

# HEALTHY HOMES MONITORING AND EVALUATION PROJECT POLICY BRIEF – SEPTEMBER 2023

## HEALTHY HOMES

The 'Healthy Homes' program is one part of the Northern Territory (NT) Government's 'Our Community. Our Future. Our Homes' remote housing investment package.

Healthy Homes is framed as a new approach to housing maintenance that incorporates cyclical and preventive approaches and prioritises supporting residents to undertake 'healthy living practices'. Having commenced in 2021, the program applies to 73 NT remote communities, Alice Springs town camps, and Tennant Creek community living areas.

The Healthy Homes Program Guidelines (NT Government 2020) outline four program components:

- The delivery of Housing for Health projects at selected remote communities by Healthabitat
- New contracts for remote housing maintenance services and tenancy management support services
- Capacity building and education, especially focused on community-based behavior change programs around housing and hygiene
- Monitoring and evaluation by Menzies School of Health Research.

The 'Healthy Homes Monitoring and Evaluation Project' (2021-23) was undertaken by Menzies School of Health Research, funded by Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The [Project Report](#) includes 32 recommendations, grouped here into five program areas. Healthy Homes is not currently meeting its goal to generalise a preventive maintenance approach across remote housing. To improve, it must act on the recommendations identified by the evaluation. Addressing these recommendations requires the collaboration of senior staff from both TFHC and the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics.

### *Preventive Maintenance*

The chief feature that differentiated Healthy Homes as a preventive and cyclical maintenance approach

from the prior model was the requirement that contracted service providers use a Condition Assessment Tool (CAT) to conduct inspections to generate preventive maintenance. From July 2021 to February 2023, less than a quarter of houses involved in Healthy Homes were inspected using the CAT. The program must increase the number of preventive maintenance inspections, revise the inspection tool, and improve its integration with wider program maintenance approaches.

### *Data Collection and Management*

While there is thorough expenditure data available, the collection and collation of data on house condition and function and maintenance by trade type is limited. This must be improved to monitor outputs and investigate any relationship between maintenance, house function, and health outcomes.

### *Governance*

Healthy Homes was undermined by machinery of government changes that divided housing staff across TFHC and DIPL. Greater investment in inter-departmental collaboration and governance was needed and is required going forward.

### *Maintenance Contracts*

Most contracts were awarded to Aboriginal Business Enterprises (ABEs). But contracted service providers conveyed issues with existing remote housing maintenance services contracts, related to total value, contract length, the schedule of rates, approval thresholds for works, and reporting requirements. Consultation with contracted service providers could improve the next iteration of contracts and further support the development of a sustainable Aboriginal community controlled housing sector in the NT.

### *The Next National Agreement*

Following the recent establishment of a one-year (2023-24) federation funding agreement, a 10-year national funding agreement should be sought. Such funding stability supports the continuity of service provision for householders, business development and corporate investment, stable employment, training opportunities, and Aboriginal community control of remote housing.

## KEY FINDINGS

The NT Government is responsible for about 5498 houses across 73 remote communities, Alice Springs town camps, and Tennant Creek community living areas. Following the commencement of 'Our Community. Our Future. Our Homes', the proportion of those houses that was overcrowded in December 2017 was 55 per cent. Five years later, at December 2022, this proportion was still 52.9 per cent.

### *Remote Housing Maintenance Services Contracts*

Healthy Homes sought to establish a new model for remote housing repairs and maintenance. Under the old model, housing was serviced under both a trade panel and a housing maintenance coordinator contract. Under Healthy Homes, a single contract was typically awarded, with an emphasis on prioritising ABEs to provide services to a smaller number of local communities per contract.

Twenty-five of the total 31 remote housing maintenance services contracts were awarded to ABEs, covering 49 remote communities. Nineteen of the total 25 tenancy management support services contracts were awarded to ABEs, applying to 47 remote communities. In 24 remote communities, the prior trade panel maintenance model continued to operate.

Under OCOFOH, \$35 million is budgeted per annum for remote community housing repairs and maintenance. In 2022, the first full calendar year of Healthy Homes, expenditure data indicates total expenditure under active remote housing maintenance services contracts was \$43.12m, including expenditure on government employee housing. Average expenditure for remote community public housing in 2022 was approximately \$6000 per house.

A significant proportion of total expenditure is unscheduled, or attributed to the 'Miscellaneous', 'Other', and 'Other Expenses' categories in maintenance reporting. In 2022, 51.5 per cent of total expenditure was attributed to these categories. This undermines the potential to determine the distribution of total maintenance expenditure by trade type.

Healthy Homes prioritised preventive maintenance by requiring contracted service providers to undertake CAT inspections of all their properties within three months of contract commencement and annually thereafter. This cyclical approach aims to proactively generate maintenance works. From July 2021 to February 2023, a total 1315 CAT inspections were undertaken, equating to only 23.9 per cent of remote community houses.

### *Housing for Health*

Under Healthy Homes, Healthabitat is contracted to deliver about three Housing for Health (HFH) projects a year at remote communities, and a Maintaining Houses for Better Health (MHBH) project with Tangentyere Council at Alice Springs town camps. Since 2021, Healthabitat has completed four HFH/MHBH projects as part of Healthy Homes, with three HFH projects underway.

HFH projects have demonstrated a marked improvement in house function and provide an indicative audit for the condition of remote housing stock generally. However, this approach is only taken at a small number of communities. The evaluation prioritised attention to the generalised remote maintenance approach (above).

### *Living Strong*

A key component of remote tenancy management support services contracts was the delivery of the Living Strong program. Living Strong aims to integrate Healthabitat's nine 'healthy living practices' into tenancy support. TFHC provided a series of modules that service providers could use as they deemed appropriate.

The evaluation found that there is scant quantitative data on the delivery of the program. Interviews with service providers found significant variability in terms of whether Living Strong was being delivered and what this entailed. The program was appropriately flexible but this has meant it has been applied inconsistently.

## METHODOLOGY

This evaluation employed interviews, participant observation, document analysis, and statistical analysis. Interviews were undertaken with NT Government public servants, staff of contracted service providers, householders, and other stakeholders. Participant observation occurred at remote communities and town camps while researchers participated in project work and CAT inspections. Statistical analysis was based on routine datasets focused on inspections and expenditure. The project established an Expert Advisory Group including Aboriginal Housing NT, land councils, and Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

**For more information, please contact:**

**Liam Grealy** | Researcher and Project Manager

**E** [liam.grealy@menzies.edu.au](mailto:liam.grealy@menzies.edu.au)

**The Project Report is available [here](#).**