

Submission to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

October 2023



VACCA
Connected by culture

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VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL
CHILD CARE AGENCY

Acknowledgment

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands across Victoria that we work on, and pay our respects to their Elders, both past and present and to their children and young people, who are our future Elders and caretakers of this great land. We acknowledge the Stolen Generations, those who we have lost; those who generously share their stories with us; and those we are yet to bring home.

Note on Language

We use the term 'Aboriginal' to describe the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Clans and Traditional Owner Groups whose traditional lands comprise what is now called Australia.

We use the term 'Indigenous' as it relates to Indigenous peoples globally as well as in the human rights context.

The terms 'First Peoples' and 'First Nations' are employed in the Australian context, by recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the First Peoples/First Nations of this land, it directly relates to their inherent un-ceded sovereignty.

Note on case stories shared

The names used in each case story are not the real names of the community members we support, all case stories shared have been de-identified, to protect their identity of community we provide services to.

We welcome the chance to discuss this submission in more detail. For further information, please contact Sarah Gafforini, Director, Office of the CEO via sarahg@vacca.org.

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Introduction

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the consultation on the National Housing and Homelessness Plan. VACCA is the lead Aboriginal child and family welfare organisation in Australia and the largest provider of Aboriginal family violence services in Victoria. We provide a suite of housing and homelessness support programs targeted to Aboriginal young people leaving out-of-home care (OOHC), people leaving prison and those experiencing family violence.

VACCA supports the establishment of a National Housing and Homelessness Plan (the 'Plan') as a mainstream mechanism for developing a shared understanding of how individuals and families experience housing insecurity and homelessness: for setting national goals and standards; to improve national data collection standards and processes; and to facilitate work with the private sector to strengthen housing outcomes.

However, it is crucial for the Australian Government to develop a standalone Aboriginal-specific National Housing and Homelessness Plan (the 'Aboriginal Plan') that is led by ACCOs and local communities in each State and Territory and is grounded in the principle of self-determination. It is crucial for the four Priority Reform Areas of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*¹ to be embedded in the Aboriginal Plan. This is the position of the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum (AHHF), and as a member, VACCA supports this.

We also call for the establishment and delivery of a national Aboriginal-specific *Housing and Homelessness Agreement* that is aligned to the standalone Aboriginal Plan and sits alongside the *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement*. The development of an Aboriginal-specific Agreement should be led by the Aboriginal community and equally balance the needs of Aboriginal people living in urban areas as well as regional, rural and remote areas.

The Australian Government has a key coordination and leadership role in delivering meaningful change and reform to reduce and prevent the number of Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness and housing stress. The Aboriginal Plan can help align the priorities for Aboriginal housing across national, state and territory jurisdictions. VACCA believes the Aboriginal Plan must stipulate clear roles and responsibilities of the Australian Government, State, and Local governments,

¹ The Four Priority Reforms are: 1. Formal partnership and shared decision-making; 2. Building the community-controlled sector; 3. Transforming government organisations; and 4. Sharing access to data and information at a regional level

as well as the private and community housing sectors. To do this will require recognition and commitment to the principle that housing is a human right.

In alignment with this view, VACCA's submission takes a right-based approach centred in Aboriginal self-determination, to respond to the consultation questions posed in the Issues Paper and makes recommendations for key reforms. We have attached relevant supporting submissions previously undertaken by VACCA that also apply here.²

Our submission addresses the consultation questions from the Aboriginal focus area in the Issues Paper on page 44. The Victorian AHHF submission addresses all focus areas please refer to their submission for further detail. VACCA endorses the AHHF submission to this consultation and supports all its recommendations.

Recommendation:

- 1. For the development of a standalone Aboriginal National Housing and Homelessness Plan, developed by ACCOs, grounded in the principle of self-determination and *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* four Priority Reforms.**

Response to the Aboriginal-specific consultation questions

1. What are the main cultural, social and economic factors that must be considered by governments and providers when considering how to improve housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

Aboriginal peoples have demonstrated decades of resilience and strength, however their healing journey is severely disrupted when there is no safe, affordable housing available to meet their needs and they are faced with significant financial hardship and poverty as a consequence. This injustice is only compounded with the fact Aboriginal people's access to traditional lands and the economic stability land affords was denied as a result of colonisation.

Cultural factors

In taking a rights-based approach to housing, VACCA emphasises the right to culture for Aboriginal communities. In international law, the right to culture is articulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), where Indigenous rights are recognised as collective

² Please see VACCA's submission into [Victoria's Inquiry into the Rental and Housing Affordability Crisis \(2023\)](#) and our [Submission to Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia \(2020\)](#).

rights that are derived from the unique legal status of Indigenous peoples as distinct communities.³ Article 13 stipulates that “Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.”

Within the context of housing, a standalone Aboriginal Plan must take into account the unique cultural rights and needs of Aboriginal communities. These cultural rights are derived from living on Country and being connected to culture, family and community where multiple generations can live safely together in appropriate and not overcrowded housing and share their culture and knowledge with future generations. Aboriginal people have always associated land as home, so any discussion about securing Country must also consider infrastructure for houses to enable Aboriginal people to live on Country. In order to live and thrive on Country, communities also need to be close to ACCHOs, ACCOs and culturally safe services, including health, family violence and family support services.

Recommendation:

- 2. For a standalone Aboriginal Plan to be rights-based, including the unique cultural rights of Aboriginal communities as per UNDRIP.**

Structural and economic factors

A number of structural and economic factors such as lack of affordable crisis, transitional social housing and private rental housing, alongside broader policy, social and economic forces are leading to chronic housing need. Compounding these experiences are also the increased competition posed by the low vacancy rate of private rentals. Aboriginal renters in particular, are faced with a lack of culturally safe services, resulting in experiences of racism and discrimination, complex administrative processes and a lack of affordable and appropriate options for themselves and their families. Further, a lack of long-term accommodation and early intervention options has also resulted in the sector becoming crisis orientated. Due to the exceedingly high demand for housing and lack of options the sector is inclined to focus more on the immediate needs of people who are homeless rather than people at risk of homelessness, including children and families.⁴

In order to address some of these structural issues faced by Aboriginal people, a National Plan can provide national consistency regarding no fault evictions, flexible rent policies in private and social housing that limit rent increases and national minimum rental standards for properties. This can

³ UN General Assembly. (2007). United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples : resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 2 October 2007, A/RES/61/295, Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

⁴ Parliament of Victoria. (2021). Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria, Final Report. Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. Parliament of Victoria. [Weblink](#)

ensure that Aboriginal people across the nation can attain safe and suitable housing that is well maintained and appropriate to their needs, as well as be protected from discrimination in the rental market.

Recommendation:

- 3. For the National Plan to provide national consistency regarding no fault evictions, flexible rent policies in private and social housing that limit rent increases and national minimum rental standards for properties.**

Intersectional experience of housing stress and homelessness

In 2021, findings from the *Inquiry into homelessness in Australia* highlighted the significant over-representations of Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness, who were homeless at a rate of ten times the national average during the 2016 Census.⁵ The report emphasised that the causes and risk factors of homelessness are multifaceted and interrelated, and usually include a combination of both housing market failures and individual circumstance. They can include the prevalence of a risk factor in the community, including family violence or poverty, or risks associated with the individual experiencing homelessness including poor mental health and discrimination.⁶ The report highlighted the importance of addressing these factors through an increase in housing options and access to holistic, wrap around support services.

Both research and VACCA's experiences as a child welfare organisation highlight the impact that inadequate housing and homelessness has on the Aboriginal community, in particular Aboriginal young people exiting OOHC, Aboriginal people fleeing family violence, young people and adults exiting prison, Aboriginal people with multiple and complex needs experiencing chronic homelessness and sleeping rough, people with a disability and Elders. These groups experience an intersection of discrimination and disadvantage when accessing housing. It is therefore crucial for the Australian Government to develop a standalone Aboriginal Plan which includes a framework for urgent action to address their specific needs and the systemic drivers of their experiences of homelessness and housing stress.

Aboriginal young people leaving OOHC

Young people leaving OOHC are likely to experience challenges in accessing employment, education, becoming involved in the criminal justice system, drug and alcohol abuse and developing a mental

⁵ Commonwealth of Australia. (2021). *Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia*, Final Report. House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs. Commonwealth of Australia. [Weblink](#)

⁶ Ibid

illness.⁷ Each of these challenges becomes exacerbated for Aboriginal young people leaving OOHC due to ingrained systemic racism and discrimination. This means Aboriginal young people leaving OOHC are particularly vulnerable to homelessness and housing stress, where they are overrepresented in the homeless population within a year of leaving OOHC (at a rate of more than one in three).⁸

A number of factors which drive homelessness for Aboriginal young people leaving OOHC have been highlighted in research. These include a lack of appropriate housing, insufficient planning around accommodation, long wait lists for public housing, lack of understanding of the housing system, young women remaining in relationships with family violence due to lack of housing options and young people needing support to sustain housing.⁹ Additional factors identified by VACCA practitioners include a lack of financial independence due to intergenerational poverty and time spent in the OOHC system, discrimination in the private rental market and insufficient income support payments. The *Adequacy of Newstart* report also found that lower payment rates for young people under 22 years of age contributed to the rise of youth homelessness.¹⁰ Our practitioners also reported that while a range of leaving OOHC supports are available until 21 years of age, these do not always meet the needs of Aboriginal young people leaving OOHC; given high caseloads, late referrals, and limited resourcing of ACCOs to provide culturally appropriate support.

Recommendation:

- 4. For a standalone Aboriginal Plan to include specific actions addressing the needs of Aboriginal young people exiting out-of-home care, including investment in ACCOs to provide wrap around supports so young people leaving care can attain culturally safe, secure, affordable and long-term housing, as well as additional supports needed to help them maintain housing.**

Aboriginal people exiting prison

The experience of social exclusion and isolation for Aboriginal people while in prison is particularly disruptive to connection to family, community, Country and culture. This means that when exiting

⁷ Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care (CFCA Paper No. 41). Canberra: Australian Institute of Family Studies

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ McKenzie, D., Hand, T., Zufferey, C., McNelis, S., Spinney, A. & Tedmanson, D. (2020) Redesign of a homelessness service system for young people. Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute; Mendes, P., Standfield, R., Saunders, B., McCurdy, S., Walsh, J., Turnbull, L., & Armstrong, E. (2020). Indigenous care leavers in Australia: A national scoping study.

¹⁰ Commonwealth of Australia (2020). Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, Parliament House, Canberra. [Weblink](#)

prison, many Aboriginal people need support with reconnecting back into their communities for healing and reintegration. Those who do not have access to supports, housing or are unable to return to their communities are at greater risk of homelessness.

In 2021-22, around one third of people exiting prison who received support from specialist homelessness services identified as Aboriginal.¹¹ Aboriginal people often exit prison into unsafe hostels and boarding houses from private providers. This type of short-term, unstable and unsafe accommodation is not appropriate to the needs of Aboriginal people exiting prison. Additionally, inadequate or insecure housing for Aboriginal people leaving prison can make individuals vulnerable to re-offending and recidivism.¹²

Moreover, under Victoria's harsh bail laws, Aboriginal people, particularly women, are often incarcerated on remand for several months for minor offences and are at increased risk of losing their housing during this time. Aboriginal people who are detained within the criminal justice system are also often unable to access bail, parole or a corrections order due to their inability to demonstrate access to secure housing.¹³ This perpetuates the cycle of incarceration and homelessness for Aboriginal people.

Recommendation:

- 5. For a standalone Aboriginal Plan to include specific actions addressing the needs of Aboriginal adults and young people existing custodial settings, including investment in ACCOs to provide wrap around reintegration supports as well as short- and long-term safe and culturally appropriate housing stock.**

Aboriginal people impacted by family violence

Family violence is one of the main reasons driving Aboriginal young people, women, families and men entering homelessness.¹⁴ There are a number of complex and compounding reasons why individuals, in particular women and children, are forced to remain in unsafe housing, with a key issue being no alternative, affordable accommodation. For children and young people, family violence is

¹¹ AIHW (2022). Specialist homelessness services annual report 2021–22. ([Weblink](#))

¹² Aboriginal Housing Victoria (2020). Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort, Every Aboriginal Person has a Home, Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework. ([Weblink](#))

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Closing the Gap Clearinghouse (AIHW & AIFS). (2016). Family violence prevention programs in Indigenous communities (Resource sheet no. 37). Produced by the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. Canberra: AIHW & Melbourne: AIFS. ([Weblink](#))

the leading cause of homelessness and can have a detrimental impact on their life trajectory, affecting their educational, physical, mental and emotional wellbeing and development.¹⁵

VACCA has ongoing concerns about the lack of crisis, transitional, and social housing stock available for Aboriginal women and children experiencing family violence. Despite recommendations 13 to 20 of the *Royal Commission into Family Violence* and extensive advocacy from ACCO and mainstream family violence organisations, calling for shortages across crisis, transitional, and long-term housing stocks to be addressed, this remains an area of acute need.

The case study below captures the intersection between family violence and homelessness and demonstrates the importance of family violence to be a priority area in an Aboriginal standalone Plan that should also be aligned with the actions in the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan 2023–2025* under the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*.

Case study: Intersection of family violence and homelessness

Marie is an Aboriginal woman in her 60s. Her adult son is using violence against her at home. He is coercive and controlling with her money and forced her to transfer ownership of the family home to him. She smokes yarndi sometimes to help with stress and anxiety, but she has never been formally diagnosed. She lost her job due to the impact of COVID-19 on tourism and is not yet eligible for the pension. Her son then proceeded to kick her out of her home, forcing her to live in her car. She sought help from a mainstream family violence service provider because she lived in regional area where there were no ACCOs delivering family violence services. She was hoping to access family violence crisis accommodation, but during the intake process, the housing worker asked her about drug use, and she became quite heightened and left the appointment. Marie has since moved to Melbourne and is couch surfing at family and friends' homes. Because she no longer has a fixed address, Marie is unable to claim Centrelink payments. She is currently accessing housing and homelessness support through VACCA, and we workers have linked her up to additional support services.

¹⁵ DiNicola, K., Liyanarachchi, D., & Plummer, J. Out of the shadows: Domestic and family violence: A leading cause of homelessness in Australia. Mission Australia.

Recommendation:

- 6. For a standalone Aboriginal Plan to include specific actions addressing the needs of Aboriginal women, children, young people and families impacted by family violence, including investment in ACCOs to provide culturally safe crisis, transitional and long term-housing and additional wrap around supports.**

Aboriginal Elders

Aboriginal Elders have a wealth of knowledge in cultural practices, protocols and lore, they are the connection between our ancestors that have come before us, to impart cultural knowledge to the next generation.

However, the evidence and our practice experience shows that our Elders face financial hardship, financial stress and homelessness at a higher rate than non-Aboriginal people aged 50 and over. On Census night in 2016, nearly 3% of Aboriginal people aged 50 and over were homeless. Nearly two thirds of this group lived in severely crowded dwellings and around 1 in 6 lived in improvised dwellings or tents or were sleeping rough.¹⁶ In comparison, less than 1% of non-Aboriginal older Australians were homeless.¹⁷

Elders have an important caring role in Aboriginal communities. Care provided by kin in traditional Aboriginal cultures has been part of the normal fabric of society for time immemorial. Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles and cousins raising and supporting Aboriginal children and young people is a fundamental part of Aboriginal society, this 'collective community focus' is a strength of Aboriginal culture and is a protective factor. This example of extended family support is how traditional societies and moieties functioned and thrived and goes beyond the western traditional views of family and parental roles. Given this caring role, experiences of financial hardship, homelessness and housing stress by Elders can have flow on effects on children and young people as well as the wider family group.

In Victoria, *Ageing well in Victoria An action plan for strengthening wellbeing for senior Victorians* includes an action for improved housing options for older people experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, based on the principle of 'ageing in place'. This includes flexible housing options to age in place in locations that maintain social networks and action to prevent and respond to homelessness among older people as a priority cohort. Additionally, dwellings need to be able to accommodate changing needs of Elders, this might include ensuring that multiple generations of

¹⁶ ABS 2016. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2014–15, Table Builder. ABS cat. no. 4720.0.55.002. Canberra: ABS.

¹⁷ Ibid.

the same family can live close by, as well as any additional infrastructure to assist with daily activities due to illness or disability. This approach should be adopted for the national context to ensure Aboriginal Elders can practice their cultural rights in caring for family and community.

Recommendation:

- 7. For a standalone Aboriginal Plan to include specific cultural rights and needs of Aboriginal Elders, including flexible housing options to support 'aging in place' close to family, kin and within their community.**

Aboriginal people with multiple and complex needs and experiencing chronic homelessness

VACCA's practitioners in our Northern metropolitan Melbourne region have reported an increase in the number of Aboriginal people with multiple and complex needs and those experiencing chronic homelessness seeking support. This group of people often experience a number of intersecting issues including complex mental health, alcohol and other drug misuse, disability, family violence and history of contact with the child protection and criminal justice system.

VACCA supports the recommendation of the *Inquiry into homelessness in Australia* for the Australian Government to work with state and territory governments to ensure the availability of appropriate proportion of social housing and transitional, crisis and emergency accommodation which is accessible and appropriate for people with multiple and complex needs and those experiencing chronic homelessness (Rec 16).¹⁸ This should be a key priority action in the National Plan.

Recommendation:

- 8. For a standalone Aboriginal Plan to include specific actions addressing the needs of Aboriginal people with multiple and complex needs, experiencing chronic homelessness and sleeping rough, including dedicated proportion of social housing and transitional, crisis and emergency accommodation that is culturally safe and appropriate.**

Aboriginal people with a disability

VACCA know from both our everyday practice, and the available evidence, that disability is a highly prevalent condition among the Aboriginal families, children and communities we work with. Many of the children and families we support are also living with complex needs that require multiple forms of specialised supports, including NDIS and disability support services. The disability space is also

¹⁸ Commonwealth of Australia. (2021).

one where there is a lack of support and where Aboriginal clients face many barriers in accessing services including the NDIS.

Research shows that people living with a disability experience additional barriers to accessing housing including earning typically lower incomes, engage less with employment, and face stigma and discrimination in private rental markets than others.¹⁹ These factors are exacerbated for Aboriginal people living with a disability where the intersection of health, wellbeing and social outcomes impact on them to compound disadvantage and systemic barriers to service system access and discrimination within the service system.²⁰

Recommendation:

- 9. For a standalone Aboriginal Plan to include specific actions addressing the needs of Aboriginal people with disabilities, including funding for ACCOs to provide wrap around supports to help Aboriginal people with disabilities obtain and remain in supported housing, access NDIS and other support as well as addressing stigma in the private rental market.**

2. How can governments best work with communities and the Aboriginal community controlled housing sector to support better housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including embedding the Priority Reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and promoting self-determination?

Moving from crisis management to long-term housing options

In order to address the drivers of housing outcomes for Aboriginal people and achieve equity, governments across Australia need to move beyond crisis management and take a clear and coordinated approach. Victoria's *Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort – Every Aboriginal Person has a Home, Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework* articulates a new approach to shift norms in Aboriginal housing from crisis to long term housing options – this is known as the Housing

¹⁹ Groot C, Rehm I, Andrews C, Hobern B, Morgan R, Green H, Sweeney L and Blanchard M (2020). Report on Findings from the Our Turn to Speak Survey: Understanding the impact of stigma and discrimination on people living with complex mental health issues- external site opens in new window, Anne Deveson Research Centre, Melbourne.; Beer A, Baker E, Mallett S, Batterham D, Pate A and Lester, L (2012). Addressing homelessness amongst persons with a disability: Identifying and enacting best practice- external site opens in new window, report to the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHSCIA).

²⁰ Jeromey B. Temple, Heather Wong, Angeline Ferdinand, Scott Avery, Yin Paradies and Margaret Kelaher, 'Exposure to interpersonal racism and avoidance behaviours reported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a disability', *Australian Journal of Social Issues* (2020), 1-20, 9.

Continuum.²¹ An Aboriginal Plan must prioritise the aspirations of Aboriginal people to have increasing independence and to have access to long-term social housing, private rentals or own their own home. This also includes investing in flexible housing options that place the specific needs of Aboriginal people, whether this be Elders, families, young people or those with other intersecting needs at the centre.

Recommendation:

10. For a standalone Aboriginal Plan to take an approach that moves away from crisis management towards long-term, secure housing, including flexible housing options for specific needs of Aboriginal people.

An Aboriginal-specific Housing and Homelessness Agreement

In 2022, the Productivity Commission undertook a review of the *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement*, which they argued was ineffective because it does not foster collaboration between governments or hold governments to account.²² It recommended the next Agreement should focus on affordability of the private rental market and the targeting of housing assistance, especially the Commonwealth Rent Assistance package. VACCA supports the findings of the Productivity Commission and agrees that a new approach is needed to support Aboriginal housing and homelessness services that aligns with the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*. The Commonwealth must action the seven key commitments from the Productivity Commission's report.

Currently the *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement* does not articulate specific objectives, outcomes, actions or targets for Aboriginal and housing. This is why VACCA also calls on the Australian Government to develop an Aboriginal-specific Housing and Homelessness Agreement at the national level that is rights based and guided by the principle of self-determination. An Aboriginal Agreement must include a dedicated funding stream for Aboriginal housing outcomes to support increased investment in Aboriginal housing and homelessness supports. This approach can ensure equitable funding is distributed to ACCOs to implement programs to address the needs of Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness.

The establishment and delivery of a national Aboriginal-specific *Housing and Homelessness Agreement* should also be aligned to a standalone Aboriginal Plan, sitting alongside the *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement*. Additionally, the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*

²¹ Aboriginal Housing Victoria (2020).

²² Productivity Commission (2022) *In need of Repair: The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement – Study Report* [Weblink](#)

targets, measures and four Priority Reforms must be embedded in an Aboriginal Agreement to drive long term change for Aboriginal housing outcomes.

Recommendation:

11. The development of a national Aboriginal-specific integrated Housing and Homelessness Agreement, that is aligned to a standalone Aboriginal-specific National Housing and Homelessness Plan and sits alongside the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, developed by ACCOs and is grounded in the principle of self-determination.

Governance of the National Plan

The Issue Paper does not provide much detail on the proposed governance framework for the National Plan. It is crucial for the Plan to have an Aboriginal-led governance framework based on the strong partnership elements detailed under Priority Reform 1: Formal partnerships and shared decision-making. Such elements are those where partnerships are accountable and representative, a formal agreement is in place between members and decision making is shared between government and Aboriginal people.²³ The governance frameworks of other First Nations Action Plans such as *Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children* and the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children* are based on the strong partnership elements, and as such, the governance of the National Plan should align with these.

Recommendation:

12. For the standalone National Aboriginal Plan to have an Aboriginal-led governance framework based on the strong partnership elements, as per National Agreement on Closing the Gap Priority Reform 1.

Mainstream and government accountability

Access to culturally safe mainstream services is a key barrier that needs to be addressed in improving housing outcomes for Aboriginal people. A report on the accessibility of mainstream services for Aboriginal Victorians outlined barriers to accessing mainstream services including racism, affordability, lack of culturally safe services, shame and fear, a lack of awareness of available services and complex administrative processes.²⁴ A lack of culturally safe housing means Aboriginal people

²³ National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020). An Agreement between: the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, and all Australian Governments. [Weblink](#)

²⁴ Victorian Auditor General's Office. (2014). Accessibility of Mainstream Services for Aboriginal Victorians. Victorian Government. No 325. [Weblink](#)

are more likely to slip through the gaps and miss the opportunity to access housing support or participate in the private rental market.

Aboriginal families are also often faced with racism and discrimination from mainstream organisations when attempting to secure accommodation resulting in many Aboriginal households being excluded from the opportunity for private rentals.²⁵ Aboriginal Housing Victoria identified racism to be an entrenched challenge for Aboriginal peoples, masked better than ever, particularly in the private rental market.²⁶

Further, Western models and structures of housing are not always be aligned with traditional Aboriginal ways of living. Research into housing issues notes that Western models and structures of housing are pushed by governments onto the Aboriginal community, which preferences a nuclear family model rather than housing for larger or multi-generational families.²⁷

In order to address discrimination, improve cultural safety and ensure mainstream and government accountability in Aboriginal housing, the Aboriginal Plan must embed Priority Reform 3: Transforming government and mainstream organisations. This Priority Reform includes key transformative elements intended to enact systemic and structural transformation of mainstream government organisations to improve accountability and respond to the needs of Aboriginal people. These elements include identifying and eliminating racism; embedding and practicing meaningful cultural safety; delivering services in partnership with community; accountability through transparent funding allocation; supporting Aboriginal cultures; and improving engagement with Aboriginal people.

The Aboriginal Plan must have key actions and targets to address discrimination and improve cultural safety and accessibility of mainstream housing system, including service providers as well as private rental market. This also includes national standards around the behaviour and conduct of landlords and real estate agents in respect to Aboriginal tenants as well as rent increases.

Recommendation:

13. Key actions and to address discrimination and improve cultural safety and accessibility of mainstream housing system, including service providers and private rental market, as per National Agreement on Closing the Gap Priority Reform 3.

²⁵ AHV. (2019). The Victorian Aboriginal housing and homelessness summit: Report of findings. Melbourne: Aboriginal Housing Victoria. [Weblink](#)

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Stone, W. M., Goodall, Z. A., Peters, A., & Veeroja, P. (2021). Aboriginal Private Rental Access in Victoria: 'Excluded from the Start'. A Report Commissioned by the Consumer Policy Research Centre. Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne. [Weblink](#)

Addressing housing stress in metropolitan and regional areas

As per the information outlined in the Issues Paper, a significant amount of the Commonwealth's funding is directed towards remote Aboriginal communities. While this is crucial for supporting the housing outcomes of these communities, all too often the metropolitan and regional Aboriginal housing experience is not prioritised in national policy or funding decisions. Data from the Victorian June quarter 2023 Rental Report indicates that over the previous quarter the median rent increased in metropolitan Melbourne to \$500 per week and in regional Victoria to \$420 per week.²⁸ These increases in rent, coupled with the existing barriers to housing such as discrimination in the rental market are significantly impacting on Aboriginal people's access to housing.

The regional snapshot below from VACCA's Ovens Murray region shows the intersection of housing need as well as other issues in driving homelessness.

Regional snapshot: Housing stress and homelessness in Ovens Murray

VACCA staff have raised that housing and homelessness are a significant issue in Ovens Murray. A number of factors are driving this including low vacancy rates, increases in rent and intersecting issues such as mental health, alcohol and drug misuse and family violence. Ovens Murray encompasses a large regional area, which means many rural clients are not able to access social housing and there are limited rental properties available. Additionally, the few services available in the region are challenging for our clients to access due to limited access to transport. Our clients are experiencing discrimination and prejudice due to distrust from local real estate agencies as well as motels when seeking accommodation services. Staff acknowledged that young people who leave OOHC are at very high risk of experiencing homelessness once Child Protection, Kinship, Better Futures and Homestretch programs cease offering support. Young people leaving OOHC are reported to come back to VACCA to access supports as adults. Rent was reported to be \$450 per week for a two-bedroom rental unit, which is not affordable for many VACCA clients who require additional support and many lower income families in general.

²⁸ DFFH. (2022). Rental report-quarterly: Affordable lettings by LGA. [Weblink](#)

Recommendation:

14. For a standalone Aboriginal Plan to include specific actions addressing the unique needs of Aboriginal people living in metropolitan and regional areas.

Flexibility in funding

In VACCA's experience, homelessness often co-occurs alongside other vulnerabilities, such as a history of child protection involvement, family violence, or a disability. We therefore agree with the recommendation of the *Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria* that more flexibility is needed for funding homelessness programs. This is needed so that the amount of time an individual is supported for can be increased, and that a multi-disciplinary approach can be taken to ensure that services for people with complex needs can be met in a holistic way alongside their need for housing.²⁹ Priorities and actions dedicated to improving flexibility in funding should therefore be a consideration in the development of a standalone Aboriginal Plan.

Recommendation:

15. For a standalone Aboriginal Plan to prioritise improving flexibility in funding homelessness programs so that a holistic and multi-disciplinary approach can be taken when supporting an Aboriginal person experiencing housing stress or homelessness.

3. How can governments ensure diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are included in the development of housing and homelessness policies and programs?

The establishment of formal partnerships and decision making between Aboriginal people and governments, in alignment with Closing the Gap Priority Reform 1, is key to ensuring voices of Aboriginal people are included in the development of housing policies and programs. For this to occur, governments must move beyond consultation and transfer decision-making authority to the Aboriginal community, this is in line with the principles of Aboriginal self-determination and self-governance. All future policies, programs and reforms of the housing sector should be co-designed in partnership with Aboriginal people and communities to ensure responses are culturally safe and Aboriginal led. This must also include paid positions on Advisory Councils and quotas on Boards to ensure an Aboriginal lens over the development of housing and homelessness policies and programs. Furthermore, Aboriginal impact statements on policies and programs for governments

²⁹ Parliament of Victoria. (2021).

and private sector can guarantee that the housing needs and interests of Aboriginal people are considered in the development of new and revised policies, programs and strategies.

An example of a successful co-design process is the establishment of *Mana-na Woorn-Tyeen Maar-Takoort – Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*. The Framework was the first self-determined strategic housing policy which was developed directly by Aboriginal community and ACCOs to drive change.³⁰ It presents a comprehensive strategy to improving Aboriginal housing outcomes through its five goals (below) but also aims to embed Aboriginal housing targets in all relevant mainstream and Aboriginal policies, strategies and programs.³¹

The Framework is underpinned by the following five goals:

1. Secure housing to improve life outcomes
2. Build supply to meet the needs of a growing Aboriginal population
3. Open doors to home ownership and private rental
4. An Aboriginal focused homelessness system
5. A capable system that delivers Aboriginal housing needs³²

The Framework includes ongoing accountability mechanisms to sustain progress and drive change, including an Annual Report Card which monitors housing outcomes experienced by Aboriginal Victorians in comparison to the mainstream population. In 2021, the Victorian Government and Aboriginal housing sector co-released the first report card, which also provides benchmark data at the commencement of the Victorian Governments \$5.3 billion 'Big Housing Build.'³³ The report card includes data to measure change and collective accountability to ensure the priorities of the Framework are driver across community and government.³⁴

As such, the voice of community is not only crucial in the development of housing and homelessness programs and policies, but also in their governance, monitoring and evaluation. These functions must be Aboriginal community and sector-led to guarantee independent oversight over the implementation of policy and programs, as well as to accurately track the progress of reforms.

Key to this is also improved national data collection standards and process as per Priority Reform 4: Sharing access to data and information at a regional level. Data access on a national, state and local level must be a key consideration in the National Plan, this includes embedding Aboriginal data

³⁰ Aboriginal Housing Victoria (2020).

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid.

³³ Aboriginal Housing Victoria (2022), 'A line in the Sand on Housing Outcomes for First Australians', accessed from [weblink](#).

³⁴ Ibid.

sovereignty principles and practices and prioritising the sharing of housing and homelessness data between governments and Aboriginal community sector.

VACCA therefore advocates for the establishment of an Aboriginal community-led monitoring and evaluation framework and specific reporting requirements, including access to data, to ensure oversight over the implementation of a standalone Aboriginal Plan.

Recommendation:

16. For the establishment of an Aboriginal community-led monitoring and evaluation framework and specific reporting requirements, including access to data, to ensure oversight over the implementation of a standalone Aboriginal Plan, as per National Agreement on Closing the Gap Priority Reform 4.

4. What are the ideal short, medium and long-term policies and programs government can pursue to improve the supply of housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including increasing the capacity and capability of ATSI CCHOs?

Please see responses provided under Question 2 given they speak to the policy approach governments can take to improve housing supply for Aboriginal people. Below, we provide examples of effective Aboriginal-led programs that are improving housing outcomes as well as highlight the need to increase Aboriginal workforce capacity to continue delivering such programs.

ACCO-led programs and practice improving Aboriginal housing outcomes

VACCA currently offers housing and homelessness support services including the Wilam Support Service in the Northern Metro area of Melbourne and the Kurnai Youth Homelessness Program offered across Inner Gippsland. We also as manage an Aboriginal Private Rental Assistance Program (APRAP) in Gippsland and in the West metro region. Each program provides culturally appropriate crisis support and case management services to Aboriginal peoples who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness while also supporting the client's connection with Culture, identity and community.

The programs also support non-Aboriginal people with Aboriginal children. People accessing these services are assisted to find and secure housing, develop life and living skills and address the issues contributing to their homelessness through a case management model of support. The Wilam Support Service is not age specific; however, the Kurnai Youth Homelessness Program is targeted at Aboriginal young people aged 15-25. The case study demonstrates the partnerships ACCOs have within community to provide wrap around supports and ensure Aboriginal clients can attain safe and appropriate housing.

Case study: ACCOs supporting Elders to housing

Wilam Support Service received a referral for two Elders experiencing homelessness. Aunty and Uncle owned property in the country but had been forced to sell. They moved into private rental property in Melbourne for \$500 per week but fell into arrears and had to leave, becoming homeless. They began living under a railway bridge in winter and coping with several health conditions. After connecting with VACCA, they were referred to a mainstream housing provider who assisted them to crisis accommodation. Soon after, the VACCA caseworker liaised with a worker from the Aboriginal Community Elders Services (ACES) to support Aunty and Uncle's application for ACES housing. In the meantime, both workers also provided Aunty and Uncle with much needed essential groceries and food. The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) was also engaged to help with their health care. Aunty and Uncle were successfully housed in ACES permanent respite care within a few months after being referred to Wilam. All ACCOs collaborated to provide the best care and support for these Elders to secure permanent and stable accommodation. Uncle and Aunty are so happy, appreciating that ACCOs and a mainstream housing service came together to support them.

In Victoria, 'More Than a Landlord' is an example of a program that has seen success in transferring of title of public housing stock from the Victorian Government to Aboriginal Housing Victoria. The program facilitated new forms of engagement between Aboriginal Housing Victoria, its tenants and service providers, giving the opportunity for Aboriginal people to access a service more consistent with Aboriginal cultural values and responsive to their specific needs. Prior to accessing the program, 50 per cent of households reported living in insecure, transitional housing at risk of homelessness, with 78.8 per cent saying they felt like they were at home when they moved into an Aboriginal Housing Victoria managed household. In the year 2022-23, the program helped more than 1000 Aboriginal Victorians to achieve and sustain their tenancies.³⁵ The positive impact of More Than a Landlord shows the importance of funding the Aboriginal community-controlled sector and the Commonwealth must commit to further investment in such programs to support sustainable Aboriginal tenancies.

³⁵ Aboriginal Housing Victoria. (2023). State Budget housing crisis response excludes Aboriginal Victorians. Aboriginal Housing Victoria.

ACCOs are best placed to respond to the housing needs of the Aboriginal community and require the funding and resources to do so. VACCA therefore calls for a standalone Aboriginal Plan to include specific targets for increased investment in ACCOs to provide case management and support to Aboriginal people to secure culturally safe, secure, affordable and long-term housing, including housing brokerage funding into agreements for ACCOs.

Increasing the Aboriginal workforce capacity

Investing in Aboriginal workforce development is key to achieving Closing the Gap Priority Reform 2: Building the community-controlled sector. The standalone Aboriginal Plan should include actions focused on building the Aboriginal evidence base through investment and targets to strengthen data access, collection and Aboriginal-led evaluations. This is central to increasing ACCO capacity and improving outcomes for Aboriginal people. Further, the Plan must have key priority actions for wealth creation for the ACCO sector, including funding to attain and keep housing stock as well other infrastructure and supports needed.

Aboriginal agencies have the knowledge and services to become an entry and referral point into the homelessness system, however more resourcing is needed to strengthen their capacity to be able to take on this role given increased demand as a result of the housing crisis. A standalone Aboriginal Plan must include specific actions and investment for workforce development and capacity of the Aboriginal community-controlled sector related to housing and homelessness.

Recommendation:

17. For the standalone National Aboriginal Plan to include specific actions and investment for workforce development and capacity of the Aboriginal community-controlled sector related to housing and homelessness, as per National Agreement on Closing the Gap Priority Reform 2.