

Pre-Election Policy Statement

Funding for Aboriginal Community
Housing Organisations

2022 Federal Election

Southern Aboriginal Corporation

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1 Executive Summary

This pre-election policy statement has been prepared by Southern Aboriginal Corporation (SAC) ahead of the 2022 Australian Federal Election.

Southern Aboriginal Corporation is an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation registered with the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, which provides community housing services for Aboriginal people in the Great Southern, South West and Wheatbelt regions of Western Australia. As an Aboriginal Community Housing Organisation, Southern Aboriginal Corporation provides Noongar tenants with quality accommodation at affordable rent. The Southern Aboriginal Corporation housing program, which involves the management of 75 properties, including 64 properties owned by the Corporation, extends from Bunbury to Ravensthorpe, Brookton, Kondinin, Albany and all towns in between.

Under the housing program, Southern Aboriginal Corporation facilitates complete overhauls and refurbishments of accommodation and uses internal funds to cover long term repairs and maintenance, so that quality, comfortable accommodation can be offered to clients at affordable price points. With a total property portfolio value estimated at \$18,000,000.00, Southern Aboriginal Corporation is registered as a Preferred Provider with the Department of Communities (Housing). The Southern Aboriginal Corporation Housing Mission Statement represents our commitments as providers of housing to Aboriginal people to:

- Buy and build good quality dwellings in every centre of Aboriginal population in our regions and base each purchase on the availability of suitable properties for purchase and an impartial assessment of local housing needs.
- Allocate dwellings fairly and impartially among prospective tenants who are willing to abide by the terms of our tenancy agreements.
- Promote home ownership in the Aboriginal community by encouraging qualifying tenants to buy their homes.
- Run our housing program as a business enterprise, bearing in mind always that every dwelling we own is an asset of our Corporation and has been acquired for the ultimate economic benefit of all Aboriginal people in our service delivery regions.

Southern Aboriginal Corporation's experience of being a community housing provider for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional Western Australia over the last decade puts us in a particularly unique and strong position to steer policy responses and drive change in responding to the provision of homelessness and other related housing services for Aboriginal communities.

Our submission represents a continuation of our efforts to lobby the Australian Government to promote the sustainability of Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations and seeks to highlight key issues of importance to the Aboriginal Community Housing Sector, including:

- Ensuring adequate and long-term funding for Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations to continue the provision of social and community housing programs and meet the unique needs of Aboriginal people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
- Increasing investment into social and community housing programs in regional areas.
- Accelerating Aboriginal housing outcomes under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap by supporting capacity building for the Aboriginal Community Housing sector, to promote sustainability and leverage growth.

2 Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia have historically been overrepresented among people who are homeless, who are users of Specialist Homelessness Services, and who are seeking assistance with housing.^[i]

Data from the 2016 Census indicated that Aboriginal people represented over one-fifth (22%) of the homeless population nationally ^[ii] and in 2019-20, Specialist Homelessness Service data^[iii] showed that:

- Around 71,600 Indigenous Australians received SHS support
- Indigenous Australians made up 27% of all SHS clients, but only 3.3% of the Australian population
- More than half (53%, or almost 38,000) of Indigenous SHS clients were aged under 25 compared with 41% (79,800) of non-Indigenous clients
- More Indigenous clients (65%) than non-Indigenous clients (57%) were returning clients (that is, they had received SHS services at some point since the collection began in 2011-12)

All levels of government play significant roles in housing policy and programs;^[iv] however, nationally, the demand for a dedicated response to the need for affordable social and community housing for Aboriginal people has been seldom addressed. While the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement identifies Indigenous Australians as a priority homelessness cohort and improving housing outcomes for Indigenous Australians as an aspirational overarching national outcome, there are inconsistencies in how the Agreement is written and how social and community housing programs are practically funded.

In Western Australia, for example, the absence of predictable, sustainable and long-term funding investments into Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations is risking the continuity of housing services specifically for Aboriginal people. This is becoming increasingly problematic, when the demand for quality, affordable social and community housing for Aboriginal people in Western Australia is particularly strong. Research from Noongar Mia Mia,^[v] an Aboriginal owned housing provider in Western Australia, for example shows that:

- Western Australia has the lowest rate of non-Aboriginal homelessness in Australia, and the second-highest rate of Aboriginal homelessness
- Despite Aboriginal people comprising only 3.7% of Western Australia's total population, 29.1% of the homeless population identified as Aboriginal
- 42% of people supported by specialist homelessness services in Western Australia identified as Aboriginal
- Of the at least 56 people who died homeless on the streets of Perth in 2020, 28% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- Aboriginal people are more likely to be evicted than non-Aboriginal tenants from social housing
- Despite almost half of Specialist Homelessness Services clients in Western Australia being Aboriginal, the community housing sector has very little Aboriginal-led housing presence
- Mainstream tenancy support services often fall flat because of a lack of cultural awareness or competency

As we head towards an election in May 2022, Southern Aboriginal Corporation is calling on the Commonwealth Government to commit to ensuring predictable, sustainable and long-term funding investments into Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations, to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, and to provide culturally appropriate housing solutions for Aboriginal people and families. To have an effect on closing the gap, housing policy frameworks and investment in housing solutions for Aboriginal people additionally must support capacity building in the Aboriginal Community Housing sector, to promote sustainability and leverage growth.

3 The importance of culturally appropriate housing programs for Aboriginal people and current funding for Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations

Aboriginal people's unique experiences of housing are well documented; they have different cultural norms and customs that impact their lives, with evidence showing^[vi] that their housing needs may be affected by:

- Changing household numbers in relation to extended family transitions between houses and communities resulting in overcrowding.
- Close proximity of houses or the lack of traditional separation leading to aggravations between family, language, age and/or gender groups.
- Avoidance behaviours related to kinship rules.
- Different values and attitudes about the possession and sharing of objects.
- Cultural responses to the death of a householder.

The provision of appropriate social housing for Aboriginal people, including as a response to homelessness, therefore requires an understanding of the cultural norms and practices of those households. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute^[vii] found that "at times, cultural customs can come into conflict with rules and requirements set by state and territory housing authorities." According to the Institute:

Standardised planning and housing is not necessarily suitable or appropriate for the diverse cultural, gender, age and extend family structures evident in Aboriginal communities. State and territory housing authorities see providing standardised housing as a way to give all tenants equality in housing while maximising the number of houses built for a limited budget; however, a 'one size fits all' approach is one the principle factor in the ongoing failure of governments and agencies in the provision of appropriate housing for Indigenous Australians.[viii]

In Western Australia, a review of the 50 Lives 50 Homes collective impact project designed to house and support the most vulnerable rough sleepers in Perth additionally found that different approaches to Aboriginal housing were needed. The review considered that to strengthen the Aboriginal Housing First approach in the state, more housing was required to be provided by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, and more Aboriginal support services and support workers were needed to help Aboriginal people maintain their tenancies in culturally appropriate environments.^[ix]

These findings collectively highlight the importance of Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations as service providers for Aboriginal people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, or who for any other reason require social or community housing, and the demand for adequate investments into those organisations to deliver housing services for Aboriginal people.

Currently, community housing organisations in Australia receive their funding through Commonwealth and State Government funding streams, with the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement providing \$1.5 billion annually to states and territories for housing need, and separate funding agreements between the Federal Government with Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory dedicated to providing housing in remote Aboriginal communities. Under these funding arrangements, eligibility is generally restricted to organisations which are registered as tiered community housing providers. In Western Australia, there are four Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations, none of which are registered.^[x] This means that all the Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations in Western Australia are ineligible

4 Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Address the funding shortfall between the goal of the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement to improve access to safe and affordable housing and the investment capable of supporting it, to ensure the provision of long-term, predictable funding for Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations, including organisations in the process of becoming tiered register providers

Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations are “key to an effective housing system”.[xv] The accessibility of Aboriginal controlled services is critical to helping Aboriginal people out of homelessness, building capacity within service users to ensure the risks of them returning to homelessness are minimised, addressing their needs in culturally safe and appropriate ways, and improving their health and other related outcomes.

To increase the accessibility of homelessness and housing services for Aboriginal people in Australia generally, and to reduce the number of Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness, the next Commonwealth Government must commit to long-term, predictable and sustainable funding for Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations, to continue the provision of homelessness and other related social and community housing programs and meet the unique needs of Aboriginal people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Funding within the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement must be expanded to include quarantined funding streams for Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations, which will be critical to achieving the ‘Improved housing outcomes for Indigenous Australians’ outcome of the Agreement.

The funding must be available to community housing providers within the sector that are either already registered as a community housing provider with the Community Housing Registration Office under the Community Housing Regulatory Framework, or in the process of achieving registration.

To continue to exclude Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations like Southern Aboriginal Corporation from funding for the delivery of homelessness and housing services across Australia not only has implications for service users and for those organisations, but ultimately represents a disingenuous commitment from the Commonwealth Government to improving housing and other related outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This must be addressed in the housing policies of the next Commonwealth Government.

Recommendation 2: Expand investment in the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement for existing social and community housing programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional areas

Homelessness is experienced at disproportionate rates in regional and remote areas. In Western Australia, the 2021 Heat Map Summary of Homelessness and Housing[xvi] found that:

- The proportion of rough sleepers was significantly higher in regional Western Australia than in the metropolitan area (15% compared to 10%)
- The proportion of people temporarily staying with others was higher in regional Western Australia than in the metropolitan area (22% compared to 21%)
- The proportion of people living in severely overcrowded dwellings was significantly higher in regional Western Australia than in the metropolitan area (48% compared to 39%)

In the South West region specifically, the Heat Map Summary found that:

- There were 788 people experiencing homelessness
- 38% of all renters were experiencing rental stress
- 21% of all mortgage holders were experiencing mortgage stress

This investment will be critical to achieving progress against Outcome 9: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned their priorities and need, of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

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Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations

We're asking for long-term, predictable, sustainable funding

Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations are key to an effective housing system. They provide Aboriginal controlled solutions to housing and homelessness issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by:

- Helping clients to find appropriate and affordable housing that is suitable to their needs
- Building capacity within service users to ensure the risks of them returning to homelessness are minimised
- Addressing the needs of their clients in culturally safe and appropriate ways
- Improving health and other related outcomes for clients

Currently, community housing organisations in Australia receive their funding through Commonwealth and State Government funding streams, with eligibility for funding restricted to organisations which are registered as tiered community housing providers. In Western Australia, there are four Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations, none of which are registered. This means that all the Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations in Western Australia are ineligible for any funding provided, for example, through the Social Housing Economic Recovery Package for new builds, and through the National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation for access to grants and finance options.

The absence of predictable, sustainable and long-term funding from State and Federal Governments for those organisations, which regardless of their registration status provide uniquely effective housing solutions for Aboriginal people, not only leaves those providers isolated with limited internal capacity to grow and diversify their service provision, but also contributes to increased risk for Aboriginal people seeking access to Aboriginal controlled, culturally appropriate social and community housing services. When housing is recognised as a crucial social and environmental determinant of health and an influencer of outcomes in other areas of a householder's life, it is reasonable to see the lack of investment in Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations as directly inconsistent with efforts to achieve outcomes under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

That is why we are calling for a Commonwealth commitment to increase investment into Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations, to ensure the continuity of social and community housing programs which are specifically designed to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, or for who any other reason require social or community housing. Funding must be available for community housing providers within the sector that are either already registered as a community housing provider with the Community Housing Registration Office, or in the process of achieving registration.

Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations

We're asking for expanded investment in the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement for existing social and community housing programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional areas

Homelessness and housing issues are experienced at disproportionate rates in regional and remote areas. In Western Australia, research shows that the proportion of rough sleepers, people temporarily staying with others, and people living in severely overcrowded dwellings is significantly higher in the metropolitan area than in regional Western Australia.

There is obvious demand for targeted investment into homelessness and related social and community housing programs in regional areas. To effectively respond to homelessness, increase the accessibility of services and reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness across Australia, the Commonwealth Government must therefore commit to providing adequate and long-term funding for homelessness and related social and community housing programs in regional areas, and in doing so prioritise funding for service providers that already exist and deliver services in those regional locations. Those services must be supported to expand and build their service delivery capacity, rather than introducing new services into the sector.

That is why we are calling for a Commonwealth commitment to expanding investment into the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement to include quarantined funding for housing programs in regional locations, with specific focus on Aboriginal Community Housing providers. This will be critical to achieving the 'Improved housing outcomes for Indigenous Australians' outcome of the Agreement.

Like funding quarantined for Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations, funding must be available for community housing providers within the sector that are either already registered as a community housing provider with the Community Housing Registration Office, or in the process of achieving registration.

Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations

We're asking for investment in capacity building for the Aboriginal Community Housing Sector, to promote sustainability and leverage growth

The National First Peoples Housing Authority, in commenting on the status of funding for the Aboriginal Community Housing sector across Australia, noted that:

Many Indigenous Community Housing Organisations (ICHOs) are small and have less well-developed organisational governance, workforce capability and business systems than the rest of the community housing sector. Organisational scale and operating subsidies are inadequate to address tenant need and cover the costs of service provision... If ICHOs are to secure their futures and protect their existing assets, they need to explore ways to consolidate their operations and build scale, without losing the advantages of local engagement and branding. The benefits to tenants will be more, and better, housing. Communities will also be able to retain important assets.

This is an area in which government could work with community housing peak bodies to build ICHO capability. Capital investment to support organisational reform, bring properties back into service and grow the capacity of these organisations to own, manage and grow rental stock would create long-term benefits.

Given the role that Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations play in ensuring safe and supported housing solutions for Aboriginal people, it is essential for the next Commonwealth Government to continue to grow their value by providing necessary investments in capacity building across the Aboriginal Community Housing sector.

That is why we are calling for a Commonwealth commitment to investing in the capacity of Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations, to enable them to grow, leverage their assets, and provide quality tenancy and property management across their portfolios.

Like funding quarantined for Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations and funding for regional housing programs, funding must be available for community housing providers within the sector that are either already registered as a community housing provider with the Community Housing Registration Office, or in the process of achieving registration.

Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations are facing a funding crisis across Australia

That is why we are calling for Commonwealth commitments to:

1. Stabilise Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations through long-term, predictable and sustainable funding
2. Expand investment in the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement for existing social and community housing programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional areas
3. Invest in capacity building for the Aboriginal Community Housing Sector, to promote sustainability and leverage growth

