



## **BACKGROUND**

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Association (NATSIHA) is the peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing body for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Housing Organisation (ATSICCHO) Sector. NATSIHA was established and constituted in December 2020. Consistent with the principles enshrined in the National Agreement to Closing the Gap, NATSIHA has been established to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island voices are heard in all housing forums. To date, NATSIHA has been instrumental in the development of the Closing the Gap Housing Sector Strengthening Plan and has been working closely with the Coalition of Peaks, National Indigenous Affairs Agency (NIAA), jurisdictional governments and national Labor in delivering the key targets as identified in the Housing Sector Strengthening Plan.

NATSIHA represents all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled housing organisations and encourages them to be a member of one of the three community housing registration schemes- the National Regulatory Scheme for Community Housing (NRSCH), the Victorian Regulatory Scheme for Community Housing and the WA Housing Regulatory Framework. However, membership of these is not a requirement for membership with NATSIHA. There is no minimum number of houses an organisation needs for joining NATSIHA but it must be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander controlled.

## **SUMMARY**

NATSIHA broadly supports the Government’s housing commitments - the Housing Australia Future Fund Bill, the National Housing Supply and Affordability Council Bill and Treasury Laws (Housing Measures No 1) Amendment Bill and commends the Australian Government for this initiative.

However, NATSIHA has a number of recommendations they see as crucial to the on-going success of these initiatives – in particular, there must be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation on the National Housing Supply and Affordability Council (the Council) and a requirement that all Council members undertake a cultural security course to make sure they can work alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their communities. NATSIHA acknowledges the ‘strategic’ nature of the roles and responsibilities of the Council but also sees the critical nature of the requirement that Council members, respectfully have a good understanding, appreciation and rapport with the challenges faced by our people and communities and the impact of decisions on their health and general well-being. NATSIHA has and will continue to strongly advocate that a

dedicated allocation of funding each year be made to address the Indigenous housing shortage that would 'supplement' other initiatives and programs emanating from the legislative frameworks developed and proposed for housing policy and programs.

The following document sets out NATSIHA's position on these and the reasons they must be included.

Regards

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**NATIONAL HOUSING SUPPLY and AFFORDABILITY COUNCIL BILL, and TREASURY LAWS (Housing Measures No 1) Amendment Bill**

NATSIHA is extremely concerned that there is no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation on the Council. This is a significant oversight since Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 3.2% of the Australian population, yet they make up over 28% of clients assisted by specialist homelessness services. Added to this, as the Closing the Gap targets demonstrate, there is extensive overcrowding in existing community-owned houses and the continuing lack of appropriate outcomes from previous strategies and programs.

The National Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA) submission and the Victorian Aboriginal Housing (AHV) and Homelessness Forum submissions (both of which NATSIHA support) also raise this lack of Indigenous representation as an issue in the success of the Council.

We concur with the CHIA submission (p.3), that the Minister must ensure that:

- The Council members collectively have an appropriate balance of qualifications, skills or experience in the fields mentioned in subsection (2); and
- At least two Council members have appropriate qualifications, skills or experience in acute, social or affordable rental housing or homelessness services and
- That an additional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander member is appointed to the Council - with the appropriate qualifications, skills and experience outlined in sub section (2)

Quality housing is pivotal to addressing inequality, disadvantage, poor social determinants and lack of opportunities - all of which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have faced for far too long. The level of investment needed to address the severe overcrowding, extreme levels of homelessness and poor condition of housing stock in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia is significant and cannot be under-estimated. This is a matter of urgency.

Housing and homelessness issues are experienced in urban, regional and remote Indigenous Communities throughout Australia. All must be addressed urgently. It is known that the spending returns on health, education and employment increases exponentially if access to safe and adequate housing is improved.

There is a consistent failure of any of the documents in the package provided to address that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities must be consulted with, and involved in, all decision-making around housing. Unless this occurs, they will continue to experience poor

housing, overcrowding and the associated problems these bring. Experience has shown that unless this is done no changes to the sector can occur. This is consistent with the principles relating to the National Agreement to Closing the Gap and the work of the Coalition of Peaks of which NATSIHA is a member.

Without an Indigenous representative on the Council this cannot, and will not, occur.

It is further noted that the involvement of NATSIHA in the National Agreement to Closing the Gap has achieved positive outcomes such as the development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Sector Strengthening Plan that includes agreed Actions and Outcomes with government (Commonwealth and State/Territories). NATSIHA is also looking forward to working in partnership with government and community in the Policy Partnership initiative which we anticipate will also achieve positive outcomes.

The community housing sector CHIA represents includes approximately 400 registered community housing organisations (as per NRSCH). Of these, 10% are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled organisations. It is also known not many Aboriginal Community controlled housing organisations are registered with NRSCH – the process is bureaucratic, can be expensive and there appears to be little advantage in them doing so. Therefore, this 10% gives little indication of the real size of the sector. Some jurisdictions (for example Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia) are working on this alongside NATSIHA.

There is no government report that accurately details the number of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander community owned, managed, purchased or repaired houses under Aboriginal programs or which provides a basic statistical profile of Indigenous community housing. These are fundamental data requirements needed for program and asset planning, funding requirements, and housing and service needs assessment at the sector level and drilling down into individual community organisations.

There is a similar lack of knowledge on actual numbers of community housing organisations or the number of houses owned by these organisations. NATSIHA has commenced a project to address this so that the real extent of the housing crisis in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can be recognised.

Currently most data on housing prevalence and profiles are sourced from several ABS datasets. However, this has its own issues as the data contained is 5 years old and due to the nature of the housing sector is often no longer current. The methodology for the data capture within the census is generalist in nature and while the health and welfare report does look at community housing, the

data from the sector is limited as it uses a sampling method which limits the overall coverage of the sector. Much of the data is spread across many other less conventional datasets, and due to different methods used in compiling them, this means there is more work to be done in reconciling the available data.

The representation by at least one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person on the Council will ensure that the reality of the Indigenous housing crisis and the issues involved across Australia is being addressed.

In initial consultations, NATSIHA suggested a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who would be appropriate to sit on the Council. These were not accepted. It is still maintained NATSIHA, if not the representative on the Council which would make sense given that it is the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing across Australia, should at least be involved in considering the nominations for the Indigenous person selected for this additional position.

### **HOUSING AUSTRALIA FUTURE FUND (HAFF) BILL 2023**

We agree with the support CHIA has offered for this Bill including their comments on future proofing and optimising its outcomes - on the proviso that a high proportion of the housing fund (the AHV submission suggests 10% ) is directed towards the supply of housing for all sectors of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community sector.

In the Explanatory Material provided, it is stated:

**1.6** The Fund would be credited with \$10 billion as soon as practicable after establishment. Once invested this would provide a funding stream of up to \$500 million per year to support new social and affordable housing and to meet a range of acute housing needs, which **could** include housing improvements in **remote** Indigenous communities and housing services for women, children and veterans. The adequacy of this annual disbursement amount will be considered periodically as part of the legislated reviews. The first review will be completed by 31 December 2028, with five-yearly reviews thereafter. (*c2022-343652-explanatory material p. 9*).

NATSIHA strongly recommends that this be amended to state as follows:

*. . . which **must** include home improvements in remote, **regional and urban** Indigenous communities*

Since homelessness and poor housing continue to be a significant issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote, regional and urban areas throughout Australia, improvement must be across the whole sector reflecting the extent of this disadvantage.

It is also essential that HAFF allocates an amount of the fund to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing specifically – 10% is the amount specified in Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum (Recommendation 3, p.3) but NATSIHA would consider this a minimum.

A fund such as HAFF, with tight timeframes and large amounts of money to be spent in a short time, will by default favour larger organisations excluding smaller ones such as deliver housing to Indigenous communities. Many of these smaller Community Housing Organisations are known to be capable of delivering good appropriate housing to their people and have sound management practices. However, they are overlooked unless programs are flexible enough to incorporate them in timing and procedures and the environment they work in is understood.

It is with this in mind that NATSIHA recommends that all Council participants undertake cultural safety training and gain a greater understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing and develop (as per AHV's submission) a set of cultural principles.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Housing Australia Future Fund Bill, the National Housing Supply and Affordability Council Bill and Treasury Laws (Housing Measures No 1) Amendment Bill offers the possibility for improving the housing opportunities and possibilities for many Australians.

If the recommendations from NATSIHA were taken up and the Council and HAFF were amended as suggested here and as by CHIA and the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum in their submission Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can expect into the future far better housing options than they have to date.

NATSIHA participated in the Productivity Commission review of the National Housing and Homeless Agreement (NHHA) and provided a submission to the enquiry. We encourage the appropriate authorities to read that submission. An extract to one of the numerous questions that was included in the Discussion Paper is provided below which articulates our ongoing concern of the impact of not having the appropriate involvement and influence of our people in the development of legislation, strategies and programs that may be 'well intended' but on most occasions does not achieve the desired outcomes.

**Productivity Commission Question 6**

***Does the NHHA (and the actions required under it) clearly specify the objectives and housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities? What (if any) principles, outcomes, targets and best practices could be embedded in the next agreement?***

The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement does not clearly specify the objectives and housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It is vital that the next version of this Agreement does so. It is, however, noted that the NHHA's aspirational, overarching national outcomes include improved housing outcomes for Indigenous Australians, that National priority homelessness cohorts include Indigenous Australians and that one of the NHHA's performance indicators is an increase in the proportion of Indigenous Australians purchasing or owning their own home.

However, the outcome does not align with the outcome in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. NHHA's overarching national outcomes should include the outcome negotiated between Governments and the Coalition of Peaks in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap; namely that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their needs and priorities. The current performance indicator in the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, never the subject of consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, measures an increase in the proportion of Indigenous Australians purchasing or owning their own home. This needs to be replaced with an indicator that measures progress towards parity across the housing spectrum which is proposed in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Targets also need to be included in the National Agreement on Housing and Homelessness including the target in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap that commits all parties to increasing the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88 per cent noting that the Coalition of Peaks sought a more ambitious target in negotiations, which was not endorsed by Australian Governments. The scope of activities for data improvement in the NHHA do not address the data needs for Indigenous housing. Improving data and information on Indigenous housing is a high priority for NATSIHA and it is essential for achieving better outcomes and data improvements agreed to in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap these need to be agreed to for the next version of the NHHA.