



# Design & construction maintenance of Indigenous housing

A N A T I O N A L F R A M E W O R K



# **National framework for the design, construction and maintenance of Indigenous housing**

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## **Overview**

Prepared by the  
Commonwealth, State and Territory Housing Ministers' Working Group  
on Indigenous Housing

September 1999

ISBN 0642 39979 4

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This publication is produced by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services on behalf of the Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers' Working Group on Indigenous Housing.

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Design: Typetalk, Canberra  
Printed by: Pirie Printers

## Contents

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Foreword	v
Preface	vi
1 Introduction	1
2 National principles for the design, construction and maintenance of Indigenous housing	3
3 Reviewing the national framework for the design, construction and maintenance of Indigenous housing	5

## Foreword

Last year, Sydney's water supply was temporarily contaminated, and Sydney-siders had to boil their water before drinking it. A disruption to the gas supply meant that many Melbourne people could not have a hot shower for a few weeks. These incidents were almost considered national disasters, and were certainly considered a threat to public health. Nobody expected people in major urban centres to be inconvenienced in this way.

The daily reality for many Indigenous Australians, however, especially those living in rural and remote communities, is that they do not have access to safe drinking water or hot water for showers. Nor in many cases do they have the other basic services for healthy living such as safe gas and electricity or functioning waste removal systems. Many Indigenous people do not enjoy the same standard of housing or access to essential services that the rest of the community regards as a fundamental right.

Two years ago, I met with the State and Territory Housing Ministers to find ways to overcome the housing problems experienced by Indigenous people. The problems are numerous and complex. Houses are often designed in ways that do not meet Indigenous peoples' cultural needs. Despite having national and local building codes and regulations, many houses are poorly constructed. The lack of regular maintenance means that houses break down prematurely, and their life spans are short.

These factors have contributed to environmental conditions that have a detrimental impact on the health of Indigenous people, especially young children.

As a response to these problems, the State and Territory Housing Ministers and I set a new policy direction of safe, healthy and sustainable housing for Indigenous people.

The national framework for the design, construction and maintenance of Indigenous housing is one of a number of strategies we have produced to achieve better housing and health outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

The national framework has four elements:

- The *principles* of safety, health, quality control and sustainability will guide people in designing, building, upgrading and maintaining Indigenous housing;

- *States' and Territories' remote area building standards* will complement other standards such as the Building Code of Australia;
- *The National Indigenous Housing Guide* is a practical tool to ensure that housing health hardware—the physical infrastructure necessary to keep healthy—is safe, functional and sustainable. I agreed to fund the development of *The National Indigenous Housing Guide* from the Housing Reform Fund. The Guide complements the States' and Territories' remote area building standards; and
- *regular review* will ensure that the national framework remains up to date and incorporates national best practice in the provision of safe and healthy Indigenous housing.

The national framework is a tribute to efforts of the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments working together to provide a national solution to the very pressing housing problems experienced by Indigenous people. On behalf of other Housing Ministers, I would like to thank the working group on Indigenous housing for developing the national framework and the environmental health consultants, Healthabitat, particularly Paul Pholeros, who in consultation with other housing experts, produced *The National Indigenous Housing Guide*.

A publication will not, in itself, improve the housing and health of Indigenous people. There needs to be a commitment by everybody involved in the delivery of Indigenous housing to put the four principles into practice. Housing providers also need to be committed to giving special attention to fundamental health hardware before anything else. When we can get the basics right in houses—safe gas and electrical facilities, safe water and effective waste removal systems—health benefits for Indigenous people will follow.



JOCELYN NEWMAN  
Minister for Family and Community Services



# 1. Introduction

It is a regrettable reality that many of Australia's Indigenous people live in inadequate housing, and that this contributes to poor health. The reasons are complex. However, it is now evident that there are fundamental problems with the way houses for Indigenous people are designed and built, especially in the rural and remote regions of Australia.

Many houses are not culturally appropriate in their design. They are often poorly built, and there has been no systematic approach to their repair and maintenance. Furthermore, building codes fail to address the particular requirements of Indigenous housing in rural and remote communities.

When houses fail to function, particularly the housing components essential for good health such as water, waste removal and power facilities—the 'health hardware'—a range of serious health problems can result. Breakdown in health hardware poses threats to safety, and has contributed to the high incidence among Indigenous people—especially children—of such conditions as skin and eye infection, diarrhoeal disease, respiratory illness and hepatitis.

Houses become uninhabitable when health hardware ceases to function properly. This leads to crowding for other households in Indigenous communities and creates stress on services and facilities. When houses fall 'off line', scarce financial resources are wasted, and progress in reducing the serious backlog of housing need in rural and remote Indigenous communities is impeded.

## A national framework to improve Indigenous housing

Improving Indigenous housing—by raising the standard to that enjoyed by most non-Indigenous Australians—is a priority for Australian governments.

In April 1997, Commonwealth, State and Territory Housing Ministers resolved to improve housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and agreed that such improvements could also produce environmental health benefits for them.

The national framework for the design, construction and maintenance of Indigenous housing is an

outcome of the Housing Ministers' resolution, and is one of a number of national strategies that aim to achieve safe, healthy and sustainable houses for Indigenous people.

As a collaborative initiative of the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments, the national framework recognises that housing problems are not peculiar to one jurisdiction but cross all State and Territory borders.

It is primarily concerned with Indigenous housing in rural and remote communities, however, it can also be applied to housing in other locations.

Each State and Territory continually strives to improve housing outcomes for their Indigenous communities. However, it is hoped that a national approach to housing design, construction and maintenance, based on shared principles for achieving safe, healthy and sustainable housing, will enable the exchange of ideas and housing best practice possibilities between jurisdictions.

State and Territory governments' commitment to a national approach for improving Indigenous housing will be reflected in Indigenous Housing Bilateral Agreements.

## Structure of the national framework

The national framework consists of four elements:

- National principles for the design, construction and maintenance of Indigenous housing;
- State and Territory remote area building standards;
- *The National Indigenous Housing Guide*;
- Reviewing the national framework.

The national principles and review process are described in this publication. *The National Indigenous Housing Guide* and State and Territory remote area building standards are separate publications.

## National principles for the design, construction and maintenance of Indigenous housing

Four national principles for the design, construction and maintenance of Indigenous housing have been agreed:



1. Houses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will be designed, constructed and maintained for safety.
2. Houses will be designed, constructed and maintained to support healthy living practices.
3. Quality control measures will be adopted in the design and construction of houses.
4. Houses will be designed and constructed for long-term function and ease and economy of maintenance.

These principles are presented in more detail on pages 3–4.

### **Consultation and cooperation**

Indigenous people have an essential role in delivering housing to their communities. They must be consulted in all aspects of the design, building and maintenance of their housing and infrastructure services, and their views and decisions must be based on high quality information.

To deliver housing that is consistent with the spirit of the national principles, all levels of government, Indigenous organisations and communities must collaborate and cooperate to prioritise need and make the best use of their resources.

### **State and Territory remote area building standards**

State and Territory remote area building standards are an integral part of the national framework. States and Territories with remote area Indigenous housing will undertake to continually develop their building standards and keep them up to date.

Some jurisdictions have already produced building standards that establish the Indigenous housing requirements particular to their remote regions, and adherence to the standards when constructing or upgrading houses has now become a contractual requirement in some States and Territories. In States such as NSW, the standards apply to all Indigenous housing, not just remote area housing.

The State and Territory remote area building standards are intended to be used in conjunction with other building guidelines such as the Building Code of Australia, Australian Standards, State and Territory environmental health, building and planning legislation and local government building regulations.

It is intended that the national principles will inform the development and updating of the State and Territory standards.

State and Territory remote area building standards are published by the State and Territory governments. For details see page vi.

### **National Indigenous Housing Guide**

*The National Indigenous Housing Guide* is a tool to assist in the design, construction and maintenance of houses.

The Guide does not deal with all housing design and construction issues but rather focuses on the health hardware components essential for safe, healthy and sustainable housing.

The first edition of the Guide has been developed from the collective experiences of experts who, for more than a decade, have worked with Indigenous communities to improve their housing.

The Guide is designed to be used in conjunction with State and Territory remote area building standards. References to other local design and construction sources are included in the Guide.

To remain useful and relevant, the Guide must be periodically assessed and updated. State and Commonwealth representatives, technical experts and community representatives will meet every two years to review and improve it in accordance with emerging research, new technology and good housing practices.

The Guide is a companion document to this overview.

### **Reviewing and developing the national framework**

The national framework will be reviewed and refined as necessary to ensure it delivers the intended outcomes of safe, healthy and sustainable housing for Indigenous people.

Commonwealth, State and Territory governments will share responsibility for monitoring the quality of new and upgraded houses to ensure that the required standards are being achieved.

Pages 5–6 of this publication deal with the review process in more detail.

## 2. National principles for the design, construction and maintenance of Indigenous housing

**T**he national principles for the design, construction and maintenance of Indigenous housing reflect the new direction that Commonwealth, State and Territory governments have adopted for Indigenous housing. They focus on the key housing issues:

- **safety**
- **health**
- **quality control**
- **sustainability**

Under the national framework for the design, construction and maintenance of Indigenous housing, everybody involved in the process of providing houses for Indigenous people—designers, project managers, government officials, building contractors, community councils and Indigenous housing providers—will be expected to operate in the spirit of the principles.

The principles aim to change attitudes to the provision of Indigenous housing—poor design and construction practices will no longer be tolerated; houses that are not safe or adversely affect people's health will not be accepted.

For all four principles, the following issues should be carefully considered as they impact on the overall quality of Indigenous housing:

- housing design should be appropriate to the location and cultural and social requirements of the community;
- houses should be designed in accordance with the ways Indigenous people use their houses; and
- the quality of Indigenous housing in rural and remote areas should be not less than the standard applying to urban areas.

In agreeing to the national framework, governments will be responsible for ensuring that the principles are reflected in housing outcomes.

### The principles

#### Safety

##### Principle 1

**Houses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will be designed, constructed and maintained for safety**

New and upgraded houses will be of a standard that ensures people's lives are not put at risk. Houses will:

- have properly installed electrical and gas connections and appliances;
- be connected to a potable (drinkable) water source;
- be built with approved, safe and non-toxic materials;
- have properly designed and soundly constructed waste removal systems.

Emergency and cyclical maintenance programs are critical for achieving safe houses for Indigenous people.

#### Health

##### Principle 2

**Houses will be designed, constructed and maintained to support healthy living practices**

Houses must support nine healthy living practices (in order of priority):

1. washing people, particularly children under five years of age;
2. washing clothes and bedding;
3. removing waste safely from the living area;
4. improving nutrition—the ability to store, prepare and cook food;
5. reducing crowding and the potential for the spread of infectious disease;
6. reducing negative contact between people and animals, vermin or insects;
7. reducing the negative impact of dust;
8. controlling the temperature of the living environment;
9. reducing trauma (or minor injury) around the house and living environment.

Emergency and cyclical maintenance programs for houses are critical to enable people to carry out the nine healthy living practices.



## Quality control

### Principle 3

**Quality control measures will be adopted in the design and construction of houses**

- Houses should be designed and constructed, and construction supervised, to minimum standards as set by the State and local government regulations based on the Building Code of Australia and State and Territory remote area building standards. *The National Indigenous Housing Guide* will assist to bring health hardware to a standard that provides safety and promotes health.
- Housing should be constructed under a properly established quality control system that is subject to periodic monitoring and evaluation.
- Building inspections should be conducted at various stages of construction to ensure quality control. Payment to contractors can be linked to inspection points. The involvement of local government in building inspections should be encouraged.

## Sustainability

### Principle 4

**Houses will be designed and constructed for long-term function and ease and economy of maintenance**

- Water, waste removal and electrical facilities and building fabric—'health hardware'—should be of a quality that meets the rigours of remote locations and provides good amenity.
- In order to sustain houses—to keep them functional and habitable—they should be maintained regularly. Establishing emergency and cyclical maintenance programs should be a priority.
- Access to tradespeople for maintenance of health hardware should be taken into account at the design stage.
- Long-term maintenance requirements and costs should be included in initial housing design and life-cycle budgets.
- Health hardware should be selected on the basis of quality, effectiveness and efficiency in reducing running costs and keeping the safety and health benefits provided by houses affordable.
- Indigenous community housing organisations should have access to the appropriate equipment and training for routine maintenance of essential health and safety items.

### 3. Reviewing the national framework for the design, construction and maintenance of Indigenous housing

**T**he purpose of the national framework for the design, construction and maintenance of Indigenous housing is to assist in delivering safe, healthy and sustainable housing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The national framework needs to be periodically reviewed to assess whether it is working effectively to produce the desired outcomes.

Periodic review will provide an opportunity to further develop and enhance the national framework.

There are three elements to the review process:

- assessing the quality of new and upgraded houses;
- assessing the efficacy of the national framework elements—the principles, State and Territory remote area building standards and *National Indigenous Housing Guide*; and
- biennial workshops.

#### Assessing the quality of new and upgraded houses

In order to assess the national framework's impact, it is necessary to check whether new and upgraded houses for Indigenous people are being designed, constructed and maintained to a standard that is in accord with the framework.

Indigenous housing funders will implement an independent assessment of a sample of houses in Indigenous communities every two years.

New and upgraded houses will be selected across all States and Territories and assessed as to whether they are safe, healthy and sustainable. This will provide quantitative data on houses, especially in respect of the quality and functionality of health hardware. The assessment will be based on the national principles as outlined in Section 2 of this overview and should include fixing houses so that Indigenous people can also benefit from this process.

The survey results will identify the steps needed to be taken to improve outcomes where housing has been found to be below the standard expected under the national framework.

#### Assessing the efficacy of the national framework elements—principles, State and Territory remote area building standards and *National Indigenous Housing Guide*

The national principles, State and Territory remote area building standards and *The National Indigenous Housing Guide* all have to be periodically assessed as to their relevance, comprehensiveness and application.

A key means for measuring the relevance and application of the national framework elements will be the subjective assessments of stakeholders in the building process. Indigenous housing funding providers will consult State and Territory housing administrators, local councils, community council members, Indigenous housing workers, community chief executive officers, project managers, architects and builders every two years about the elements of the national framework. This process would occur concurrently with the housing assessment survey described above.

This qualitative feedback, coupled with the national housing survey data, will provide comment on how and where the national framework is being applied and will give an indication about the deficits in the framework that need to be addressed.

Data from the survey and stakeholder interviews will feed into biennial workshops (below).

The State and Territory governments have primary responsibility for reviewing their remote area building standards.

#### Biennial workshops

In committing to this framework, Commonwealth, State and Territory officials and representatives from State and Territory Indigenous housing boards and other relevant agencies will agree to 'workshop' the national framework every two years.

The workshops will have several aims:

- to assist in maintaining a national focus on improving the design, construction and maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing;



- to review new building products, technology and emerging design and construction best practice and consider their applicability for *The National Indigenous Housing Guide*;
- to facilitate the exchange of information on the lessons learned in the previous two years in delivering housing to Indigenous people; and
- to improve the national framework through the exchange of information and ideas and by using the data obtained from the national survey and stakeholder feedback process.

It is anticipated that States and Territories will be well placed to make substantial contributions to enhancing the national framework, and particularly *The National Indigenous Housing Guide*, following the annual reviews of their own remote area building standards.

Between biennial meetings, users of the Guide are encouraged to record their ideas and comments about the key elements; there is space in the Guide for this purpose. Comments should be forwarded to the Commonwealth agency responsible for Indigenous housing. Comments will subsequently be taken to the workshops for discussion and possible inclusion in the next edition of the Guide.

The Commonwealth, State and Territory governments will be jointly responsible for convening the workshops. The product of the workshops will be an updated edition of the national framework documents. The new edition will be widely disseminated.

All findings emerging from the review process will be used to update and enhance the national framework.

**NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE DESIGN, CONSTRUCTION AND  
MAINTENANCE OF INDIGENOUS HOUSING**

**WORKSHOP AGENDA**

**15 September 1999**

**The Brassey of Canberra, Belmore Gardens and Macquarie Street  
BARTON ACT**

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| 10.00am | Welcome/introduction ( <b>Mr Alex Ackfun, Chairperson, General Manager of Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Program and Queensland's representative on the Commonwealth State Working Group for Indigenous Housing</b> )  |
| 10.15am | Address by Senator the Hon Jocelyn Newman, <b>Minister for Family and Community Services</b>   |
| 10.30am | The links between the living environment and health problems confronting Indigenous people ( <b>Dr Penny Miller, Nganampa Health Council</b> )   |
| 10.50am | Overview of the work of the Commonwealth State Working Group on Indigenous Housing and where the National Framework fits within it ( <b>Mr Alex Ackfun</b> )   |
| 11.10am | MORNING TEA  |
| 11.30am | Video presentation on improving housing in the Northern Peninsular Area, Queensland ( <b>Mr Alex Ackfun</b> )  |
| 11.45am | <i>National Framework for the Design, Construction and Maintenance of Indigenous Housing</i> ( <b>Ms Jody Broun, Executive Director, Aboriginal Housing and Infrastructure Unit, Western Australia and WA's representative on the Commonwealth State Working Group on Indigenous Housing</b> ) |
| 12.05pm | <i>The National Indigenous Housing Guide</i> ( <b>Mr Paul Pholeros, Healthabitat</b> )   |
| 12.25pm | <i>Fixing Houses for Better Health</i> project ( <b>Mr Mark Sullivan, Chief Executive Officer, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission</b> )  |
| 12.40pm | Questions, general discussion and close ( <b>Mr Alex Ackfun</b> )  |
| 1.00pm  | LUNCH  |



# The Workshop

Senator the Hon Jocelyn Newman, the Minister for Family and Community Services, who also has responsibility for housing including Indigenous housing, will introduce the National Framework at a workshop in Canberra on 15 September 1999.

The Minister has invited people from the mainstream and Indigenous housing and health sectors as well as others with an interest in improving housing and health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

As well as introducing the National Framework, the workshop aims to:

- provide an overview of current housing and related health issues confronting Indigenous people and invite discussion on the issues;
- obtain support for an informal national network to promote the National Framework as a long-term strategy to improve the housing and health of Indigenous people.

Copies of the National Framework publications including the *National Indigenous Housing Guide* will be distributed at the workshop.

## For more information contact:

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**The National  
Framework for the  
Design, Construction  
and Maintenance of  
Indigenous Housing**



## Background

Two years ago, Commonwealth, State and Territory Housing Ministers met to find ways to overcome the housing problems experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The problems are numerous and complex. For example:

- houses are often designed in ways that do not meet Indigenous people's cultural needs;
- despite having national and local building codes and regulations, many houses are poorly constructed, especially in rural and remote locations; and
- the lack of regular maintenance means that houses break down prematurely, and their life spans are short.

These factors have contributed to environmental conditions that have a detrimental impact on the health of Indigenous people, especially young children.

As a result of these problems, the Housing Ministers set a new policy direction of safe, healthy and sustainable housing for Indigenous Australians. The Ministers established the *Commonwealth State Working Group for Indigenous Housing* to

develop strategies for achieving better housing and health outcomes for Indigenous people.

The National Framework for the Design, Construction and Maintenance of Indigenous Housing is one of these strategies.

The National Framework has four elements:

- the *Principles* of safety, health, quality control and sustainability will guide people in designing, building, upgrading and maintaining Indigenous housing;
- the *States' and Territories' remote area Indigenous building standards* will complement other standards such as the Building Code of Australia;
- *The National Indigenous Housing Guide* is a practical tool to help ensure that housing health hardware (the physical infrastructure necessary to keep healthy) is safe, functional and sustainable; and
- *regular review* will ensure that the National Framework remains up to date and incorporates national best practice in the provision of safe, healthy and sustainable Indigenous housing.