AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin

Remote Indigenous housing is best delivered through locally adapted arrangements

COST-EFFECTIVE HOUSING SERVICE DELIVERY THAT PROVIDES POSITIVE OUTCOMES IN REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES REQUIRES MAXIMISING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY PROVIDERS AND ADJUSTMENT TO LOCAL CONTEXTS.

KEY POINTS

- The research shows that while much has been achieved to improve housing management in remote Indigenous communities under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH) reforms, other areas require further development.

- Housing standards and tenancy management have generally improved in the case study communities. Government housing agencies have come a considerable way in bringing remote Indigenous housing into the mainstream housing system.

- In most locations there was agreement that tenancy management arrangements had improved under delivery by government housing agencies. Very few respondents wanted to return to previous tenancy management arrangements.

- The most effective arrangement for service delivery is one that is adapted to the local context. This is best achieved through a hybrid model, involving a partnership between the government housing agency and knowledgeable, preferably Indigenous, third party providers delivering a culturally appropriate service.

- The complexity, fairness and extremely high administrative costs of income-based rents raises questions about whether mainstream rent models are the most appropriate for remote communities.

This bulletin is based on research conducted by A/ Prof Daphne Habibis at the AHURI Research Centre— University of Tasmania, Ms Rhonda Phillips at The University of Queensland, Dr Angela Spinney at the AHURI Research Centre— Swinburne University of Technology, Prof Peter Phibbs at the AHURI Research Centre—The University of Sydney and Mr Brendan Churchill at the AHURI Research Centre—University of Tasmania. The research investigates how well remote Indigenous housing reforms introduced since 2008 under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH) are working.

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- Centralised repairs and maintenance systems are costly, ineffective and contribute little to Indigenous labour market participation. More needs to be done to proactively manage assets, reduce costs and increase local employment.

- There is a risk that the gains achieved under the NPARIH will be lost unless the Commonwealth continues its investment, and maintains oversight of progress.

CONTEXT

Tenancy management on remote Indigenous communities is vastly different to service delivery in mainstream settings. As well as challenges of distance and the absence of housing markets and services, there are substantial social and cultural differences between remote Indigenous populations and mainstream ones. Prior to the commencement of NPARIH in 2008, the poor housing standards of remote Indigenous communities was partly attributed to the diversity of housing providers and grants as well as complex land tenure arrangements which made it difficult to manage housing.

The NPARIH saw the introduction of the 'mainstreaming' of remote Indigenous housing that was formerly managed by the Indigenous community housing sector, whereby housing came under a single regime managed by the state and territory governments through their public housing agencies. The aim was to introduce robust and standardised tenancy management consistent with public housing standards and a repairs and maintenance program that increased the life cycle of housing, improved housing conditions and expanded housing options in remote Indigenous communities.

RESEARCH METHOD

Five case study sites were selected in the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, providing a mix of remote and very remote, provider and service delivery arrangements and types of housing. This empirical component of the study only investigated those communities that had been subject to the NPARIH reforms. Data collection involved tenant surveys (N=144) and interviews (N=37), and semi-structured interviews with housing managers, housing providers and other stakeholders (N=37). A cost analysis examined tenancy management, repairs and maintenance and rents. A policy forum held in October 2015 provided an opportunity for managers and CEOs from the Commonwealth, states, Indigenous community housing organisations and community housing providers to confirm the findings and provide feedback on the study's conclusions.

KEY FINDINGS

What have the NPARIH reforms achieved?

The study's findings show that government housing agencies have come a considerable way in implementing public-housing-like tenancy management standards in some remote Indigenous communities. Government housing agencies are improving their capacity to deliver appropriate, efficient and effective housing services to remote communities. Remote Indigenous housing is now understood as part of governments' public housing program and this has brought with it a systemic approach to improving and managing it. Rent arrears are reducing, local and regional service delivery infrastructure has been strengthened and there is greater expertise in remote housing management.

In the case study communities, housing standards and tenancy management have mostly improved. Tenants are beginning to know their rights and understand that it is not acceptable for showers and taps to be broken, ovens not to work and to have no security locks. They are developing the skills to manage their homes and understand what is required to meet their tenancy obligations in relation to paying rent and maintaining their home. The tenant survey found there is also a high level of satisfaction with the way tenants are treated by housing officers although some would prefer to see them more often. In most locations tenants agreed that tenancy management arrangements had improved under government

housing agencies. Very few respondents expressed a desire to return to previous tenancy management arrangements.

What areas need to be improved?

The achievements of NPARIH are balanced by many areas that require further development. Crowding remains high, rent models are inappropriate and inefficient, and there are aspects of tenancy management and maintenance regimes that are inefficient, lack cultural appropriateness and fail to adequately support local employment, community empowerment or broader social benefits. These shortfalls reflect the difficulties with applying mainstream social housing approaches involving centralised, non-adaptive service delivery in remote areas. In addition, the NPARIH reforms have been implemented unevenly between and within jurisdictions.

Crowding

Research shows that crowding has declined in all of the jurisdictions the study investigated but remains high in many locations, especially in the Northern Territory (SCRGSP 2014:53). This is supported by the data where occupancy levels at Ngukkur in the Northern Territory were almost double that of other jurisdictions, and crowding was a substantial concern. Elsewhere concerns about crowding were present in the communities visited in Cooktown and the APY Lands. The capital works program of new housing and refurbishments has been applied in only some locations, leaving crowding and inappropriate housing in many communities.

Rent models

Although the goal of public housing-like rents appears to be on track, mainstream rent models are problematic because the contexts in which they are applied are so different. The prevailing rent models are inconsistent with social housing policy objectives of fairness and affordability, given high levels of disability and living costs in remote communities, and difficulties determining occupancy. Tenant respondents and stakeholders are concerned about how rents will be managed as they increase beyond current settings.

This is especially the case in the APY Lands where satisfaction with rent levels was low and affordable rent was the first housing priority for most tenant respondents. Housing managers also need to address their failure to provide tenants with information about whether they are in rent arrears. It is unfair to penalise tenants for non-payment of rent unless they are informed of arrears in a timely way. The automatic debit rent collection system means tenants have little knowledge of how much rent they are paying or how levels are calculated.

Housing allocations

Fair and transparent housing allocations remain problematic. There is an urgent need to improve allocations procedures so that they are more responsive to levels of need and do not contribute to conflict in communities through inappropriate allocations to individuals who are not welcome there for cultural reasons.

Repairs and maintenance

There was also consistent criticism of centralised repairs and maintenance systems as inefficient and missing opportunities for local employment. In all jurisdictions, the timeliness of repairs was a major concern, especially for the more distant communities. None of the study locations had established strategies for managing property damage even though respondents demonstrated a good understanding of their responsibilities in this area.

Communities outside of NPARIH arrangements

Many people on communities outside of NPARIH arrangements are living in crowded and/or unmodernised properties and are very concerned about their future. Addressing these concerns and providing assurances about the future of their communities is a critical policy priority.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The goal of government housing agencies should be to develop a remote tenancy management system that is flexible and adapted to context. The most cost-effective and successful tenancy management services are those that employ a

hybrid model that combines the resources and consistent policy frameworks of housing agencies with adaptive, local service delivery, with high levels of Indigenous employment at all levels of the organisation.

Strategies to improve tenancy management services include developing partnerships with local providers, integrating repairs and maintenance with tenancy management at service delivery sites to save travel costs and pool knowledge, tenant education campaigns to help tenants reduce maintenance risks, increased local involvement in repairs and maintenance (e.g. the Northern Territory's local handyman system), and standardising components and fittings. While repairs and maintenance in the remote context will always be difficult, it is essential to develop systems and strategies that proactively manage assets. Regular inspections and maintenance work should be applied in a way that maximises opportunities for local employment and partnerships. For both tenancy and property management there are opportunities to partner with employment and training programs, to increase skills and employment in communities.

Delivering adequate tenancy management and repairs and maintenance to remote Indigenous communities will always necessitate housing subsidies. Without adequate investment, there is a risk that the gains achieved under NPARIH will be lost. An ongoing regulatory framework to ensure that service standards are maintained through monitoring and quality assurance procedures is recommended. Without this the remoteness impact on costs and oversight will result in ineffective tenant education, substandard property maintenance, an increase in rent arrears and potentially inequitable tenancy allocations, undoing the last eight years of government investment.

It is essential for governments to maintain their involvement in a long-term approach to increasing the housing options available in remote communities, including forms of home ownership. This requires working with communities to reconcile community aspirations for maintaining community land tenure with the need for economic development.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI Project 41037, *Identifying effective arrangements for managing remote Aboriginal tenancies*.

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

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