

18 January 2017

Dear Panel Members

**Submission to the Inquiry into service delivery in Queensland's remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities**

We have recently completed a detailed analysis of the progress of housing management reforms to remote Indigenous communities under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH) through two Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) funded investigations<sup>1</sup>.

The second of these projects collected data from five regions in Western Australia, the Northern Territory, Queensland and South Australia and included survey of 144 tenants, interviews with 138 tenants, 37 housing providers and 34 stakeholders. Sampling ensured diversity in variables of gender, age, household size, house condition, length of tenancy, distance from regional centre and community size. All the communities investigated had received NPARIH funding for new and improved housing.

The findings are highly relevant to the Inquiry and we hope the Commission is able to take them into account in its deliberations. The project's 'Final Report' and 'Research and Policy Bulletin' (which provides a brief summary of the key findings) are available here: <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/271>.

Members of the research team also have extensive policy and practice expertise in the field of remote Indigenous housing.

What we wish to emphasise in this submission is the urgent need to deliver housing in ways that are sustainable over the medium to long-term, and which are also compatible with the aspirations, values and traditions of Indigenous community members. If this is not achieved there is a risk that the goal of significantly reducing Indigenous housing instability, crowding and homelessness will not be achieved.

<sup>1</sup> Habibis, D., Phillips, R., Spinney, A., Phibbs, P. and Churchill, B. 2016 *Identifying effective arrangements for tenancy management service delivery on remote Indigenous communities* AHURI Final Report 271, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/271>  
Habibis, D., Phillips, R., Phibbs, P. and Verdouw, J. 2014 *Progressing Tenancy Management Reform on Remote Indigenous Communities* AHURI Final Report No. 223, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/271>

Achieving a sustainable and culturally appropriate remote Indigenous housing system requires:

- Recognising that remote Indigenous housing will always be costly and that, with the exception of a minority of communities that are able to access independent funding sources, this requires investment by the Commonwealth and the states/territories over the medium- to long-term.
- The history of remote Indigenous housing has been one in which government engagement has been characterized by periods of intense engagement followed by periods of significant neglect. To ensure that the benefits from the investment provided through NPARIH are sustained, it is essential for the Commonwealth to maintain some degree of oversight in the delivery and management of remote Indigenous housing.
- Our research adds to the existing evidence base that where housing is delivered by Indigenous people much can be achieved to improve Indigenous housing outcomes. But despite this, and a policy context that encourages Indigenous involvement in housing delivery, little has been done to increase the size of the Indigenous community housing sector. There is an urgent need for governments to support capacity building of Indigenous community organisations so that they can compete in the community housing provider sector.
- Municipal and essential services to remote/discrete Indigenous communities are currently a shared responsibility between the Commonwealth and the states resulting in confusion over roles and responsibilities. This has undermined the stability of communities and contributed to poor health and well-being outcomes. Given the longevity of Indigenous settlement on remote communities pressure needs to be applied to all levels of government to resolve this confusion and establish an agreement that will ensure that these services will be provided in the same way they are provided to other Australian communities.
- Unless rent settings in remote communities are adapted to the remote physical and cultural context they are likely to be costly, inefficient and unfair. Income-based rent settings with maximum rents capped at public housing levels require reconsideration given the geographical and cultural context. It may be that some adaptation of property based rents, possibly with a safety net for small households on very low incomes would collect similar income and be as affordable and fair, while being more efficient and transparent. There is a need to review how rent caps are set, and how rent policy intersects with the cost in remote locations of other essentials such as power, food and petrol. High levels of population mobility are a further consideration as well as how rent policy contributes to other policy goals such as encouraging home ownership.
- Our assessment of NPARIH was that although the states and the Northern Territory met the Commonwealth's Indigenous employment targets, little employment was provided to local Indigenous populations and NPARIH made little contribution to local economies. There is a real opportunity to improve the sustainability of remote Indigenous communities by making better use of the housing system to provide employment. This requires detailed analysis of how to design a housing typology, procurement and maintenance system that will

increase levels of Indigenous employment in remote and regional areas whilst reducing unit costs for housing construction and maintenance, and providing culturally appropriate durable and quality shelter.

- To build a sustainable housing system in remote communities requires establishing mechanisms that will provide some protection from the damage caused by the politicization of remote Indigenous policy. The establishment of state/territory and national remote Indigenous Housing Authorities would go some way towards achieving this. As well as ensuring the membership has a wide range of experience in remote Indigenous housing policy and practice, it should be chaired by an Indigenous leader, and the majority of its members should be Indigenous.

We hope this submission is helpful and are available for further input and discussion as required.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'D. Habibis', is positioned below the closing text.

on behalf of Assoc Prof Daphne Habibis (University of Tasmania), Rhonda Phillips (University of Queensland), and Peter Phibbs (University of Sydney).

