

ABORIGINAL-CONTROLLED GOVERNANCE FOR THE REMOTE HOUSING SYSTEM IN THE NT – FEBRUARY 2025

THE PROJECT

Background

The project 'Aboriginal-controlled Governance for the Remote Housing System in the Northern Territory' was commissioned by Aboriginal Housing NT (AHNT), led by AHNT and the Central Land Council (CLC), funded by the Australian and Northern Territory (NT) Governments, and overseen by a Project Advisory Group (PAG) involving all members of the Joint Steering Committee for Remote Housing Northern Territory (JSC-RHNT).

The Discussion Paper's publication concludes Phase 1 of a larger project envisioned by AHNT. The Phase 1 scope directed the research to identify archetypes for the roles that can be played by Aboriginal organisations in the governance, oversight, commissioning, delivery, and management of housing, to provide options for Aboriginal-controlled governance of the remote housing system.

The research sought to balance examination of existing mechanisms through which Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs), land councils, and traditional owners are involved in decisions about remote housing, with consideration of prospective models for systemic governmental reform.

Outputs

Phase 1 research produced a Background Paper and a Discussion Paper. The former was developed to provide necessary contextual information to inform subsequent phases of the project, and should be read in conjunction with the Discussion Paper. It provides an overview of self-determination for remote housing in the NT, the remote housing system, prior proposals for system reform, and the consultation approach.

The Discussion Paper aims to balance empirical and speculative approaches, examining contemporary governance and proposing models for system reform. This approach resulted in four detailed Topic Analyses focused on: the JSC-RHNT; Local Decision Making (LDM); the National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH); and Aboriginal control of remote housing funding and finance. The Topic Analyses include a summary of key points and conclude with specific recommendations. A middle section to the Discussion Paper acts as a bridge between the close empirical analysis of the Topic Analyses and the presentation of model options for governance

arrangements, summarising stakeholder feedback and developing medium-scale reforms to existing mechanisms and policies.

The Discussion Paper also provides four models for remote housing system governance to guide future reforms: the public housing model; the government and Aboriginal sector partnership model; the government Aboriginal housing authority model; and the non-government Aboriginal housing agency model.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Discussion Paper includes 40 recommendations, summarised here. Addressing these recommendations requires the collaboration of JSC-RHNT members and broader engagement with the ACCO sector.

Joint Steering Committee for Remote Housing NT

The JSC-RHNT is the chief mechanism for monitoring the delivery of Federation Funding Agreement Schedules related to NT remote communities and homelands. Recommendations concern the revision of the JSC-RHNT terms of reference, the review of its membership structure and working groups, measures to support equal participation of non-government members, and improved communication with the ACCO sector.

Local Decision Making

LDM is an NT Government policy designed to increase the control of Aboriginal communities over matters that affect them, principally focused on increasing local involvement in service delivery contracts.

Recommendations concern the allocation of resources to support the implementation of LDM Agreements, the development of resources to guide housing options for communities, and clarifying how LDM relates to proposed local government reforms.

National Regulatory System for Community Housing

The NRSCH is intended to ensure a well-governed and viable community housing sector and there has been a push in the NT for ACCOs and others involved in delivering housing services contracts to seek NRSCH accreditation. Recommendations concern the need for the NT Government to clarify its position on the relevance of NRSCH for remote housing and homelands services contracts, increased resourcing for the NT Registrar, and the revision of NRSCH reporting obligations and performance metrics to reflect remote service delivery challenges.

Aboriginal Control of Remote Housing Funding and Finance

While Aboriginal involvement in decision making about NT remote housing has increased in recent years, Aboriginal control over remote housing funding and finance remains very limited. Recommendations concern reforms to Housing Australia's programs to increase access to funding for remote housing, the development of partnership models to support capital investment and collaboration between ACCOs operating at different scales, and further investigation into institutional arrangements to support Aboriginal control of housing.

Proposals for Reform

Chapter 8 develops a number of medium-scale reforms to existing governance arrangements. It recommends further consideration by the JSC-RHNT and others of a special purpose vehicle to receive finance and hold funds for specific housing projects, separate to funding distributed via agreements between the Australian and NT Governments; the establishment of a mechanism for collective representation of LDM holders; and a systematic approach to remote community planning.

Options for System Reform – Governance Models

The governance models described are developed to guide future structural reforms to the system. As Phase 1 research, recommendations concerned the need for the JSC-RHNT to circulate the Discussion Paper to the wider remote housing sector and to fund subsequent targeted research, including financial modelling of the costs of managing remote housing.

GOVERNANCE MODELS

The Discussion Paper describes four governance models for the remote housing system in the NT. It prefaces those models with the development of six principles that are subsequently applied to each model to highlight the ways and extent that each model supports Aboriginal-controlled governance. The governance models are developed with consideration of the service area components of the housing system, are grounded in examples of similar arrangements in other jurisdictions (e.g., the NSW Aboriginal Housing Office and Aboriginal Housing Victoria), and are each considered in terms of their benefits, risks, and limitations.

The **Public Housing Model** locates responsibilities and liabilities for remote housing with the state, with limited opportunity for Aboriginal-control of governance or contribution to decision-making.

The **Government and Aboriginal Sector Partnership Model** reflects current NT arrangements, whereby various aspects of remote service provision have been devolved to the ACCO sector, and the JSC-RHNT monitors key housing agreements, but governments hold funding and administrative responsibilities.

The **Government Aboriginal Housing Authority (GAHA) Model** involves the establishment through

legislation of an authority overseen by an Aboriginal board of directors, and situated within an existing department or as an independent authority, which is responsible for administering the remote housing system.

The **Non-Government Aboriginal Housing Agency (NGAHA) Model** involves one or more NGAHAs operating regionally as not-for-profit housing associations to facilitate development and delivery of remote housing strategies and to engage with ACCOs and other stakeholders, while governments retain responsibility for funding, regulating, and reporting on the remote housing system.

METHODOLOGY

The research approach was outlined in a Stakeholder Consultation Strategy and a Remote Housing System Component and Consultation Plan, submitted to the PAG for feedback in April and June 2024, respectively. Consultation predominantly took the form of in-depth interviews, supplemented by the receipt of written submissions and attendance at board meetings.

A total 50 interviews were completed involving 66 people across the remote housing sector in the NT. The project engaged extensively with the NT ACCO sector, public servants, and relevant ACCO, government, and other representatives across Australian state and territory jurisdictions. Appendix 2 in the Discussion Paper provides an interview register.

This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the NT Department of Health and Menzies School of Health Research.

NEXT STEPS

The combination of detailed empirical analysis of existing arrangements with speculative models of system reform, and the attempt in the Discussion Paper to articulate the bridges between these perspectives, mitigates against the possibility that recommendations be dismissed or deferred as too costly, ambitious, or politically risky.

To progress this work, the JSC-RHNT should consider the 40 recommendations provided by the Discussion Paper, outlining how the recommendations it supports will be achieved through an implementation plan. Subsequent phases of the project as originally planned – involving legal analysis of the governance models and financial modelling of system costs – should be funded. This additional information will support the practical transition of control of housing to ACCOs and traditional owners, as desired by them.

For more information, please contact:

Liam Grealy | Principal Researcher

E liam.grealy@menzies.edu.au

The Discussion Paper and Background Paper are available here.