

COMMUNITY FORUM: HOUSING INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN REGIONAL WA

Access to appropriate and affordable housing is traditionally seen as a problem affecting mainly metropolitan areas. However, an adequate supply of high quality and affordable housing is a crucial factor underlying the economic potential and social well being of regional areas. Indigenous people are particularly badly affected by the poorly functioning housing markets in regional areas of the State.

On Wednesday 24 September 2003 Shelter WA organised a forum on housing issues for Indigenous people in regional areas of Western Australia. The forum was auspiced by the Access and Equity Standing Committee of the Housing Advisory Committee to the Minister for Housing and Works. 29 people heard presentations from four speakers:

- The Hon Nick Griffiths MLC, Minister for Housing and Works,
- Paul Pendergast, Shelter WA,
- Bob Thomas, General Manager of Homeswest, and
- Laurel Sellers, Aboriginal Housing and Infrastructure Directorate.

The four presentations are summarised below.

Hon Nick Griffiths MLC, Minister for Housing and Works

The Minister opened his presentation by recognising that there are a number of housing issues that impact on many Aboriginal people, including:

- Affordability,
- Homelessness (primary and secondary), and
- Limitations to Government resources.

The Minister also recognised that these issues were exacerbated by remoteness, and therefore welcomed the Forum. However, he stated that the Government through the Department of Housing and Works has a number of programs in place that address housing issues for Aboriginal people in regional areas. These measures include public housing under both Fund 1 (Homeswest) and Fund 6 (Aboriginal).

Funding for these measures occurs mainly through the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement, but recently Commonwealth, State and ATSIC funding for Aboriginal housing had been pooled under the Aboriginal Housing and Infrastructure Council (AHIC). The Minister stated that while this new partnership combined a critical mass of funding, its ultimate success would depend on the strength of the partnership.

Finally, the Minister commented that AHIC strongly supported broadening the Aboriginal Regional Housing Program to urban areas, and that the need for housing services included not only housing but also infrastructure such as sewerage.

Paul Pendergast, Shelter WA

Paul said that Shelter WA is the State's peak housing consumer body, and presents a voice for low income and otherwise disadvantaged housing consumers. He said that Shelter WA agreed with the Minister that Indigenous people in regional areas were particularly disadvantaged with regard to housing.

Paul said that his presentation would draw upon information gathered as part of forums, surveys and projects, which Shelter WA conducts regularly in regional areas.

In recent times, these have included projects in Albany, Broome, Bunbury, Busselton, Derby, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie, Margaret River and Midland.

Figure 1: Indigenous Households by Tenure (ATSIC Regions)

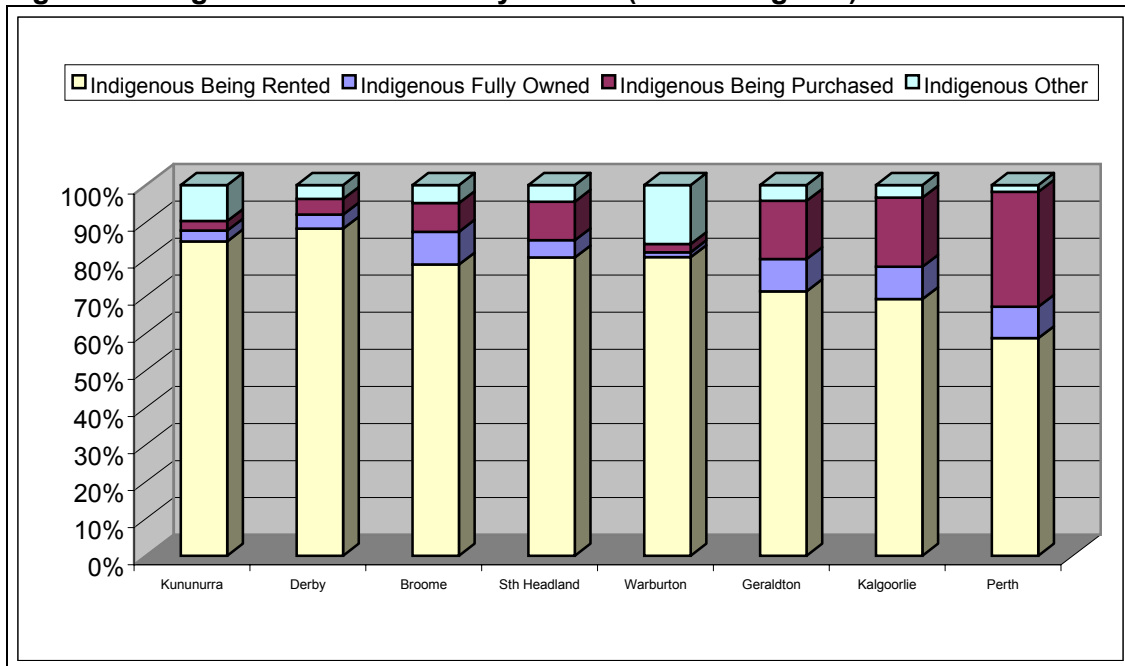
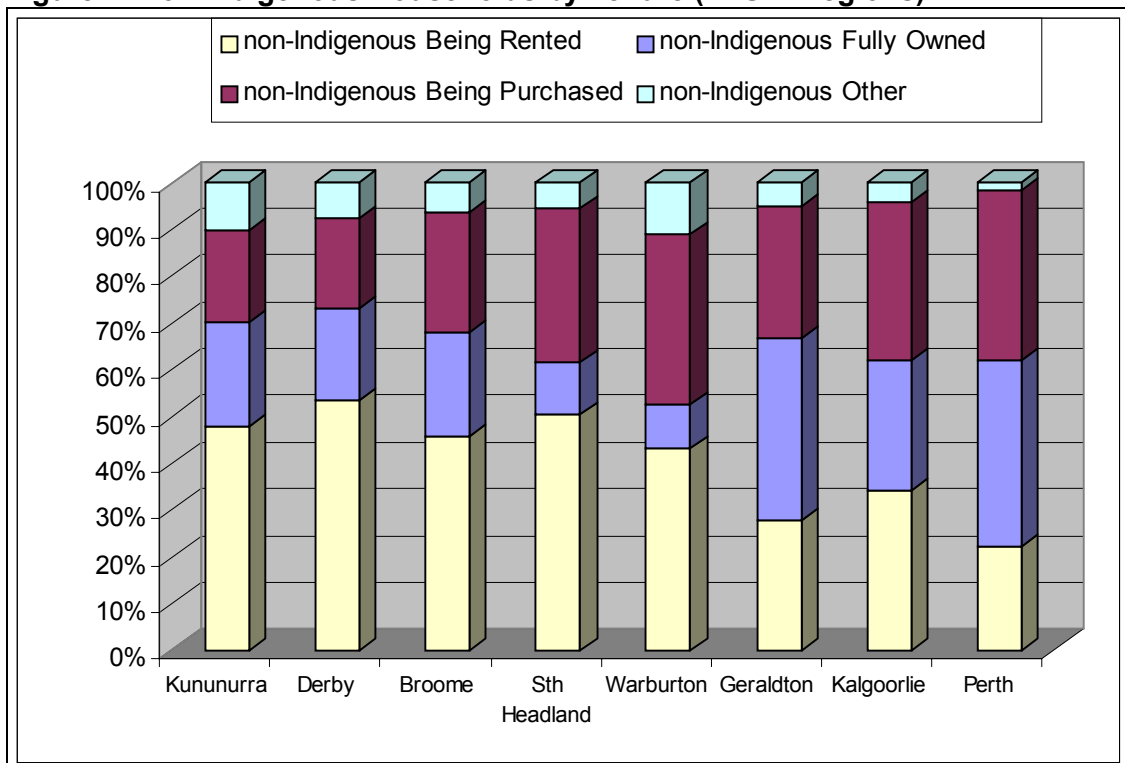


Figure 2: Non-Indigenous Households by Tenure (ATSIC Regions)



He then gave an overview of the tenure of Indigenous households living in regional areas of Western Australia (Figure 1). In particular, he stressed the high proportion of Indigenous people who were dependent on rental housing, which was over 50% in Perth and generally increased with remoteness to more than 80% in Kununurra and

Derby. However, non-Indigenous households were generally less than half as likely as Indigenous people to reside in rental housing in any given area (Figure 2).

More detailed figures showed that 46% of Indigenous renters in Western Australia live in public housing (Homeswest), and a further 22% were in community housing, including self-managed Indigenous communities. Again, the corresponding figures were much lower for the general population, with less than 20% of all renters living in public housing and less than 2% in community housing.

Paul stated that Shelter WA's research consistently identified overcrowding as the most significant way in which housing disadvantage amongst Indigenous people expressed itself in regional Western Australia, with 20% of Indigenous households in WA living in overcrowded conditions. Again, the evidence suggested that the level of overcrowding among Indigenous people increased with distance from Perth.

For instance, ABS data (Figure 3) indicated that in Perth, 11% of all Indigenous households lived in overcrowded conditions, compared to 2% of non-Indigenous households. This increased to 18% (Indigenous) and 4% (non-Indigenous) in Geraldton, 20% / 5% in South Hedland, and 31% / 12% in Broome. Finally, in Warburton, overcrowding stood at 50% for Indigenous households and 2% for non-Indigenous households. In Kununurra a similar proportion (48%) of Indigenous households lived in overcrowded conditions, compared to 8% of non-Indigenous households.

Figure 3: Overcrowding in Western Australia, 2001

ATSIC Region	Indigenous			non-Indigenous			All Households		
	Overcrowded	Total	%	Overcrowded	Total	%	Overcrowded	Total	%
Perth	591	5628	11%	9237	485987	2%	9828	491615	2%
Geraldton	259	1407	18%	665	16996	4%	924	18403	5%
Kalgoorlie	154	811	19%	558	14302	4%	712	15113	5%
Derby	346	879	39%	61	770	8%	407	1649	25%
South Hedland	231	1144	20%	394	8356	5%	625	9500	7%
Narrogin	258	1905	14%	2364	82019	3%	2622	83924	3%
Warburton	228	454	50%	30	1271	2%	258	1725	15%
Kununurra	381	801	48%	164	1315	12%	545	2116	26%
Broome	272	881	31%	297	2561	12%	569	3442	17%
Total WA	2720	13910	20%	13770	613577	2%	16490	627487	3%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census data

Paul's presentation concluded with an overview of the type of measures that would be required to adequately address Indigenous housing needs in the State. First and foremost, this would require a significant increase in appropriate and affordable housing for Indigenous people across Western Australia. However, he warned that while the benefits in terms of improved health, education and employment outcomes might be great, this would not be a cheap solution. For instance, recent research conducted by Shelter WA suggested that in the Shire of Broome alone there was a shortage of more than 350 units of affordable housing. Providing this quantity of housing would cost over \$85 million immediately and then \$5 million annually.

Bob Thomas, Department of Housing and Works

Bob started by explaining that the Department of Housing and Works' role includes property and tenancy management of public housing properties (Fund 1: \$89.09 million per year) and dwellings aimed specifically at Aboriginal people (Fund 6: \$25.62 million per year). In addition, he highlighted that the Department through the Aboriginal Housing and Infrastructure Directorate now also manages Commonwealth and ATSIC funds for Aboriginal housing. Finally the Department receives some \$60

million from the State Government, \$80 million from land sales and \$110 million in rent on an annual basis.

Bob explained that the Department currently owns some 39,263 properties, spread over a number of programs (Figure 4). Indigenous tenants occupied 5,905 or 18% of these properties, including all Fund 6 and 11% of Fund 1 dwellings. In country areas, Indigenous tenants occupied 25% of Fund 1 dwellings. However, Bob noted that these figures might be higher in actuality, since the Department's information was based on Indigenous tenants and applicants ticking a box on a form, which not all of them might actually do.

Figure 4: DHW Stock, 30 June 2003

Public Rental	35,025
Aboriginal Communities	1,115
Community Housing	843
Crisis Accommodation	453
Joint Ventures	1,708
Resident Funded	119
Total	39,263

In addition to long term housing, Bob highlighted that the Department also provides crisis housing, safe houses, refuges and hostel accommodation in regional areas. He listed examples in Narrogin, Albany, Bunbury, Kalgoorlie, Geraldton, Hedland, Broome, Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Kununurra and Carnarvon. Next, he presented some figures on asset management. For instance, the Department's maintenance budget in country areas was \$6.75 million, split across maintenance, building, insurance and New Living (Figure 5).

Figure 5: DHW Maintenance Budget: Country WA

Maintenance Budget - Country	
Day to day maintenance	\$ 1.89m
Vacated maintenance	\$ 1.37m
Refurbishment program	\$ 0.724m
Building program	\$ 0.35m
Insurance	\$ 0.35m
New Living	\$ 2.07m
Total	\$ 6.754m

In 2003/04, a total 67 units of stock (value \$9.174 million) are scheduled to be replaced in country areas, including 45 units under Fund 1 (value \$6.347m) and 22 units under Fund 6 (value \$2.827m). The average age of public housing stock was 25 years in Albany, but in the Kimberley it was 18 years. Fund 6 stock was generally younger than Fund 1 stock. Bob explained that nine regional offices were responsible for the management of these properties, and that a tenth office would open soon in Northam.

Next, Bob gave a brief overview of the major policy issues affecting Indigenous tenants and applicants. This included a review of eligibility criteria, homelessness and the homelessness help line, the debt discount scheme and the waiting list. Currently, waiting times average 14.76 months for general applicants and 2.2 months for priority housing.

Bob said that the Department also funded a number of support services, including the Supported Housing Assistance Program (SHAP: \$1.04 million per year), Aboriginal Tenants Support Service (ATSS: \$0.52m per year), headleasing, In-house Practical Support (\$350,000 pa), DCD/DHW Tenant Referral Program, Customer Support Officers (\$120,000 pa), Homeless Helpline, Strong Families (\$50,000 pa) and various training programs.

Finally, Bob provided some figures for the Department's regional construction program (Figure 6) and restated the Department's commitment to providing adequate housing for Aboriginal people in country areas.

Figure 6: DHW Regional Building Program 2003/04

Albany	87
Bunbury	133
Kalgoorlie	138
Geraldton	109
Pilbara	103
Kimberley	113
Total	683

Laurel Sellers, Aboriginal Housing and Infrastructure Directorate.

Laurel gave an overview of the new Indigenous Housing & Infrastructure Agreement between the Commonwealth (Department of Family and Community Services), ATSIC and the State Government. The Agreement was signed in July 2002, replaces the 1997 Agreement and will pool around \$80 million of funds from the three partners in the next financial year.

The Agreement is based on the objectives and strategies outlined in *Building a Better Future: Indigenous Housing to 2010* (BBF). The overarching BBF objectives are to:

- Identify & address unmet housing needs of Indigenous people.
- Improve the capacity of Indigenous community housing organisations and involve Indigenous people in planning and service delivery.
- Achieve safe, healthy and sustainable housing.
- Coordinate program administration.

In addition to pooling funds between ATSIC, Commonwealth and the State, the Agreement gave a centralised program management with the Aboriginal Housing and Infrastructure Directorate (AHID), which will be responsible for management of the pooled funds. ATSIC Regional Councils will be responsible for determining funding priorities, through the development of Regional Housing & Infrastructure Plans (RHIP's). Finally, an Aboriginal Housing & Infrastructure Council (AHIC) had been established, with responsibility for strategic planning and policy.

The agreed process is:

1. ATSIC RC's develop 5 year RHIP's (updated annually) detailing their funding priorities.
2. Total funds available will be "allocated" regionally based on a multi-measure Funding Formula agreed by AHID & ATSIC RC's.
3. AHID develop annual programs based on RC priorities within the Funding formula parameters & submit to the AHIC for approval.
4. AHIC will develop a 5 year State Strategic Plan & ensure that annual funding programs and initiatives are consistent with the requirements of the Plan

Laurel said that the process would include a National Reporting Framework (NRF) with national goals and focuses on major outcomes rather than program outputs. Based on BBF strategies, the NRF seeks to determine the impact of the strategy in terms of housing and environmental health outcomes. She said that the new coordinated approach allows for better monitoring and reporting of outcomes, especially in discrete communities, and that the State was developing baseline measures and targets for key outcomes.

Next, Laurel gave a brief overview of the Aboriginal Housing & Infrastructure Council (AHIC). Established in March 2003, the agreement outlines AHIC as the principal source of advice on policies and strategies to improve housing outcomes for Aboriginal People in WA. AHIC plans to meet around six times per year and comprises of a part time Chairperson, two State Government representatives, four ATSIC State Council representatives and the Executive Director of AHID.

AHIC's responsibilities include formulating strategic policy, developing a 5 year State Strategic Plan and annual Operational Plans to achieve the outcomes of the Agreement, monitoring housing & infrastructure service provision, policies and programs, and providing advice and advocacy, through representation on the SHC Board, with respect to Indigenous access to mainstream public housing and other culturally appropriate housing services.

Laurel said that AHIC had identified a number of core housing issues in which it will seek to play a lobbying or brokerage role. These include:

- low levels of Indigenous home ownership,
- housing affordability problems, especially in the Kimberley and parts of Perth,
- high dependence and demand on public rental housing stock and therefore the need for increased Indigenous representation in DHW policy processes,
- difficulties in accessing private rental options, and
- improving access to urban community housing options.

Finally, she stressed the need for quantum leap in funding to address backlog of urgent Indigenous housing needs and emerging needs. For instance, 40% of WA Indigenous population was under the age of 15 during 2001 Census.