



The solution is Aboriginal-led

Submission to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan

Representing 16 housing and homelands service providers and 4 land councils across the Northern Territory, Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory (AHNT) Aboriginal Corporation calls for a dramatic increase in funding for Aboriginal housing in the Northern Territory, especially on homelands, as well as systemic change to return Aboriginal housing to Aboriginal hands.

Summary of recommendations

1. Provide fair and reasonable funding for homelessness services in the NT – in accordance with the actual need.
2. Dramatically expand Housing for Health projects and the Healthabitat approach to monitoring, on-the-spot repairs and preventive maintenance.
3. Allocate 20% of all HAFF spending to Aboriginal housing, in perpetuity.
4. In conjunction with the NT Government, AHNT and land councils, sign up to a long-term agreement for remote housing – including on homelands.
5. In conjunction with the NT Government, partner with the First Nations Clean Energy Network to expand access to renewable energy in Aboriginal housing throughout the NT.
6. Recognise that climate change is deepening the Aboriginal housing crisis, declare it an emergency, and establish tripartite channels to work with Aboriginal communities to devise and deploy mitigations and solutions at every scale.
7. When designing and constructing any Aboriginal housing, be led by Aboriginal people.
8. Explore and clarify homelands tenure arrangements to support self-determination for Aboriginal landowners and enable external financial investment.
9. Commit to investing a minimum of \$100 million on NT homelands housing and infrastructure repairs and upgrades each year for the next 15 years.
10. In conjunction with the NT Government, activate your commitments to priority reforms under Closing the Gap so that those commitments infiltrate every public policy and practice.
11. Support AHNT and NT land councils at every stage of the effort to establish Aboriginal community-controlled governance for Aboriginal housing in the NT.

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About AHNT

Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory (AHNT) Aboriginal Corporation is the community-driven peak body for Aboriginal housing in the Northern Territory (NT).

We work with our 16 corporate members, the four NT land councils, the NT and Australian governments, and other partners and stakeholders across the housing sector. We influence policy, improve practice and promote agency and transparency in decision-making.

Our vision is Aboriginal housing in Aboriginal hands.

Currently, there are far too few houses for Aboriginal people – and many existing houses are very run-down, and inappropriate both culturally and climatically.

NT geography makes it expensive and logistically challenging to provide housing and related services. The land mass is 1.3 million square kilometres, and there are around 80,000 Aboriginal people living in 4 urban centres, 43 town camps, 73 remote communities and over 500 homelands/outstations.

The situation for Aboriginal Territorians – particularly in relation to housing – is dire and has been years in the (un)making. Despite all the setbacks and deprivations, culture remains strong, and within individuals and groups and corporations there is awesome capability, much of it latent but some of it manifest in diverse initiatives across the Territory.

We aim to leverage the wisdom and talent of Aboriginal people and allies to turn this situation around. We support all efforts to strengthen the capacity of individuals and organisations to govern and manage the system of Aboriginal housing – to restore Aboriginal housing to Aboriginal hands.

The focus of this submission

In the following pages we describe three facets of Aboriginal housing in the NT: homelessness, housing and homelands. We lay out the unique and severe circumstances of our sector and jurisdiction, and call for actions to improve them. What unifies every aspect of this submission is the keystone currently missing from the system as a whole – Aboriginal authority, Aboriginal agency, Aboriginal community control – because unless the system embodies and nurtures self-determination, it will continue to fail Aboriginal people. Conversely, whatever the solutions to the crisis of Aboriginal housing may be, it will surely be Aboriginal-led.

Homelessness

In the Northern Territory, a lot of people are homeless – 12 times more (per capita) than the rest of Australia – and almost all homeless people are Aboriginal. Many Aboriginal houses are severely overcrowded – overcrowding is itself a form of homelessness. Having three or five or eight people per bedroom puts a lot of pressure on the hardware of the house, and makes things break more often. It also makes it much harder for everyone to get a decent sleep, stay healthy, make it to school or work, and feel happy.

Overcrowding is not unique to the NT but as the Productivity Commission’s dashboard on progress toward Closing the Gap shows, it is far worse here than in any other jurisdiction. (See the NT figures in the graph about [Target 9a](#).)

The negative effects of overcrowding on health are well-documented and include higher rates of infectious diseases and parasites. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports that from 2017 to 2021, 371 Aboriginal people in the NT were diagnosed with acute rheumatic fever – about five times more than in Western Australia, which had the next-highest number. Despite its small population, the NT accounted for 55% of all Australian cases of the disease.

Here's one ordinary story of homelessness in the NT.

A young Indigenous woman’s experience

In late 2018 Mia (not her real name) left her home community of Maningrida. She had been staying in various 3-bedroom homes, each one housing between 10 and 15 family members. Whenever Mia felt there was someone more in need than herself, she would move on.

“Most young people in my community (from 15 to early 20s) are homeless because they feel like there isn’t any space in the house for them. I felt responsible for the vulnerable, so I gave up the rooms for older people or couples with a new baby to sleep in. To make myself useful I would take care of all the children. It was a way to repay family for letting me stay. As a 22-year-old woman, I felt I needed my own space and wanted to be independent. So I came to Darwin.”

The first few weeks of 2019 Mia couch-surfed between family and friends’ houses or slept in her car. “I felt like a burden. I didn’t want to overstay with friends and family. I was thankful for their support, but I didn’t want to take up their living space.”

“I heard about housing services that could possibly accommodate me but found it daunting to begin the process. I didn’t think they would help me because I didn’t fit the criteria. I wasn’t a teenager; I was 22 and I had no disability, wasn’t getting abused and didn’t come from an abusive background. Even though I was homeless; I wouldn’t be prioritised. And I know the waitlist is long, so I just continued to rough it out.”

“In March 2019, after two months of couch surfing and sleeping in my car, I found out I was expecting. It was difficult. I felt like I was in a loop and couldn’t break out. During my pregnancy I

continued to couch-surf. But when the time came and my daughter was born, I knew I had to break that cycle. It wasn't easy."

"In December 2019, I moved with my newborn to my dad's home at Batchelor. I stayed until I had saved enough money to rent with real estate. At the same time, I applied for housing with my mother, who was sick. I planned to move back to Maningrida to care for her. Then Covid hit. Rents went down and more rental homes became available, so I began to inspect and apply for properties. I hadn't rented before so I had no references, but my boss gave me a character reference. I was approved to rent. Then Housing offered my mum a house in Maningrida – they had moved her up the list because of her illness. I had just signed a lease, and her medical needs required her to spend time in Darwin. So I became her carer. Unfortunately, she passed before we could go back home."

"The most difficult part of being homeless was not knowing, each night, where I was going to sleep. After a year and a half of that, today I am lucky to have a family member provide a temporary housing service. As a single mother with today's renting price, I can't afford it on my own."

What we can learn from Mia's story:

- In remote NT, there aren't enough houses for Aboriginal people to live comfortably; severe overcrowding has been normalised.
- For young Aboriginal people, homelessness has been normalised.
- Mia became homeless because she is able-bodied and responsible; to alleviate overcrowding she relinquished space to those in greater need.
- For a young Aboriginal person – even if they are responsible and hardworking– it is difficult to access either private rental housing or social housing.
- Covid was a threat but for Mia it was an opportunity in that it opened up the private rental market.
- Aboriginal people who have a house will share it with family, even if it is already crowded.

Commonwealth funding for homelessness is allocated in accordance with the population. For the NT, a tiny portion of funding might be commensurate with its population but it will never be enough to adequately support the 13,000 homeless people here, or to meet target 9a of the plan for Closing the Gap.

Recommendation 1: AHNT echoes NT Shelter's call for [fair and reasonable funding for housing and homelessness services](#) – in accordance with the actual need.

Housing

Around 80,000 Indigenous people live in the NT. Many Aboriginal people live in the town centres of Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs – and 43 nearby town camps – but the population is highly distributed – there are 73 remote communities and around 500 homelands.

Both private home ownership and the private rental market are out of reach for most Aboriginal people in the NT – even if it is subsidised and called ‘affordable’. Other housing options are government (public) housing in one of 73 remote communities, and community housing, which is generally limited to the larger town centres and town camps, although some housing is available on Aboriginal homelands (see the section on homelands, below). For both public and community housing the demand is very high and the waiting lists are very long. It is a daunting system for Aboriginal people to navigate, and there is a desperate need for more houses. (Governments estimate that at least 5000 more 3-bedroom houses are needed for Aboriginal people in the NT.)

With housing in such short supply, houses are shared with extended family members who are homeless or visiting – which puts more pressure on the structures and facilities and increases their rate of deterioration. As a result, maintenance and repair works are needed sooner and more often but of course, in remote areas, repairs and refurbishments are more expensive – so there are two extra pressures on housing providers. And when your clients are impoverished, you are never going to see market rents paid. Hence, as well as being severely crowded, many Aboriginal houses are run-down, and Aboriginal community housing providers struggle to repair and maintain them.

It is incontrovertible to say that [housing is a key determinant of health](#). However, a higher risk of ill-health is just one consequence of poor housing. As noted, decent housing is a necessary foundation for succeeding at school and in employment. It’s also a prerequisite for the sense of stability, safety and security closely associated with the heartier concept of *home*. In its absence, we suffer.

The NT Government also struggles to maintain and repair public housing in remote Aboriginal communities – as recent litigation brought by tenants attests. In Santa Teresa and Laramba, residents sued the government for housing they consider to be substandard or uninhabitable. Recently, [Menzies School of Health Research evaluated](#) the NT Government’s ‘Healthy Homes’ program of remote housing repairs and maintenance. They report that where Healthabitat was contracted to run Housing for Health projects, house function significantly improved, but those projects only reach a small proportion of remote community houses.

Recommendation 2: dramatically expand Housing for Health projects and the Healthabitat approach to monitoring, on-the-spot repairs and preventive maintenance.

Recommendation 3: AHNT echoes National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Association (NATSIHA) in calling for 20% of all HAFF spending to be allocated to Aboriginal housing, in perpetuity.

Recommendation 4: that the Commonwealth, NT Government, AHNT and land councils sign up to a long-term agreement for remote housing – including on homelands.

Climatic fitness

Aboriginal housing is rarely energy efficient. In remote areas and homelands, many Aboriginal people live in improvised dwellings without water or power, let alone passive thermal comfort provided by insulation, cross-ventilation, deep verandahs or well-placed shade trees. Hence, where there is power, residents will run expensive, inefficient air conditioners in an attempt to cool down. (Compounding the problem, albeit on a small scale, on homelands the source of power is often a diesel generator.)

A recent report by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) on [sustainable Indigenous housing in regional and remote Australia](#) found that “the thermal performance of existing and improved Indigenous housing currently fails to ensure the health, safety and comfort of householders”.

Throughout the NT (and of course, beyond), heat is becoming more extreme. Climate change is hitting the most vulnerable people hardest. It is crucial to mitigate the risks associated with extreme heat, and to find ways to make Aboriginal housing safer and more comfortable. The Commonwealth and NT governments must dedicate substantial resources to work with Aboriginal communities and organisations to innovate and deploy multiple mitigations and solutions: experimental and proven, short-term and long-term, local and general.

Recommendation 5: that the Commonwealth and NT governments partner with the First Nations Clean Energy Network to expand access to renewable energy in Aboriginal housing throughout the NT.

Recommendation 6: recognise that climate change is deepening the Aboriginal housing crisis, declare it an emergency, and establish tripartite channels to work with Aboriginal communities to devise and deploy mitigations and solutions at every scale.

Cultural fitness

Cultural fitness of Aboriginal housing is another factor critical to its habitability and comfort. Aboriginal housing should enable Aboriginal people to live in accordance with their cultural imperatives and protocols. If it doesn't, it will be uncomfortable and might remain unused. Across the NT, there are dozens of language groups, each with their own cultural specificity, so a single design won't be a good fit for all Aboriginal people.

The best way to ensure cultural fitness of Aboriginal housing is to involve prospective residents in the design and build of their houses. Such an approach accords with the spirit of self-determination. It can also have concurrent benefits such as upskilling and employment, as well as enabling and motivating residents to maintain and repair their own houses.

Genuine collaboration in major works is uncommon but not unprecedented. The Centre for Appropriate Technology was a [pioneer in codesign and construction](#) in the NT. In the early days

of its operation, it successfully served a dual purpose as technology-developer and trainer. A recent model for culturally-appropriate housing development and management is provided by Anindilyakwa Housing Aboriginal Corporation [Housing Program Guidelines](#), which direct the whole life cycle of housing in the Groote archipelago – planning, design, construction, alterations and additions, maintenance and repairs, and audit – and aim at every stage for community control.

Good models of culturally-fit housing – both process and product – exist. They can be replicated and adapted as appropriate. Where design and construction is instigated by non-Indigenous partners, it is crucial that they allow time to establish trust in the relationship, practice deep listening, discover the strengths of their Aboriginal partners, and allow local Aboriginal people to lead.

Recommendation 7: in design and construction of all Aboriginal housing, be led by Aboriginal people.

Homelands

Homelands and outstations are interchangeable terms used in different parts of the NT to describe remote areas where small populations of Aboriginal people live, on lands where they have traditional ownership or historical association. There are more than 500 recognised homelands in the NT, with 394 currently funded. Around 7000 people live on a homeland, and another 40,000 people live in larger communities but are linked to homelands. Hence around 47,000 people – more than half of the Aboriginal population of the NT – either live on homelands or have family on homelands and spend time there.

The homelands movement began over 50 years ago and was a significant development in Aboriginal affairs nationally. It was a visible demonstration of Aboriginal people across the NT asserting their rights to control and determine their lives on their traditional lands. When first established in the 1970s and 1980s, homelands received small funding amounts called establishment grants provided by the then Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Physical infrastructure was largely left to Aboriginal people themselves to design, build and manage. They carried water in buckets, cleared airstrips and roads and dug toilets by hand, and solar power was gradually introduced. To this day residents talk proudly of how they overcame significant barriers through hard work and determination to build their own communities on their ancestral estates.

Today, homelands are a unique component of the Indigenous social and cultural landscape, enabling people to live on their ancestral lands, and giving them social, spiritual, cultural, health and economic benefits. Recently, homelands provided safe and alternative accommodation for Aboriginal communities as biosecurity measures were implemented throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. In many places homelands are governed mainly through traditional kinship structures, which provide and sustain leadership and local governance arrangements. As NT

independent Member for Mulka, Mark Yingiya Guyula MLA says: ‘Our connection to country is an umbilical cord.’

Tenure, buildings and infrastructure

Most homelands are located on Aboriginal land held by Aboriginal land trusts established under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (ALRA). A small number have other statutory tenures, such as community living areas (CLAs) – land excised from a pastoral lease – or parcels of land within national parks. As such, the process to formally establish a new homeland with infrastructure usually involves the relevant land council.

Generally, housing in homelands is communally owned under the ALRA, not subject to NT Government leasing nor part of the NT’s remote public housing system. There is no overarching policy that clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of the Australian and NT governments and the land councils – who owns the assets on Aboriginal land trusts; how rents can be levied; how assets might be privately owned and therefore become fungible; and who has responsibility to maintain housing and essential infrastructure. Homelands have operated in a policy vacuum for over a decade, and in that time there have been no new houses built, and very few substantial upgrades to essential infrastructure.

Recommendation 8: explore and clarify homelands tenure arrangements to support self-determination for Aboriginal landowners and enable external financial investment.

Within this policy vacuum, housing and infrastructure on homelands has been unregulated, because homelands are located outside the NT’s declared ‘building control areas’ (where all housing construction must have a building permit and meet the standards for building in the National Construction Code and Building Regulations). As a result, buildings and other infrastructure (power, water and sewerage) may be substandard.

Money story

Funding for housing on homelands and repairs and maintenance continued to be provided by the Commonwealth until 2015, at which time the NT accepted full responsibility for the delivery of municipal and essential services to homelands in exchange for a \$155 million cash-out of the municipal and essential services component of the Stronger Futures in the NT National Partnership Agreement.

At the time of the transfer of responsibility, the NT Government had no data or baseline evidence to accurately determine the condition of existing assets and essential infrastructure, or the level of unfunded liabilities across homelands. It is likely that the true cost of unfunded liabilities for housing and essential infrastructure across homelands far exceeded the \$155 million cash payment in 2015.

There are no public records available to show how the NT Government spent the \$155 million cash-out in 2015–16.

Since then the Northern Territory has retained funding responsibility for homelands, but reduced the allocation every year.

Northern Territory funding for homelands – relentless decline

While the cash-out of the municipal and essential services component of Stronger Futures in 2015 totalled \$155 million, homelands have largely received less than a third of that amount in combined recurrent and capital funding year on year.

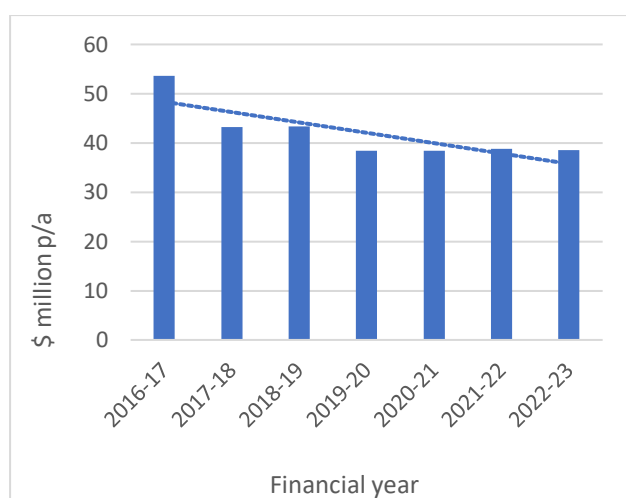
In seven years, the NT Government has steadily reduced its funding for homelands repairs and maintenance, municipal and essential services and capital improvements by 28% – from \$53.6 million to \$38.6 million.

Table 1 – NT Government funding for homelands

Financial year	Homelands funding (\$m)
2016–17	53.6
2017–18	43.2
2018–19	43.4
2019–20	38.4
2020–21	38.4
2021–22	38.8
2022–23	38.6

(Figures are sourced from departmental annual reports; questions in the NT Legislative Assembly; the homelands funding agreement; and the homelands program guidelines.)

Figure 2 – NT Government homelands funding decline – 27.9% over six years



While ABS Census data shows that Aboriginal populations have continued to grow across remote and very remote areas in the NT, funding levels for homelands have declined year on year.

Effect of underfunding

By any measure this is a significant reduction in funding over the long-term and is severely impacting the ability of service providers to repair and maintain, let alone establish a preventative schedule of maintenance work. The flow-on from this is accelerated deterioration of housing and infrastructure across homelands.

Homelands service providers regularly contact AHNT with concerns that the funding available through the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC) homelands program is so inadequate that the needs of homelands will never be met. Aboriginal homelands service provider organisations find it impossible to properly design proactive maintenance schedules and are restricted to delivering a mostly reactive approach to housing and infrastructure repairs and maintenance. Over many years, as housing and essential infrastructure has deteriorated on homelands, service providers have been forced to apply band-aids on top of older band-aids – to patch up dwellings that would be considered beyond economic repair (BER) if located in an urban area or one of NT's 73 remote communities.

At AHNT we continually hear – and the NT government and its Minister for Housing accept its truth – that funding for Aboriginal housing has been woefully inadequate for many years. Every day, the need for a properly restored funding amount grows and becomes more urgent. We must be under no illusions: the health and safety of residents is at stake.

AHNT is relieved to see that this year's investment of \$100 million in urgent repairs and maintenance of homelands housing and infrastructure is occurring under a program called 'Restoring Funding for Homelands', and hopes that this funding injection is the beginning of a long-term commitment to homelands.

Recommendation 9: that the Commonwealth commit to investing a minimum of \$100 million on NT homelands housing and infrastructure repairs and upgrades each year for the next 15 years.

Aboriginal leadership – restoring agency

In the 1970s and 80s, Aboriginal people, families and communities around the NT were developing the skills to plan, fund, design, build, maintain and manage their own housing. Today, there are some highly-skilled people and groups, but many circumstances have changed – and in some senses, conditions today are worse for Aboriginal people than they were 40 years ago.

The 2007 'Northern Territory Emergency Response', also known as the Intervention, was disempowering and dispiriting for Aboriginal people and communities. Assessments of its impact found it damaging in terms of the very measures it was designed to improve: [child protection](#) and [health](#). That damage, in combination with the prolonged underfunding of housing and homelands ever since, compound the housing and homelessness problems that beset Aboriginal people and communities. There is much work to do to restore agency and confidence in Aboriginal community control in the NT.

Transforming government relationships

Priority reforms under Closing the Gap plans are important and well-articulated:

- 'Formal partnerships and shared decision-making' commits governments to cooperative governance arrangements.
- 'Transforming government organisations' commits governments to raising the consciousness of public servants and to changing the structures and systems of government in order to respond to what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need.

Those reforms are vital but they will only succeed if there is persistent, high-level leadership from government ministers and departmental secretaries and chief executives to encourage adaptation throughout each layer and column of the bureaucracy. Non-Indigenous people must learn to listen, deeply, to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and be willing to change how they think about and act in relation to Aboriginal housing. AHNT can attest that at this point, on this front, no change is yet evident.

We may be underestimating the challenge of transforming government. Aboriginal governance systems are very different from Western systems. One way to understand the difference is that in Aboriginal worldviews, everything is connected. Non-Indigenous structures and systems, by contrast, divide the world into separate parts – environment, health, education, employment and so on. But as we know, housing is deeply entwined with all other aspects of life. Aboriginal people are good at large-scale, long-range, interconnected thinking, and in that, they are well-placed to devise smart solutions to the crisis of Aboriginal housing. But as a small portion of the population, with very different takes on the world, Aboriginal people need a lot of support from non-Indigenous people to deploy those solutions.

Recommendation 10: that Commonwealth and NT governments activate their commitments to priority reforms under Closing the Gap so that those commitments infiltrate every public policy and practice.

A new system of governance for Aboriginal housing

Central Land Council and AHNT have commissioned an options paper for establishing a new agency authorised and funded to govern and manage remote Aboriginal housing the NT. It is a complex proposition to map out every aspect of the desired end state as well as the process to achieve it. The system needs to establish strong governance and management of every stage of the life cycle of Aboriginal housing, including land tenure, planning, infrastructure, essential services, design, construction, tenancy management, tenant education, repairs and maintenance, and so on. Such an agency would ensure self-determination, and thereby progress Closing the Gap priority reforms 1 and 3 – for shared decision-making and governmental transformation. Once there is an agreed approach, it will need to be resourced.

Recommendation 11: support AHNT and NT land councils at every stage of the effort to establish a new governance system for Aboriginal housing in the NT.

