



# SHELTER

because housing matters

## Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities at risk with loss of housing investment

Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities - some of the most disadvantaged communities in Australia – are facing the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars, as the Commonwealth Government falls silent on any further investment for housing in those communities.

Around \$5.4 billion of Commonwealth funding has contributed to better housing and employment outcomes for remote Indigenous communities over the past 10 years, with over \$1.1bn going to Queensland's Indigenous communities. This ground breaking 'National Partnership Agreement' between the Commonwealth and the States and Territories, with its 10 year timeframe, provided increased funding and certainty to forward plan investment for the best community outcomes.

The positive outcomes of this investment, particularly for Queensland, are widely accepted<sup>i</sup>, and yet the Commonwealth has made no further funding commitment, with no earmarked funding either in the 2017 Budget, or in the recent Mid-Year Economic Financial Outlook (MYEFO) statement.

Any withdrawal of Commonwealth funding threatens to wind back 10 years of hard won gains to living standards in these communities. In the 50<sup>th</sup> year of the Commonwealth gaining responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, the government's own review of the program says it's a success and should continue.

**So why the lack of commitment?** The partnership with the State and Territory governments has worked, it should be continued.

Where is the voice of our Indigenous communities in the future of this program? Q Shelter supports the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Councils in Queensland in their call to the Commonwealth Government to continue and expand this program, and supports their close involvement in its roll out.



## Housing is a cornerstone of *Closing the Gap*

Ten years of funding for new and improved housing has gone some way to addressing the extreme levels of disadvantage faced by the vast majority of those living in remote Indigenous communities. **But the job is by no means done, and deep seated disadvantage remains.**

Severe housing need is still a daily reality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities – with continuing overcrowding and homelessness, a high incidence of people with disability, poor quality housing and lack of alternative housing options.

With the effectiveness of *Closing the Gap* high on the political agenda, the role of housing as a cornerstone of better outcomes for remote communities is not in question. Housing investment not only addresses overcrowding and improved amenity, it also directly impacts on health, education, economic development, safety and reducing homelessness.<sup>ii</sup>

“Housing investment for the benefit of Indigenous people in remote Indigenous communities is a central plank to achieving the targets for “Closing the Gap” on Indigenous disadvantage.”

**National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing, Intergovernmental Agreement on Federal Financial Agreement, 2008**

Reducing overcrowding and precarious housing, improving building quality and maintenance, ensuring design is appropriate for climate and household needs, all have direct impacts on physical and mental health outcomes. People in secure housing that is not overcrowded are more likely to be able to be employed, and children are likely to have better education outcomes.

## A success story

According to the Prime Minister’s own review, the program has achieved well against its objectives, with over 11,500 homes delivered, a significant decrease in overcrowding, and better property and tenancy management.

In Queensland, 14 remote communities have benefited from investment, with over 2,600 new and refurbished homes funded and the majority delivered.<sup>iii</sup> The Queensland State government performed well against key objectives of the Strategy, not only in terms of the number of dwellings delivered, but also the quality of build and ongoing maintenance.<sup>iv</sup>

And Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Council areas have seen a real reduction in overcrowding – according to official estimates, down from 46% in 2007 to 25% in 2016.<sup>v</sup>



The strong engagement of local councils has also resulted in good local employment outcomes, for example where Councils, as Principal Contractors, now employ skilled building teams from within their local community. The rate of Indigenous employment for projects funded through this program is 87%, and 80% of housing construction projects are delivered through Councils.

These improvements to local economies, spin off businesses, new jobs and skills, and opportunities for economic participation, have been built up over many years. Much more is possible, but only with certainty of future funding. Capacity is slow to build and quick to lose in these communities.

As at November 2016, the Indigenous VET Partnerships program had trained over 800 people in Queensland, with a completion rate in excess of 95%. This program is tied to employment outcomes and is allowing locals to take over job functions previously undertaken by outside fly-in fly-out (FIFO) contractors. This reduces costs whilst ensuring dollars stay in the community.

**NPARIH review: Local Government Association of Qld, Dec 2016**



*Photo Credit – Torres Strait Island Regional Council*

## **But more is needed**

Despite these achievements, much more is needed, with estimates of an additional 5,500<sup>vi</sup> to 9,000 homes needed over the next ten years, both to continue to improve existing stock, and to meet new housing needs from population growth. In addition, the program must be extended to other Indigenous Councils where similar levels of disadvantage exist – Yarrabah, Cherbourg and Torres Shire. Geography alone does not determine disadvantage and these communities continue to be denied capital funds from the Commonwealth.

Overcrowding remains a huge issue for many remote communities, with one council estimating that up to 70% of its stock remains overcrowded.



Good housing outcomes have long lead times. **If investment in these communities stops, not only will progress be halted in its tracks, but existing houses and infrastructure will deteriorate and ten years of investment - \$5.4 billion - is at risk.**

Funding under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement will be even further stretched across widespread housing needs in the Northern Territory, Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland.

We should build on the successful delivery of a program that is not just about building homes in remote and inaccessible areas, it is also crucially about land management, governance, tenancy management and building local economies. The program has met unique challenges. Long term challenges require long term solutions.

**Q Shelter calls on the Commonwealth Government to renew its commitment to invest in our remote Indigenous communities by:**

- Continuing the successful partnership with State and Territory governments, recognising their mutual interest in improving housing outcomes for remote Indigenous communities
- Committing to an ongoing housing investment program – at least for a ten year period - to allow forward planning and strong local engagement
- Working with State and other levels of government, in Queensland particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Councils, to –
  - Better measure real levels of existing and future housing needs, and overcrowding in these communities; and
  - Ensure that the funding is delivered in a way that maximises housing and employment outcomes
- Deliver a housing investment program at least in line with the government’s own estimate of 5,500 homes over the next 10 years (1,100 for Queensland), and additional homes in line with more accurate information on housing needs
- Continue and develop engagement with each community to deliver local jobs and skills training, and to develop stronger local economies.

---

<sup>i</sup> See Remote Housing Review: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, p1

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/research-synthesis-social-economic-outcomes-housing.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Queensland Department of Housing and Public Works

<sup>iv</sup> Remote Housing Review: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, p5

<sup>v</sup> Remote Housing Review: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, p22

<sup>vi</sup> Remote Housing Review: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, p2

