Indigenous social housing***

Intercultural service delivery would comprise a mix of culturally adapted mainstream services and culturally specific services working collaboratively to provide a diversified and integrated response to the housing needs of Indigenous people. The aim of this would be to promote culturally respectful and proficient service provision and enable choice for Indigenous clients.

An intercultural approach would mean that mainstream and Indigenous-specific service providers would operate within broadly common rules, standards and accountability, but with the flexibility to apply policies and practices appropriate for their clients. The drivers of service performance would focus on client experience and client outcomes. This would help to balance tensions between sustaining tenancies and efficiency measures, such as arrears management and tenancy control.

### ***Intentionally adapting mainstream services***

Enabling mainstream service providers to better meet the needs of Indigenous clients requires improving and culturally adapting policy settings and service delivery modes in the social housing system. Policies that are incompatible with Indigenous cultural norms and lifestyles can result in unintentional breaches of tenancy and lead to eviction. For example, travel for cultural needs such as ceremonial or kinship practices can result in temporary crowding in some households, extended absences, the need to accommodate long-stay visitors and sometimes the need to transfer tenancies between family members. The purpose and rationale for policies that restrict people from doing this are not necessarily explicit or understood.

Our systems are designed for households that don't change much, not designed for the fluidity and mobility of Indigenous community. It's so rigid ... People visiting is always seen as a problem rather than in a positive light. (interview, government worker)

This high mobility can also mean that complex rent setting policies are difficult for households to manage. Income-based rent setting can make it difficult for householders to keep up with reporting requirements, and also acts as a disincentive for work. Allocation policies that do not take account of the need for an extra bedroom for visiting kin can also impact negatively on Indigenous tenants. There is a need to explore ways to flexibly adapt such policies while still ensuring that living and dwelling standards are maintained and rental arrears or default is avoided.

### ***Effective communication between tenants and housing providers***

Mainstream social housing services often rely on formal written communication with tenants. This can be problematic for some Indigenous clients given the specific literacy skills required. There is a need for face-to-face communication with clients in culturally safe and welcoming service settings. Outreach services are important, as Indigenous settings (rather than government or mainstream offices) are preferred by many Indigenous social housing applicants and tenants.

Many Indigenous clients won't come up in the lift. So we do a lot of business in the foyer or through outreach. We also provide an outreach service, every fortnight, to an Indigenous health service and to a homelessness drop-in service. (interview, public housing manager)

An emphasis on face-to-face communications would also assist in building local networks between housing service providers and clients while improving frontline workers' understanding of local lifestyles and cultural norms.

### ***Workforce strategies***

Deliberate workforce strategies to better address recruitment, retention and development of Indigenous staff are essential to an intercultural

approach. These strategies should target Indigenous people in leadership roles. Training in housing, workplace culture, mentoring, training, career progression, and managing work and family is required by Indigenous staff. It is also important to recognise the difficulties faced by Indigenous people who work in government agencies.

It's difficult for Indigenous staff to work in housing—you are likely to have family or be a tenant. That creates problems when you are in the community and know people. Boundary issues must be hard. (interview, government manager)

In recognition of these tensions, Western NSW has created a specialist role for frontline Indigenous staff that does not include compliance work, such as issuing notices of tenancy breaches.

### ***Increased housing choices, options and pathways***

The system-wide shortage of social housing has particular impacts on Indigenous households. This can result in inappropriate housing allocations due to the severe mismatch between the demand for and supply of housing that is of a suitable size, location, and design for Indigenous households. Often the housing that is available is of variable quality. Social housing stock needs to be appropriate for the range of household types (including large families) to meet the needs of the Indigenous population.

Dwelling transfers to rebalance the size of mainstream and specialist providers (as applied in Victoria), provision of new products (e.g. affordable rentals, shared equity and rent-to-buy), more service partnerships and negotiated individual tenancy transfers between service providers illustrate ways to improve tenant outcomes.

### ***Case study findings***

The case studies highlighted the vital roles that are played by Indigenous organisations at both strategic and operational levels. For example, having a strategic Indigenous housing agency within government (e.g. the Aboriginal Housing Office in NSW) provides a valuable internal source of advice to governments and helps to mobilise

solutions and options through engagement with local Indigenous networks and services.

One of the strategic initiatives has been the move in Victoria to establish a viable and sustainable Aboriginal-run housing association (Aboriginal Housing Victoria Ltd.) that can operate alongside the mainstream social housing service system. This has involved staged transfer of nearly 1200 former public housing dwellings that were designated for Aboriginal people to the new housing association, which will be financially self-sustaining and able to generate some growth.

NSW is implementing a strategy to systematically build and grow its Aboriginal housing sector, so that it can operate effectively as a key component of a diversified services system alongside the well developed mainstream public and community housing sectors in that state. New service standards, rent reform, backlog maintenance funding, a customised regulatory model and a sector strengthening strategy are key elements.

While there is no similar framework guiding the future of Indigenous social housing services in Queensland, Townsville provided a positive example of a local service system that was adapting to high levels of Indigenous need in innovative ways. Strong and effective relationships and high levels of collaboration exist across the social housing service system in that city. A particular focus of providers working together is on negotiating appropriate allocation decisions and sustaining 'at risk' tenancies. The local Indigenous housing service provider, Yumba Meta, plays a critical part in this network.

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## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There are powerful examples of good practice and service innovations that are responsive to the needs of Indigenous clients in the social housing system, particularly at the local level, but these tend not to be widely recognised and do not attract adequate policy or institutional support. An intentionally designed and well-resourced Indigenous housing service strategy for urban areas would overcome the limitations of the current system and drive service improvements.

Institutional and sector reform must be locally driven. This could be achieved through the use of jointly developed local/regional approved five-year service plans that align with state wide objectives but are adapted to local conditions.

Locally, Indigenous organisations are the hub of Indigenous communities, playing critical roles such as promoting access to services, providing and interpreting information, supporting tenants and communities, etc. Linking with these organisations would support the process of adapting mainstream service delivery practices; however, dedicated resources are required to enable this to occur.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 70569, *Service integration and Indigenous housing*.

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: [www.ahuri.edu.au](http://www.ahuri.edu.au) or by contacting AHURI Limited on +61 3 9660 2300.



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