



The future of Aboriginal Housing in NSW

Shane Hamilton, Chief Executive and Executive Director, Aboriginal Housing Office

Last month the Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO) hosted a ground-breaking conference at which a bold future was discussed among 200 sector leaders from throughout Australia.

The conference, ‘Doing Things Differently – Aboriginal Housing in NSW’, covered a huge amount of territory, confronting issues surrounding housing, health, education, enterprise and community.

Central to our discussions, debates and insights from this conference was the issue of housing. To get a start in life you need a home. A safe, secure and stable home provides the basis for a prosperous and happy life. Moreover, that home should be affordable. Governments across Australia have been discussing how we make housing more affordable for generations, but many Australians still cannot afford to own their own home.

In a contemporary sense the notion of affordable housing is relevant to a number of government agencies and programs, policies, geographic considerations; or personal and cultural circumstances. Historically we have used the

term ‘social housing’ to describe a particular affordable housing product, typically provided by government. I think that term attracts a stigma and it is now far more relevant to refer to ‘affordable housing’, whether it be provided by government, Aboriginal community housing providers, through innovative private-public partnerships, or simply properties available through the private rental market. The overarching concern is to provide access to affordable housing to those in need.

The Aboriginal Housing Office has been focused on what we all need to do to provide affordable housing for Aboriginal people in NSW for almost 20 years. Today, the AHO owns a portfolio of nearly 6,000 properties, many of which are managed by FACS Housing, and the rest by Aboriginal community housing providers. In the future, we believe Aboriginal people in NSW would be better served by Aboriginal organisations, as these organisations have a shared sense of history, culture and the challenges of getting equal access to, and choice in, affordable housing. This is why our corporate plan states that by 2022 all Aboriginal Housing Office properties will be managed by Aboriginal community housing providers.

If we were to design an affordable housing system for Aboriginal people today, what would it look like? I put it to you that the current state is not where we would be if we designed an affordable housing system today for Aboriginal people. Today we are providing a valuable service. We are providing affordable housing stock. But we're not doing enough beyond that. We are not unlocking the pathways to opportunity.

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Change is coming; change is needed. If we are to create positive and lasting opportunities for Aboriginal people in NSW, we need to do things differently. We need to build on the resilience of Aboriginal people and create an environment where opportunity will bloom, an environment where we create housing independence, and from that better health, education, and employment for Aboriginal communities across NSW.

We have already started down that road. I'll give you an example. In response to energy bill stress being experienced by our tenants in some of the hottest parts of New South Wales we have created a program to install solar panels on our properties. When the project is complete we will have installed solar panels on over 1100 homes.

This is a good initiative and it works in tandem with the air-conditioning units we have, or will be installing. We are providing a more comfortable environment for our tenants while also reducing their costs energy. This reduces bill stress, and means our tenants do not have to choose between buying food and other essentials in order to pay their bills. All round it is a good social outcome.

However, this initiative is about a lot more than delivering better social outcomes for our tenants. There are other significant flow-on effects for this program.

We originally piloted this project in Dubbo and solar panels were installed on 150 properties by Aboriginal businesses that sourced and employed Aboriginal trainees. While these Aboriginal businesses provided great value for money they also understood tenant needs and made significant social value contributions to the project. The next phase of this project, the installation of solar panels on a further 970 properties throughout New South Wales, will also be undertaken by Aboriginal businesses employing Aboriginal staff.

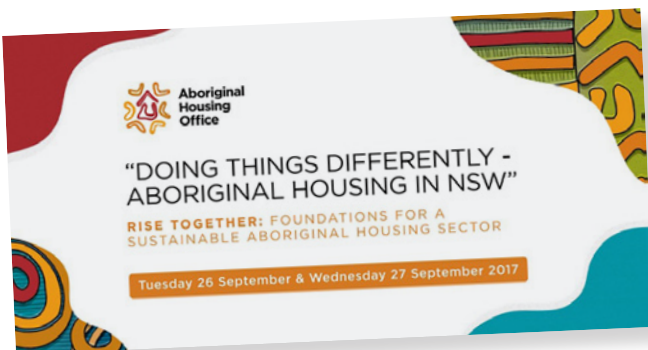
One young person from the Dubbo pilot secured an apprenticeship as a direct result of his involvement as a trainee. We hope and trust that he will now go on and secure full-time employment at the completion of his apprenticeship, prosper, and perhaps one-day consider home-ownership.

This young man seized his opportunity. The AHO, the Aboriginal businesses, and all the other many contributors to the project may have helped, but it was this young man's drive and determination that has led to his success. We want to provide more pathways to opportunity for more Aboriginal people in New South Wales. We own valuable housing assets – why not leverage these to create more opportunity and prosperity – for, and with Aboriginal people in NSW?

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Returning to the 'Doing Things Differently' conference, one of the aims of this event was to confront the issue of unlocking value in housing, and to focus the attention of experts from investment, housing, health, education and community on the future of Aboriginal housing in NSW. Consequently, the conference placed a strong emphasis on the need to create opportunity, plan for the future, and acknowledging the power of partnership.

Chris Bird, Chief Executive of Twofold Aboriginal Corporation in Eden talked about forming a partnership



Conference Keynote Speaker - Luke Carroll, Actor and Cathy Freeman Foundation Ambassador



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with the AHO and creating local employment through repairs and maintenance services provided locally, using local tradespeople, and creating local Aboriginal employment. By using our properties in this way, and opening them up to Aboriginal enterprise and business, they can act as a multiplier delivering benefits far beyond the provision of affordable housing, which nonetheless remains a vital and important component of what we do.

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Cath Brokenborough, Executive Lead for Indigenous Engagement and Reconciliation at Lendlease also talked about employment opportunity and how the redevelopment of the Gosford Hospital has resulted in 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander locals working onsite, and how other partnerships are being formed to create further opportunities to develop job skills and change lives through employment.

In addition to the obvious economic and employment benefits that would flow from unlocking the value of Aboriginal Housing Office properties, we are also seeking to vastly improve the provision of tenancy support services.

One thing is clear, while many Aboriginal organisations already provide local training and employment opportunities, and many provide disability support and case management services for tenants, there is a lack of evidence of the range of services being provided, the cost of providing these services, and the benefits tenants are getting from these services.

To secure future funding for tenant support programs for Aboriginal families and communities in NSW, we all need to get better at gathering and sharing information on what services are needed, what are being provided and how the strength of communities is being built around these programs.

There were many other excellent contributions at the conference. These highlighted a strong desire for the development of further partnerships, which bodes well for the future. Notable contributions include:

- Melissa Brennan, General Manager of Yaanma Services, who talked about the importance of government, corporations and Aboriginal businesses working together.
- Uncle Tom Slockee, one of the founders of the Aboriginal Housing Office and Director and Co-Chairperson of South East Aboriginal Rental Management Service (SEARMS) talked about the strength of his organisation's relationship with a large mainstream community housing provider, Argyle Housing. SEARMS and Argyle Housing have a joint focus on investing in local communities to help them develop and grow, and are now collaborating

on new models for youth housing and housing for older Aboriginal people.

- Uncle Tom also talked about what housing means for Aboriginal people, and how housing creates a sense of security that allows other positive outcomes to follow.
- Dr Jack Beetson focused on the importance of Aboriginal literacy, not just English literacy, but financial and other forms of literacy. Dr Beetson touched on the direct impact that low literacy has on sustaining tenancies, and on understanding the tenant's rights and responsibilities. He also spoke of the positive impact that improved literacy has on health, including increased rates of Aboriginal people accessing healthcare.

There were many more discussions like these.

Consequently, the Aboriginal Housing Office is planning to share the content from this event at future local and regional meetings, so organisations providing housing and tenancy support services to Aboriginal communities in regional and remote NSW can participate in the discussion about the future of Aboriginal housing in NSW.

As I recapped on the last 19 years of the AHO at the conference, and the purpose of the AHO, it struck me not only how far we have come, but how much more we can achieve when we work together. We must confront the reality, as we approach our 20th anniversary of the AHO, that the next 20 years will see a vastly different landscape in the area of affordable housing, one in which the AHO will no longer be performing the role that it presently does.

There is no one coming behind us to improve the opportunities for, and prosperity of, Aboriginal people in NSW. It is up to us, and that is true for the AHO, Aboriginal community housing providers, mainstream community housing providers, health services, and many other support services provided to Aboriginal tenants in social housing.

We challenged everyone who attended this event to shift the conversation from simply, "How do we house Aboriginal families and communities?" to "How can we partner to create a real difference to the Aboriginal future of NSW?" To create the future we want to see, we need to identify the links between housing and better opportunities for Aboriginal people in NSW, so the services we develop are effective and create real change.



As a postscript, it is critical for all of us in the sector to appreciate the direction that affordable housing policy and management is taking. On 17 October the Minister for Social Housing, Pru Goward, announced the transfer of 14,000 properties in New South Wales to the community housing sector. The change is already upon us and we must meet this challenge. It is time for us to seize this opportunity, just like that young man from Dubbo. 🏠