

A PROPOSAL TO DEVELOP A VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS FRAMEWORK

PURPOSE

This paper sets out a proposal for the development of a Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework. The paper sets out the background to and rationale for development of the Framework, the proposed scope, objectives and methodology.

The proposal takes a 'rights based' approach which places Aboriginal Victorians and their communities firmly at the centre of Housing policy initiatives.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Policy rationale

There is a pressing need for an Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework that intersects with other areas of social and economic policy and recognises both Commonwealth and State policy and program interventions; spans social and affordable housing; home ownership; transitional and specialist housing needs; homelessness; and the role and viability of Aboriginal housing organisations.

Housing is fundamental to closing the gap and reaching targets in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework

Unlike those other areas of social policy that impact on the wellbeing of Aboriginal Victorians, Housing and Homelessness initiatives are not framed by overarching policy either at the State or Commonwealth level. The result is piecemeal initiatives, major gaps in program offerings, and lost opportunities to build long term sustainable housing outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians. While housing in of itself does not break the cycle of disadvantage, without it, investments in education, health, family violence, justice, child protection and economic development are unlikely to be successful. Lower rates of home ownership amongst Aboriginal people also mean that they are missing out on the opportunities to create the intergenerational wealth that comes with home ownership. Meanwhile the pressure on Government to make capital investments in social housing continually ramps up because people do not move into private ownership.

The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework and the Close the Gap policy set out targeted, coordinated and joined up policy priorities that are critical to sustained improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. These policies aim to guide Governments, Aboriginal organisations and communities in the areas that are essential if outcomes are to improve. Housing receives little attention and homelessness is referenced as an indicator of disadvantage rather than receiving the concerted and integrated policy effort it needs. An Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework provides both a basis for integrated client centred policy responses that span people's life-course and a logical and structured means by which other Aboriginal policy and service areas can intersect and engage with the Housing and Homelessness sectors.

Optimising the benefit of Victoria's housing policies

Aboriginal housing: In September 2016 the Victorian Government fulfilled its promise of transferring to Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) ownership of the 1448 DHHS properties it was managing. This landmark decision to be enacted over three years, represents the largest single transfer of housing ownership to a NFP housing organisation in Australia's history. It is a significant practical and symbolic act of self-determination. However this act does not in itself address the broader housing needs of Aboriginal Victorians. While it enables AHV to incrementally tailor its services, grow its housing stock

and align properties with the areas and types of demand people have for housing, it is only one small element in a required comprehensive housing and homeless strategy.

Housing Affordability Strategy: In March 2017 the Victorian Government released its housing affordability strategy, *Homes for Victorians*. The strategy recognises that there are housing affordability pressures across the housing continuum. *Homes for Victorians* lays out an agenda which includes:

- A \$1 billion Social Housing Growth Fund, that is invested and produces an annual funding stream (estimated a \$70m p.a.) for community housing organisations to use as both capital for new social and affordable housing on non-government land and rental subsidies for properties leased on the private market;
- Up to \$1 billion available as a loan guarantee program, to help housing associations access finance at affordable interest rates;
- A \$100 million revolving loan facility providing low cost, long-term subordinate loans to housing associations;
- Management transfer of 4,000 public housing properties plus \$3 million in establishment grants to build the capacity of the community housing industry, with transferring tenants not to be disadvantaged in terms of rent;
- A \$190 million program for the transformation of eleven ageing public housing estates led by DHHS, in which community housing organisations may play a role in consortia delivering additional affordable housing or undertaking place management.

The design of these initiatives is currently being developed by government in consultation with the social housing sector. The impact of the significant growth rates of the Aboriginal population on the planning system and the provision of social and affordable housing should also be a significant driver of change. Aboriginal housing must have a voice at the table.

Commonwealth Aboriginal housing policy

The lack of an Aboriginal Housing Framework at the national level is also hindering effort. The Commonwealth has to some degree recognised the gap by recently funding National Congress to establish a Peak Aboriginal Housing body. In parallel a group of interested Aboriginal housing agencies has also formed to promote and initiate Aboriginal housing developments and advocate to the Commonwealth for a National Aboriginal Housing policy and improved funding arrangements.

Victoria needs to be positioned to respond to these initiatives.

Victoria cashed out the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH), so the support the NPARIH has provided to Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) and Aboriginal Co-Ops, for housing upgrades will expire on 1 December 2017. There has been no move in Victoria to replace the NPARIH funds with dedicated Aboriginal housing funding through the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA). Nor has the Commonwealth sought Victorian based Aboriginal housing targets or initiatives as part of the NAHA.

Notwithstanding Victoria's action in cashing in the NPARIH, both the Commonwealth and State need to establish a new agreement on Aboriginal housing, and its scope should not be confined to housing repairs. Rather it should mirror broader Commonwealth and State housing roles and responsibilities and be culturally appropriate, meet local needs, integrate social policy, build individual and community capacity, and take a life course approach.

Key data

Demand drivers

The Victorian Aboriginal population is growing at something like two and half times the rate of the general population:

- It is the second fastest growing Aboriginal population in the nation;
- The extent of Aboriginal disadvantage is well documented and further drives demand for social housing e.g. close to ten times the rate of incarceration, child protection contact, family violence;
- Aboriginal people tend to partner earlier, have children earlier and have a greater and earlier rate of family breakdown all driving social housing demand;
- While the population is young, more elders are now living longer, driving greater demand for suitable accommodation ;
- Far higher rates of contact with the justice system and 11 times the rate of incarceration drive demand for post release housing and unstable housing limits options magistrates have for applying non-custodial sentences;
- Rates of home ownership are lower resulting in insecure housing, unfamiliarity with the process of property ownership and a consequent lack of intergenerational wealth transfer;
- Discrimination in the private rental market especially in regional areas means that Aboriginal people on relatively higher incomes can be in dire need of housing support that bears little relationship to their income.

These demand drivers combined with the general disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal Victorians result in:

- Homelessness rates that are well above those of the general community. The rate of Aboriginal people accessing homelessness services in Victoria is 9.0 per cent, 10 times that of the general population. The long-term trend has seen a slight increase in Aboriginal Victorians accessing homelessness services from 8.0 per cent in 2011-12 to 9.0 per cent in 2014-15;
- Overcrowding. In 2014-15, Aboriginal Victorians were almost 2.5 times more likely than non-Aboriginal Victorians to live in households that are overcrowded (defined as requiring one or more extra bedrooms) – 6.7 per cent compared to 2.7 per cent. This is down from 9.1 per cent versus 3.1 per cent in Victoria in 2005 but remains unacceptably high;
- Aboriginal households are more than twice as likely to receive some form of housing assistance;
- Waiting list numbers continue to grow. Aboriginal Victorians are 5 times as likely to be on the social housing waiting list and 8 times as likely to be priority applicants;
- Aboriginal tenants are taking up an increasing share of public housing, up from 1890 in 2014 to 2236 in 2016, reflecting growing levels of disadvantage and the effective cap on growth in housing in Aboriginal community controlled organisations;
- Home ownership rates are slightly over half that of the general population.

Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness services are offered across a range of Aboriginal and mainstream providers. Mainstream agencies may or may not be culturally competent, Aboriginal Housing agencies generally suffer from lack of critical mass and service providers are often poorly integrated:

- Social Housing providers:
 - AHV is now an accredited Housing Association and the largest Aboriginal housing agency in Victoria. It has 1552 properties spanning the state.
 - DHHS has 2236 houses under Aboriginal tenancy.
 - Indigenous Community Housing Organisations, other than AHV have 444 houses under Aboriginal tenancy.
 - Mainstream Community Housing agencies have around 430 houses under Aboriginal tenancy, but there is undoubtedly double counting as some are managing houses on behalf of Aboriginal Co-Ops.

- Homelessness services are provided by a number of Aboriginal organisations and through specialist mainstream Community Housing agencies and some mainstream homelessness support agencies.

PROPOSAL

AHV proposes to lead the development of a Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework. This section sets out the underlying principles on which the proposal would be developed, the scope, objectives, governance and methodological approach.

Principles:

Rights based – The right to safe, secure homes is the foundation of the Framework. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (article 23) states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop strategies for exercising their right to development. In particular, Indigenous peoples have the right to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other social and economic programs affecting them and, as far as possible to administer such programs through their own institutions.

Self-determination – The Framework will advance the Victorian Government’s self-determination agenda. It will be led by Aboriginal organisations in consultation with Aboriginal communities and in partnership with the Victorian Government and will provide the opportunity to identify housing strategies for Aboriginal people who wish to live on country.

Client centred – Client needs will be at the centre of the design of the Framework. Housing needs and a person’s capacity to take up opportunities change over the life-course. Tailored service support is critical to successful housing outcomes.

Capacity building – Program design will build individual and community capacity.

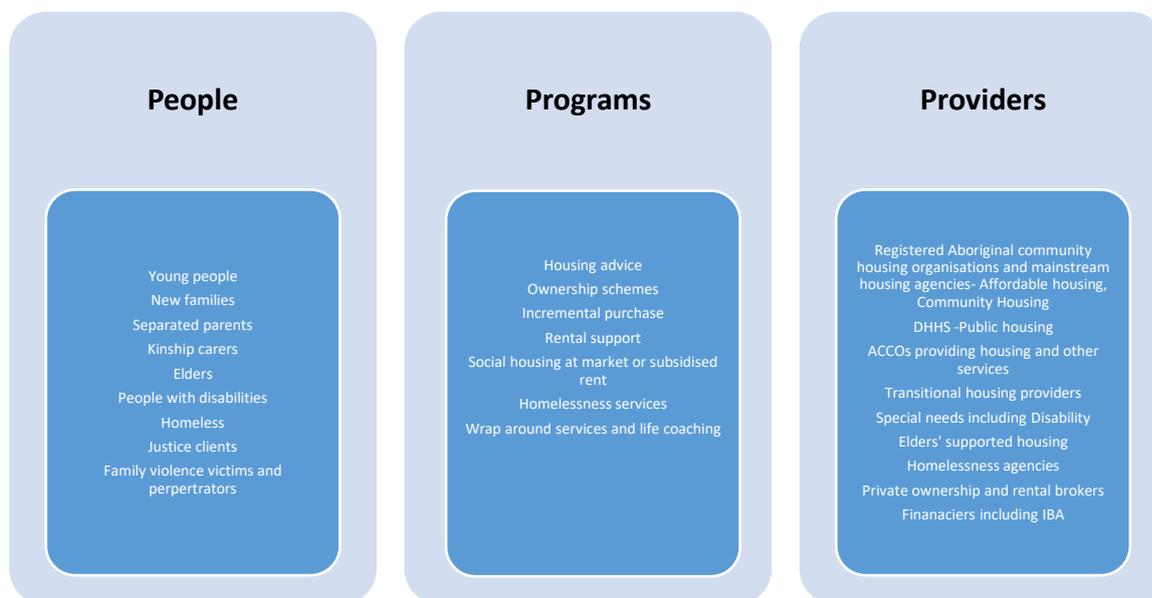
Objectives

1. To develop a Housing and Homelessness Framework that improves housing outcomes for all Aboriginal Victorians across their life course;
2. To build the capacity of Aboriginal organisations to own, manage and grow rental stock;
3. To identify innovative models that secure housing for Aboriginal Victorians including pathways to private ownership;
4. To ensure that regulatory environments are culturally appropriate and inclusive for Aboriginal providers and ensure that mainstream providers provide culturally safe and appropriate services for Aboriginal clients;
5. To identify the gap between supply and demand in social housing for Aboriginal Victorians;
6. To identify the particular issues and gaps in services for homeless Aboriginal Victorians;
7. To foster partnerships across the corporate and community sectors, with Governments and with Aboriginal organisations and communities to develop innovative and sustained improvements in Aboriginal housing outcomes;
8. To provide advice on sustainable models for Aboriginal housing providers including financing, design standards, community planning, contracting and models of incorporation;
9. To advise on opportunities for housing to become a platform for initiatives that improve social and economic outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians, including direct job opportunities associated with housing portfolio management and ownership.
10. Identifying governance arrangements to oversee the implementation of the Framework, including mechanisms through which the Victorian Aboriginal community members and service users will be able to communicate their needs and preferred outcomes and influence policy, programs and services on an ongoing basis.
11. Identifying reporting and evaluation mechanisms to support service planning, including through ongoing engagement with the Victorian Aboriginal community.

Scope

People, programs and providers are the building blocks of a systems based approach to housing and homelessness. The Framework will address each of these components and how they vary, intersect with and relate to needs across the life-course.

The regulatory system and its impact on the Aboriginal housing sector and overarching funding mechanisms and agreements at the Commonwealth and State level will also be considered.



Key questions



Governance

Development of the Housing and Homelessness Framework will be undertaken by AHV. AHV is re-establishing its role as a state-wide leader and provider of advice to government on Aboriginal housing needs. AHV has the scope and capacity to undertake the proposed work, but will do so in a way that is objective and provides independence. A steering committee will be established to provide strong governance. It will be chaired by an independent Aboriginal person with expert knowledge in housing or another related field and will include representatives from:

- Victorian Government
- AHV
- VACCHO; a member that is a Co-Op with housing ownership and tenancy responsibility
- VALS to provide advice on tenant rights and other issues
- Ngwala Willumbong as the lead Aboriginal homelessness agency
- Two current social housing tenants
- An expert with extensive experience in Aboriginal community development, social policy and/or housing

The Government's newly established Executive Council will receive regular progress reports.

Approach

Methodology will be detailed once the project is established. It is likely to include:

- Short literature review and gathering of relevant data;
- Consultation with Aboriginal people and providers, and mainstream providers to identify issues and options that answer the key questions above;
- Assessment of capacity of the current sector to maintain and grow housing provision;
- Assessment of professional development needs;
- Identification of innovative models; testing of options with stakeholders;
- Assessment of funding models and mechanisms;
- Assessment of mechanisms to ensure planning information particularly demand and supply modelling is available;
- Draft report for consideration by the Executive Council;
- Final report with recommendations and a draft implementation plan.

Timeframe

The Framework is expected to be complete within nine months of commencement.

Next steps

Support for the project

Buy in from Victorian Government

Commissioning of project