

SCOPING STUDY

Public Housing Access

for Aboriginal, Children, Young People
& Families impacted by the Child
Protection System

August 2024



Acknowledgement of Country

AbSec acknowledge the Gadigal and Wangal People of the Eora Nation, the land on which our office stands, and pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge the Elders, leaders and advocates within our sector and pay our respects to them as knowledge holders within this space and every space.

AbSec acknowledges the Stolen Generations who never came home and the ongoing impact of government policy and practice on Aboriginal children, young people and families.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that the following study report may contain images of deceased persons.



Who we are

AbSec is the peak organisation concerned with the welfare of Aboriginal children, young people and families. We advocate for their rights, while supporting carers and communities. Our main priority is to keep children and young people safe, with the key goal of also keeping them within their family and community. It is vitally important that young people grow up surrounded by those who understand them, comfortable within their own culture where they will thrive.

AbSec ensures Aboriginal children, young people, families, carers and communities have access to services and support that give them the best possible chance to fulfil their potential. We work with both Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and non-Aboriginal organisations, as well as government agencies and other stakeholders, to steer and coordinate efforts to close the gap. We are driven to advocate for a society where all children and young people have the same opportunities, regardless of cultural heritage.

At the core of this vision is our efforts to develop a tailored approach to Aboriginal child and family supports. We want to deliver universal, targeted and tertiary services that cover the full gamut of care. The aim is to create a system that recognises vulnerabilities in families and mitigates risk factors, reducing the need for invasive interventions. The fewer children and young people who need to be removed from their families, the better off we will all be. We also want to see more tailored Aboriginal out-of-home care and after-care services, with the goal of ending the cycle of disadvantage that continues to impact generations of Aboriginal families.

The bottom line is that we want to see Aboriginal children and young people cared for in safe, thriving Aboriginal families and communities, where they are raised strong in spirit and identity. We want them to have every opportunity for lifelong wellbeing and connection to culture, surrounded by holistic supports.

In working towards this vision, we are guided by these principles:

- Acknowledging and respecting the diversity and knowledge of Aboriginal communities.
- Acting with professionalism and integrity in striving for quality, culturally responsive services and supports for Aboriginal families and communities.
- Underpinning the rights of Aboriginal people to develop our own processes and systems for our communities, particularly in meeting the needs of our children, young people, families and carers.
- Being holistic, integrated and solutions-focused through Aboriginal control in delivering outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities.
- Committing to a future that empowers Aboriginal families and communities, representing our communities, and the agencies there to serve them, with transparency and drive.

Executive Summary

Access to Public Housing for Aboriginal Families Impacted by the Child Protection System.

AbSec, as the peak body for Aboriginal children, young people, families, and communities, provides critical leadership in addressing the intersections of housing instability and child protection outcomes for Aboriginal families. Recognising the profound impact of housing challenges, AbSec partnered with Lumenia to conduct this scoping study.

The study combines literature reviews, policy analysis, data exploration, interjurisdictional insights, and the voices of AbSec members to inform evidence-based strategies aimed at bridging the gaps between housing and child protection systems.

Key Findings

The scoping study's literature review highlights significant inequities in housing accessibility for Aboriginal families, stemming from colonisation. Housing instability—such as homelessness or overcrowding—emerges as both a direct and indirect risk factor for child protection involvement. While limited research addresses Aboriginal-specific experiences, the available evidence underscores that inadequate and culturally inappropriate housing often leads to perceived child protection risk and family separations.

Policy Insights

NSW housing and child protection policies reveal systemic factors exacerbating these issues. The NSW Audit Office recently found the use of Structured Decision-Making (SDM) tools susceptible to caseworker bias.¹ As such, current child protection policies and tools directly influence child protection intervention decisions, increasing the likelihood of child protection intervention for families experiencing housing instability.

Existing housing assistance initiatives enable priority access for families at risk of child removal or seeking restoration, and schemes through the Aboriginal Housing Office provide potential pathways to rebalance intergenerational wealth through housing access. However, demand far outstrips program capacity in many of these initiatives, limiting their real-world effectiveness.

Analysis of publicly available NSW data demonstrates significant correlation between areas of high risk of significant harm (ROSH) reports and requests for housing assistance. Taken alongside literature from other Australian jurisdictions which highlights that families tend to seek housing supports prior to child protection contact, there are likely to be opportunities for empowering families experiencing housing instability to reduce child protection impacts.

The survey findings and listening sessions with AbSec members (consisting of Aboriginal Controlled Organisations (ACCOS) and identified individuals) highlighted several critical issues regarding the relationship between housing accessibility and child protection impacts for Aboriginal families. A lack of culturally-led policies and practices across both housing and child protection systems was identified, leading to a failure to consider Aboriginal parenting practices and contributing to increased child protection contact. AbSec members (members) emphasised the need for culturally responsive housing design, preserving community connections, and enabling kinship networks.

¹ NSW Audit Office 2024 'Oversight of the child protection system' Audit Office of New South Wales.

Members shared experiences of families they supported who faced a range of barriers to keeping their families together and seeking restoration which were driven by a lack of housing supports. These included practical challenges in accessing suitable social housing, such as long wait times, application barriers, and a lack of housing options that accommodate extended families, specific family groups such as single parents, and cultural needs. Concerns were raised about the impact of poor maintenance of social housing properties contributing to child protection activity, and the need for improved quality and timely maintenance to reduce these impacts.

This study clearly demonstrates the relationship between housing instability and increased child protection system involvement for Aboriginal families in NSW and highlighted the lack of exploration of this area and associated policies to date.



Photography credit: Matthew Williams-Ellis

Key policy reform opportunities identified by Members include:

- Embedding Aboriginal leadership in designing culturally-centered housing and child protection policies;
- Decolonising risk assessment tools;
- Advocating legislative changes to prevent child removals due to housing instability;
- Decoupling statutory child protection from housing issues;
- Increasing collaboration between housing, child protection, and Aboriginal communities;
- Prioritising social housing maintenance;
- Increasing social housing stock availability with Aboriginal-designed eligibility models
- Developing targeted supports for vulnerable groups like families experiencing violence, and;
- Promoting intergenerational home ownership pathways.

These reforms necessitate a self-determined, culturally responsive approach focused on empowering Aboriginal families and reducing unnecessary child protection contacts resulting from housing challenges which are generally structural factors relating to financial stress. This study highlights the opportunity for AbSec to use its platform to ensure upcoming social housing investments and homelessness supports are Aboriginal-led and aligned with the identified reform priorities.

“Land is power” – Uncle Mick Mundine

Acknowledgements

Lumenia

Lumenia believe that empowering diverse perspectives is essential for achieving meaningful outcomes in communities. Through collaborative approaches, we unite individuals and evidence to build and refine services. Inspired by the Latin word “lumen,” meaning light, we embrace complexity as an opportunity to reveal new paths in human services design and delivery.

Specialising in skill sharing, we support clients in trialing and scaling new practices and policies, while fostering sustained reflective practices. Our work focuses on developing methods for monitoring, evaluation, and learning that empower both clients and the communities they serve.

For media inquiries and further details, please contact: admin@lumenia.com.au

Lumenia and AbSec acknowledge the contributions of AbSec members and stakeholders to this scoping study, including the personal stories, cultural knowledge and guidance provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and ACCOs who shared their experiences, perceptions and knowledge to collaboratively inform this report.

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AbSec	Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat
ACCO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations
AHC	Aboriginal Housing Company
AHO	Aboriginal Housing Office
AHURI	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute
ALS	Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT
CAPO	New South Wales Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations
DCJ	the NSW Department of Communities and Justice
DFV	Domestic and family violence
FACSIAR	Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research
IBA	Indigenous Business Australia
KBHAC	Kinchela Boys Home Aboriginal Corporation
LAHC	Land and Housing Corporation
NSW	New South Wales
OOHC	Out-of-home Care
ROSH	Risk of Significant Harm
SA	South Australia
SARA	Structured Assessment of Risk and Need Tool
SDM	Structured Decision Making Tools
SFSC	Strong Families Strong Communities Program
SHS	Specialist Homelessness Services
SOW	Services Our Way Program
TIISHA	Indigenous Infrastructure and Sustainable Housing Alliance
UTS	University of Technology Sydney

Additional content

Data privacy and protection

We are committed to protecting the privacy and confidentiality of individuals involved in our studies and consultations. Any personal data included in this report has been used with consent and in accordance with applicable privacy laws.

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Background

Stable and suitable housing is a fundamental determinant of health and wellbeing enabling redistribution of intergenerational wealth and disrupting cycles of entrenched disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal families². As the Peak Aboriginal body supporting Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities impacted by the child protection system, AbSec sought to explore the intersection between housing access and child protection outcomes for Aboriginal families in NSW.

This report provides an overview of the scoping analysis, which serves as an initial exploration of these intersections to inform and guide AbSec's future advocacy and initiatives.

The scoping analysis included:

1. A targeted literature review.
2. An analysis of current NSW housing and child protection policies to assess their impact on Aboriginal families navigating these systems.
3. Data collation and analysis from publicly available NSW housing and child protection data to identify potential correlations.
4. Interviews, survey and data gathering with AbSec members providing insights into their perceptions and to develop de-identified family experience studies.
5. Examination of emerging across jurisdictions to improve housing access for Aboriginal families and mitigate child protection impacts, with a focus on place-based approaches and priority geographic areas for ongoing AbSec work.

The report identifies key opportunities for reform, including initiatives that could be developed in partnership with Homes NSW including the Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO) and the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ). These reforms aim to address systemic barriers and deliver culturally responsive solutions to empower Aboriginal families and reduce unnecessary child protection involvement.

² Indigenous Business Australia (2022). Indigenous Home Ownership.

Targeted Literature Review

Methodology

A targeted literature review was undertaken to inform the scoping analysis. The review process utilised a snowballing methodology, identifying relevant published and grey literature and building on these to capture key areas of policy and practice.

Housing Inequalities for Aboriginal Families

The dispossession of land due to colonisation has created profound and ongoing housing inequalities for Aboriginal families across Australia. Aboriginal households are significantly less likely to own a home (38% compared to 66% of non-Aboriginal households) and are over-represented in social housing (21% versus 4% of non-Aboriginal households)³.

Aboriginal households are less likely to own a home, with 38% of Aboriginal households owning a home in contrast to 66% of other Australian households. Likewise, Aboriginal households are more likely to reside in social housing (21% of Aboriginal households, as compared with 4% of other households)³.

Housing and Child Protection Outcomes

Access to stable housing is a key enabler of family empowerment and wellbeing, with increasing evidence linking housing instability to child protection outcomes. International research suggests that inadequate housing is a contributing factor in at least 10% of foster care⁴ placements. However, limited research explores the underlying drivers of this association or how targeted services can address these challenges⁵.

International research has highlighted the over-representation of families experiencing housing instability in child protection interventions⁶. Although housing stress has been shown to be associated with higher levels of child and caregiver self-reported incidence of child abuse and neglect⁷, analysis of international data suggests that the over-representation of families experiencing housing instability in child protection systems is only partially explained by child maltreatment incidence⁸. These studies indicate that a complex array of factors contribute to child protection involvement in these families, including bias in perceptions of child protection risk in families experiencing housing instability. These studies have prompted calls for child welfare services to invest resources in housing assistance programs as a core component of their service offering.

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: a focus report on housing and homelessness.

⁴ Casey Family Programs (2021). How can supportive housing help improve outcomes for families in the child welfare system?

⁵ Australian Centre for Child Protection (2010). Investing in our future: Children's journeys through homelessness and child protection.

⁶ CSH (2011). Silos to Systems: Preserving and Strengthening Families and Children Experiencing Recurring Child Welfare System Encounters and Housing Crises.

⁷ Chandler CE, Austin AE, Shanahan ME. (2022). Association of Housing Stress With Child Maltreatment: A Systematic Review. Trauma Violence Abuse.

⁸ Marcal K. E. (2018). The Impact of Housing Instability on Child Maltreatment: A Causal Investigation. Journal of Family Social Work, 21(4-5), 331-347.

Taken together, the available research suggests that the relationship between housing instability and child protection involvement is likely to be both direct and indirect. These mechanisms include child protection authorities perceiving risk in situations where families are unable to access stable housing, alongside a small increase in the occurrence of abuse and neglect in families experiencing housing instability, which is likely associated with a range of other stressors such as poverty, mental health, alcohol and substance use⁹.

Reflecting the increasing focus on service integration across service systems, there is emerging Australian literature exploring opportunities for earlier family supports across service systems. A recent analysis of linked data in South Australia (SA) explored the intersection between child protection, housing and health service usage, noting the lack of existence of prior studies which examined the relationship between child protection contact with children and their family's requests for housing assistance¹⁰. This analysis drew on population-level data for all SA children born from 1999 to 2013, exploring child protection contact for families who were also in contact with housing services, either in receiving rental assistance, being on a public housing waitlist or living in public housing.

A large overlap in contact between housing and child protection was evident for families in this study, with 60% of these families found to be in contact with both housing and child protection systems. Requests for housing support occurred prior to child protection involvement in over 60% of families known to both services. Taken together, these findings highlight the significant opportunity that exists for housing services to support families to prevent and mitigate child protection contact.

Unique Challenges for Aboriginal Families

Whilst little research has directly explored this intersection in Aboriginal families, there is emerging evidence of an association between housing accessibility and child protection contact in recent studies. This includes qualitative evidence from families and practitioners which suggests that homelessness and housing insecurity for Aboriginal families contributes to perceived child protection risk and can prevent families from reunification¹¹ and voices of families and children within ongoing projects such as [Bring Them Home, Keep Them Home](#)¹², in which mothers have shared stories which indicate that their child's removal was a direct result of their experience of homelessness.

⁹ Chandler CE, Austin AE, Shanahan ME. (2022). Association of Housing Stress With Child Maltreatment: A Systematic Review. *Trauma Violence Abuse*.

¹⁰ Malvaso C, Montgomerie A, Pilkington RM, et al. (2022). Examining the intersection of child protection and public housing: development, health and justice outcomes using linked administrative data. *BMJ Open*.

¹¹ I-CARE: Predicting and preventing child removals and optimising the child protection system for Aboriginal children in Western Australia (2022).

¹² Newton B (2024). *Bring Them Home, Keep Them Home: reunifying Aboriginal families*.

^{13, 14} ANROWS. (2020). *Barriers preventing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women from reporting family violence*.

¹⁵ AHURI (2019). *Improving housing and service responses to domestic and family violence for Indigenous individuals and families*.



Photography credit: Pressmaster

Evidence collated by AHURI highlights the intersections between domestic and family violence, child protection and housing access for Aboriginal families. The researchers describe:

“Another woman (service user) was told that to get her children back she had to prove that she was: no longer using drugs or alcohol; no longer involved with her ex-partner; she had to have suitable housing for her and the children, and she also had to have a job.

“She told us that she had achieved all of the requirements except finding a house. She had been on a public housing waiting list for two years after leaving her partner. She had tried to obtain private rental accommodation only to be turned away.

“Her last interaction with child protection about getting her children back broke her heart: the child protection worker told her ‘your children are settled now, perhaps you should just move and start a new life somewhere else’. She said: ‘They are my kids, I’m their mother, I want to be there for them, I just need a house.’¹⁵



Evidence highlights the need for stable, recurrent funding for housing and support programs as essential to address these challenges effectively¹⁶. Moreover, culturally specific programs and a holistic approach that includes support for both victims and perpetrators are suggested by the evidence base to be necessary to ensure the safety and empowerment of Aboriginal women and their families¹⁷.

Cultural Considerations in Housing Design

The importance of culturally appropriate and Aboriginal-led housing policies is underscored by extensive evidence highlighting the unique cultural needs of Aboriginal families. Standardised designs often fail to accommodate the extended family structures, cultural practices, and unique needs of Aboriginal families, leading to overcrowding and increased wear-and-tear on properties¹⁸. Inappropriate and poor-quality housing has long been known to negatively impact the health and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly young people¹⁹.



Photography credit: Pressmaster

The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation highlights that housing is a key determinant of health, with overcrowding which is often caused by culturally inappropriate housing exacerbating health issues and psychological distress likely to contribute to challenges faced by Aboriginal families²⁰. These studies demonstrate the need for housing policies to be developed and implemented with leadership from Aboriginal communities. Housing initiatives must reflect Aboriginal values, support kinship networks, and promote sustainable living environments.

Implications for NSW

The intersections between housing instability and child protection are evident in existing research and community insights. Aboriginal families frequently cite housing challenges as a key factor influencing child protection decisions. Stable funding for culturally responsive housing and support programs, alongside integrated service delivery models, is essential to address these issues effectively.

Further examination of Aboriginal families' experiences in NSW is necessary to develop holistic, integrated approaches that empower families and reduce unnecessary child protection involvement. Aboriginal-led initiatives must be prioritised to ensure housing solutions meet cultural needs and support long-term wellbeing for Aboriginal children, young people, and families.

¹⁶ AHURI (2019). Improving housing and service responses to domestic and family violence for Indigenous individuals and families.

¹⁷ ANROWS. (2022). What works? Exploring the literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing programs that respond to family violence.

¹⁸ Korff, J. (2021). Overcrowded houses.

¹⁹ Andersen et al. (2018). Housing conditions of urban households with Aboriginal children in NSW Australia: tenure type matters.

²⁰ AHURI (2018). Creating culturally sensitive housing for remote Indigenous communities.

Policy and Practice Landscape

In order to further explore the association between housing access and child protection, a targeted review of key housing and child protection policies and practices in NSW was undertaken.

The review analysed publicly available policies and casework tools to:

- Identify practices affecting housing accessibility for Aboriginal families at risk of child protection involvement.
- Examine how existing practices may contribute to the over-representation of Aboriginal families experiencing housing instability within the child protection system.

Like the literature review, the review process utilised a snowballing methodology, identifying relevant policy and practice documents and building on these to support a refined review which captured key areas of policy and practice.

Child Protection Practices

Structured Decision Making (SDM) Tools

SDM tools are currently used in NSW child protection settings and underpin the rationale for child protection involvement and OOHC entry. These tools integrate housing-related risk factors, including housing instability, homelessness, and overcrowding, which can escalate risk scores and increase the likelihood of child protection interventions. Families with larger households are disproportionately affected, further entrenching their vulnerability to OOHC placement decisions.

External reviews conducted in 2017 and 2019 raised concerns that the tools were susceptible to caseworker bias in relation to Aboriginal families with both reviews recommending the NSW Government independently examine the use of the SDM tools²¹. The NSW Audit Office has since acknowledged that SDM tools contribute to the unnecessary removal of Aboriginal children from their families, exacerbating their over-representation in OOHC²².

International research supports these findings, with studies highlighting that embedding housing instability and crowding metrics into SDM tools unintentionally reinforces structural racial disparities at an individual assessment level. Scholars such as Feely and Bosk (2021)²³ noting that internationally, *“These realities further unintentionally bake racial disparities that occur at the structural level into how risk is assessed at the individual level”*.

Earlier this year the NSW Government committed to review of the use of SDM in NSW, with AbSec’s chief executive John Leha noting that the SDM is *“a racially biased system that contributes to the gross over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care”*²⁴.



“...a racially biased system that contributes to the gross over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care.”²⁴

^{21,22} Audit Office of NSW 2024 “Safeguarding the rights of Aboriginal children in the child protection system” Performance Audit 6 June 2024

²³ Feely, M., Bosk, E.A.(2021). That Which is Essential has been Made Invisible: The Need to Bring a Structural Risk Perspective to Reduce Racial Disproportionality in Child Welfare. *Race Soc Probl* 13, 49–62.

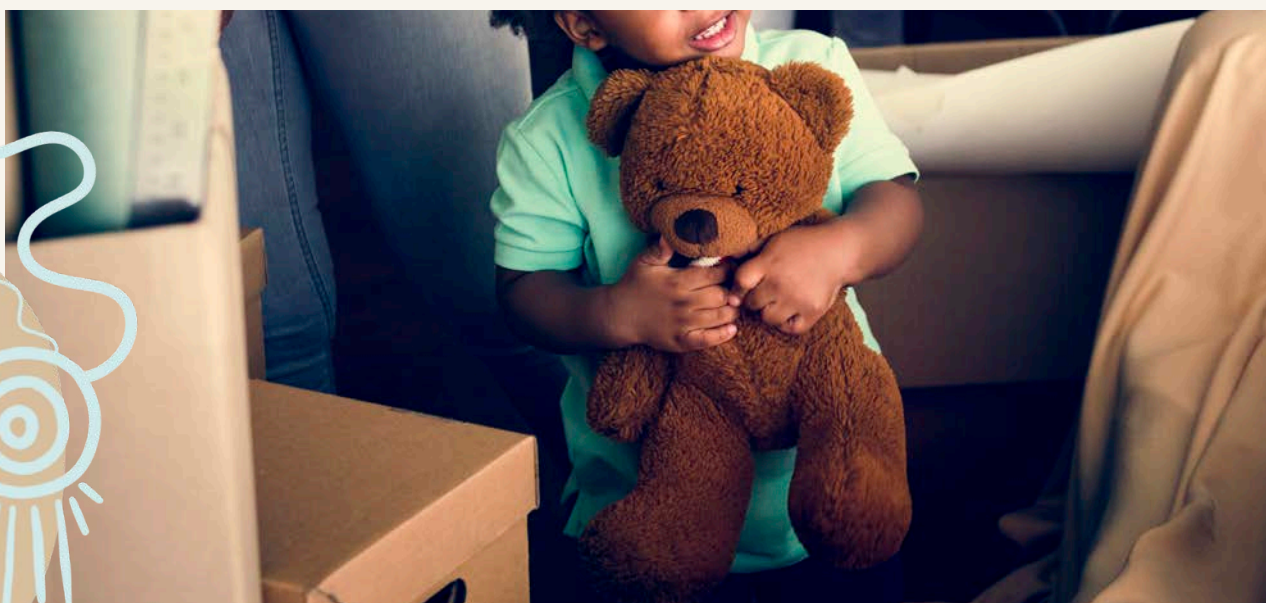
²⁴ Guardian Australia (2024). NSW to review child protection screening algorithm over concerns about racial bias.

Decoupling Housing from Child Protection

Given the influence of housing measures in SDM assessments, improving access to stable, suitable housing for Aboriginal families is critical to reducing unnecessary child protection interventions. To address this, AbSec and the Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT (ALS) are negotiating a Partnership Agreement aimed at redesigning assessment approaches for Aboriginal children, young people, and families. This initiative seeks to decouple housing issues from statutory child protection systems, ensuring that housing challenges are no longer a direct trigger for child protection involvement.

Culturally Responsive Housing Solutions

A forthcoming report 'Culturally Responsive Design Principles for NSW Aboriginal Housing' is being prepared by the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Indigenous Infrastructure and Sustainable Housing Alliance (TIISHA) for the New South Wales Coalition Of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (NSW CAPO). This report will provide further guidance and best practices for culturally respectful housing solutions that, support community well-being, and ensure sustainable and inclusive development.



Photography credit: RawPixel

Housing Supports in Practice

The NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) provides guidance to child protection practitioners on accessing housing supports for families experiencing Domestic and Family Violence (DFV), at risk of placement of their children in OOHC or seeking restoration of children from OOHC. This guidance highlights that families navigating such situations may qualify for access to emergency temporary accommodation and priority social housing (see below)²⁵. However, the extent to which practitioners and families are aware of these policies remains unclear, potentially limiting their effectiveness.

Path Forward

Addressing the structural biases within SDM tools and increasing practitioner awareness of housing support policies are essential steps toward reducing the disproportionate child protection contact experienced by Aboriginal families. AbSec continues to advocate for culturally responsive, Aboriginal-led reforms to ensure that housing solutions and child protection practices support family empowerment and well-being.

²⁵ Department of Communities and Justice (2018). Priority housing: child protection caseworker factsheet.

Child Protection Related Housing and Homelessness Policies

DCJ's Housing Pathways enables the management of applications for housing support between DCJ, the Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO), the Housing Contact Centre, and participating community housing providers.

Various housing assistance options are available via Housing Pathways, including:

Private rental assistance products: brokerage services, tenancy facilitation, bond assistance, and Rentstart.

Private rental subsidies: assisting with rent in private accommodation.

Emergency temporary accommodation: addressing short-term housing crises.

Short-term and crisis accommodation: provided by community housing organisations.

Social housing: encompassing public housing managed by DCJ and community housing managed by various providers.

For Aboriginal families, additional options for housing supports include access to Aboriginal housing managed by the AHO or community housing providers.

● Emergency Temporary Accommodation

Emergency temporary accommodation can support families during times of crisis for short-term accommodation needs, including situations that may represent child protection risk, such as where a client:

- cannot live in their home due to a domestic or family violence situation which places them, or a child, at risk of significant harm
- has removed a child at risk of abuse from the family home
- has custody of children and is homeless.

DCJ's Social Housing Eligibility and Allocations Policy Supplement²⁶ specifies the eligibility criteria for social housing and other forms of temporary accommodation support.

Emergency temporary accommodation can be accessed to provide emergency accommodation. A client is considered to have an urgent housing need appropriate for temporary accommodation support if they or a member of their household is at risk of harm.

This includes individuals and families who are at risk of experiencing:

- domestic or family violence
- sexual assault
- child abuse or neglect
- threatening behaviour by one or more household members against another occupant
- torture or trauma.

²⁶ <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/policies/social-housing-eligibility-allocations-policy-supplement/chapters/urgent-housing-needs>

● Social Housing

Families and parents seeking more long-term housing supports can apply for access to social housing, including public housing, community housing and Aboriginal housing. The process for social housing allocation in NSW involves applicants applying via Housing Pathways and being placed on the NSW Housing Register managed by DCJ. Aboriginal families who apply via this route are subject to the same waitlist and conditions as non-Aboriginal families.

Situations in which individuals are considered ineligible for housing assistance, including social housing, temporary accommodation and private rental assistance, include an individual having a history of having committed registrable offences where it is considered likely that the presence of that client in social housing will either:

- cause antisocial behaviour, or
- present an unacceptable risk of harm to the client, to other social housing occupants or to neighbours.

Individuals with previous history of unsatisfactory tenancy must rent in the private market for 6 months prior to being placed on the NSW Housing Register.

The NSW Housing Register is divided into 'priority' and 'general' categories, determining the order of allocation. The 'priority' category is for individuals in urgent need who cannot address their housing needs in the private rental market due to complex circumstances.

To qualify for priority housing access, applicants must be considered by DCJ to have needs which warrant prioritisation of their housing access. DCJ's Social Housing Eligibility and Allocations Policy Supplement²⁷ specifies that prioritisation for access to social housing be given to individuals and families who need safe and stable accommodation to have a child returned from out-of-home care, or to help prevent children from entering out-of-home care.

These families will then enter the priority waitlist. Wait times and their implications for families are further explored below.

● Aboriginal Housing

Aboriginal Individuals, families and people who care for Aboriginal children and are able to establish their Aboriginality are able to apply for Aboriginal housing, managed by the AHO. ²⁸

The AHO also delivers a range of programs which support Aboriginal individuals and families to purchase homes and engage in the private rental market.

Their Focus is described in the Figure below.



²⁷ DCJ (2023). Social Housing Eligibility and Allocations Policy Supplement.



Photography credit: <https://www.aho.nsw.gov.au/>

Focus of AHO ²⁹

The AHO delivers a range of programs³⁰ including:

● Strong Families Strong Communities (SFSC) Strengthened Sector and Communities Program

Key initiatives and expected outcomes of this program include:

- Home Ownership Options which will deliver 320 home ownership opportunities over 4 years
- Tertiary Accommodation Grants which will see 300 students enrolled in tertiary studies supported with the cost of housing over 4 years.

● SFSC Closing the Gap Program

This initiative consists of a range of programs:

- AHO Economic Recovery 23: Comprises two projects for new supply of homes
- Closing the Gap – Housing Solutions Program: Providing new Aboriginal homes, significant upgrades and Solar and Air-conditioning upgrades
- AHO Flood Recovery Program: Provides grants to Aboriginal Housing Providers to repair and upgrade flood damaged properties in flood affected regions in NSW.
- AHO LAHC Transfers Project: Transfers homes from NSW Land and Housing Corporation to AHO.

● Services Our Way (SOW)

Provides culturally appropriate service coordination, support and capacity building for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and families experiencing vulnerability, empowering them to improve their well being and achieve their goals as part of an individualised and family centred approach.

● NSW Budget

Within the government's \$6.6 billion social housing and homelessness investment, is \$202.6 million to fund a critical maintenance program for Aboriginal Housing repair and upgrade homes. The budget also provides for 6,200 new social homes with at least 50% of these prioritised for victim survivors of domestic and family violence³¹.

²⁸ AHO (2017). Aboriginal Housing Office Housing Eligibility Policy

²⁹³⁰ AHO (2024). Strong Families Strong Communities.

³¹ NSW Budget Paper No. 1 2024-25, Budget Statement, p.5-3 at: Budget Paper No.1 - Budget Statement Budget 2024-25

● Rental Assistance

There are a range of NSW and Commonwealth programs that provide rental support to Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal individuals. These include:

1. **Rent Choice:** Rent Choice helps tenants find and pay for rental accommodation for up to 3 years. Rental subsidies available for:
 - those escaping an unsafe living situation
 - young people between the ages of 16 and 24
 - veterans of the Australian Defence Force, and
 - those who have experienced a serious financial shock, such as job loss or illness.
2. **Rentstart:** Rentstart offers help to low income earners who are eligible for, or already living in, social housing. It aims to support individuals transitioning from social housing into a new home in the private rental market.
3. **Rent Assistance:** Rent Assistance may be provided through the Commonwealth government alongside income support payments to subsidise rental costs for those in private rental accommodation and community housing.

● Homelessness Services

The above supports are provided alongside a range of homelessness interventions, including those delivered under the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS).

SHS is funded by DCJ and delivered by non-government organisations across NSW. It targets individuals at high risk of homelessness, including women experiencing domestic violence, rough sleepers, young people leaving care, and those with mental health issues.

SHS operates in collaboration with housing providers and other service providers, including ACCOs, to prevent homelessness and support those already homeless in finding stable housing.

Specific programs of relevance to families include:

- **Women's Services and Refuges:** Offering specialised support for women, including those with children, complex needs, and those escaping domestic violence.
- **Domestic Violence Response Enhancement:** Providing additional funding to strengthen responses to domestic violence-related homelessness, offering tailored local service models, safety planning, case management, and increased crisis and temporary accommodation options.
- **Service Support Fund:** Establishing new programs to complement existing homelessness services and address broader homelessness reduction strategies.
- **Homeless Youth Assistance Program:** Addressing the unique needs of homeless children and young people aged 12 to 15, providing targeted support and accommodation with the goal of family reunification or transition to longer-term supported housing.

³² Guardian Australia (2024). Homeless women and children offered car park to sleep in through NSW pilot program.

³³ <https://iba.gov.au/home-ownership/>

³⁴ <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/aboriginal-housing/help-for-aboriginal-people-to-buy-a-home>

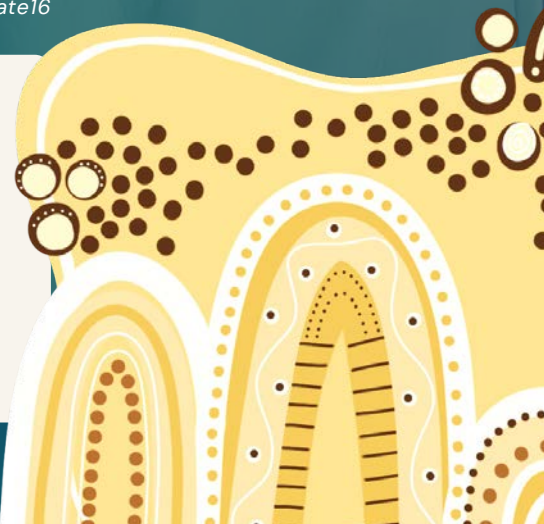
³⁵ <https://iba.gov.au/2024/04/iba-media-release-home-ownership-impacts-on-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-single-carer-families/>

³⁶ <https://www.aho.nsw.gov.au/tenants/home-ownership>



Photography credit: kckate16

Whilst these support programs exist, the level of community need exceeds program capacity. Homelessness Australia reported that in 2022-23, homelessness services across the country assisted 58,589 women and 37,825 children who had experienced domestic and family violence, with only 3.7% of those seeking long-term housing receiving this support³².



Indigenous Business Australia (IBA) offers a range of home ownership schemes designed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in purchasing their own homes, which can play a crucial role in stabilising families at risk of child protection contact. These schemes include low-deposit, low-interest housing loans that enable eligible families to buy an established residential property, upgrade an existing property, or build a new home with low deposit amounts³³. Additionally, IBA provides financial literacy training and workshops to help families prepare for home ownership, including budgeting and understanding credit³⁴.

The impact of these schemes is significant, as stable housing can reduce the stressors associated with housing instability, such as overcrowding and homelessness, which are often linked to child protection interventions³⁵. However, limitations exist that may reduce the effectiveness of these schemes in fully supporting families, including the availability of grants and loans being subject to funding caps and eligibility criteria, which may exclude some families in need³⁶. Furthermore, the requirement for a minimum deposit, although low, can still present a barrier for families experiencing severe financial hardship.

Despite these limitations, IBA's home ownership schemes represent a vital resource in promoting housing stability and reducing the risk of child protection contact for Aboriginal families.

● Housing Supports for Young People Transitioning From Care

In New South Wales, young people leaving out-of-home care may be entitled to housing supports to assist their transition to independent living, however evidence from CREATE foundation suggests that over a third of care leavers report experiencing homelessness within the first year of leaving care, with close to twenty percent of care leavers indicating they exited care to homelessness³⁷.

DCJ offers some supports aimed at providing stable accommodation for care leavers aged 18 to 25³⁸. These initiatives include the [Aftercare Housing Support Program](#), available to young people who are in full time education or training and are at risk of homelessness. It provides short-term assistance to young people aged 21 to 24 for a period of three months, until a more permanent solution is found.

Private Rental Assistance is also provided to eligible care leavers, including [Rentstart Bond Loans](#), which are interest free loans to help eligible young people pay a rental bond for a tenancy, [Bond Extra](#), which provides up to \$1,500 to landlords and agents to cover rental arrears and/or property damage that cost more than the rental bond, and [Rent Choice Youth](#), for young people between 16 and 24 years who can live independently, are homeless or at risk of homelessness, or are eligible for social housing and who plan to start work, education or training.

Rent Choice Youth is available only to young people connected to a support provider to enable them to achieve education or employment goals. Whilst these programs are available, evidence suggests that they do not meet needs for a significant portion of young people exiting care, with CREATE data indicating that of the 30% of young people who reported experienced homelessness in the first year of leaving care, 37% experienced homelessness for over 6 months³⁹.

³⁷ CREATE (2021). Post Care Report.

³⁸ <https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/service-providers/oohc-and-permanency-support-services/leaving-and-after-care/developing-a-leaving-and-after-care-plan/key-elements-of-a-leaving-care-plan/financial-assistance-and-entitlements.html>

³⁹ CREATE (2021). Post Care Report.

Policy Summary

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap includes housing among its 16 key national targets, recognising the critical role that secure, appropriate, and affordable housing plays in improving life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people⁴⁰. The Closing the Gap housing target aims to ensure that by 2031, 88% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be living in appropriately sized and stable housing. The agreement emphasises the need for culturally safe and responsive services designed and delivered by ACCOs to support families in staying safe together.

These Closing the Gap targets shape the Safe and Supported National child protection framework, which focuses on holistic and trauma-informed services for families⁴¹. Despite these attempts to provide Aboriginal-led and holistic services, significant gaps remain in practice which drive intersection between housing instability and child protection involvement.

Housing Instability and Child Protection

Risk assessment tools commonly used in child protection escalate intervention likelihood for families experiencing housing instability. While a range of housing and homelessness supports exists to assist families at risk of child protection involvement—such as those facing domestic and family violence (DFV), seeking restoration from out-of-home care (OOHC), or at risk of child removal—their effectiveness is limited by:

- **Knowledge gaps:** Unclear awareness among practitioners and families about available policies and supports.
- **Demand exceeding supply:** Housing and homelessness initiatives are consistently oversubscribed, reducing their practical impact on families in need.

The inadequacy of existing supports disproportionately impacts Aboriginal families, who often face higher rates of housing instability. Addressing these gaps requires a dual focus on increasing service capacity and ensuring that supports are culturally responsive, accessible, and prioritised for families at risk of child protection contact.

Closing these gaps is essential to achieving the Closing the Gap housing target and improving child protection outcomes for Aboriginal families.



⁴⁰ AHURI (2021). Closing the Gap targets improved housing for Indigenous Australians.

⁴¹ Department of Social Services. (2023). Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Outcomes Framework.

Child Protection and Housing Accessibility Trends

Consultations for this scoping review revealed that no formal analysis has been conducted to date on the intersection between child protection impacts and housing data in NSW. This gap, confirmed by DCJ’s Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research team (FACSIAR), highlights a critical opportunity for future research to better understand these relationships and inform targeted policy and practice interventions.

To address this gap and inform the current review, publicly available data was analysed to explore the links between child protection involvement and housing instability in NSW. This analysis provides preliminary insights into trends and areas requiring further investigation.

In 2023 there were 55,880 applicants on the NSW Housing Register⁴² 48,307 on the general waitlist and 7,573 on the priority list. Some 9,527 (17%) applicants were Aboriginal with 8,105 (17%) and 1,422 (19%) on the general and priority lists respectively.

Total dwellings in 2023 were 149,649 suggesting a shortage of 93,769 dwellings. However, shortages are exacerbated where housing types don’t meet need. The ‘under-occupancy’ rate is the percentage of dwellings with bedrooms surplus to the occupants needs and was 17% in 2023. This suggests there were over 50,000 rooms in excess of occupants’ needs in NSW in 2023.

Aboriginal Public Housing Waitlists

As shown in Figure 1, the number of Aboriginal housing applicants increased at an average rate of 4% per annum between 2012–2019 (compared with a modest -2% reduction in non-Aboriginal applicants over the same period). In the post-COVID period, the rate of growth in Aboriginal applicants has surged by 56% since 2020, and appears to be returning to a pre-COVID growth trajectory, contrasting with a 1% change in the same period in non-Aboriginal applicants.



Figure 1. Unmet Public Housing Demand for Aboriginal Applicants.

⁴² Department of Communities and Justice: Annual Statistical Report 2022–23.

Aligned to the concerning rate of growth in unmet housing demand, Aboriginal applicants make up a growing proportion of the total housing waitlist relative to non-Aboriginal applicants. Between 2012 and 2013, the proportion of Aboriginal applicants on housing waitlists increased by 7%, with the bulk of this increase occurring in the post COVID period since 2020 underpinned by higher growth of Aboriginal applicants in the priority waitlist relative to the general waitlist.

Figure 2 shows that 4,674 Aboriginal families (single applicant and couples with dependents) were waitlisted in 2023, representing half of all Aboriginal applicants. There has been a marked increase in Aboriginal family applicants as a proportion of all Aboriginal applicants in the post COVID period, which appears to be increasing at a higher rate than in the previous eight years.

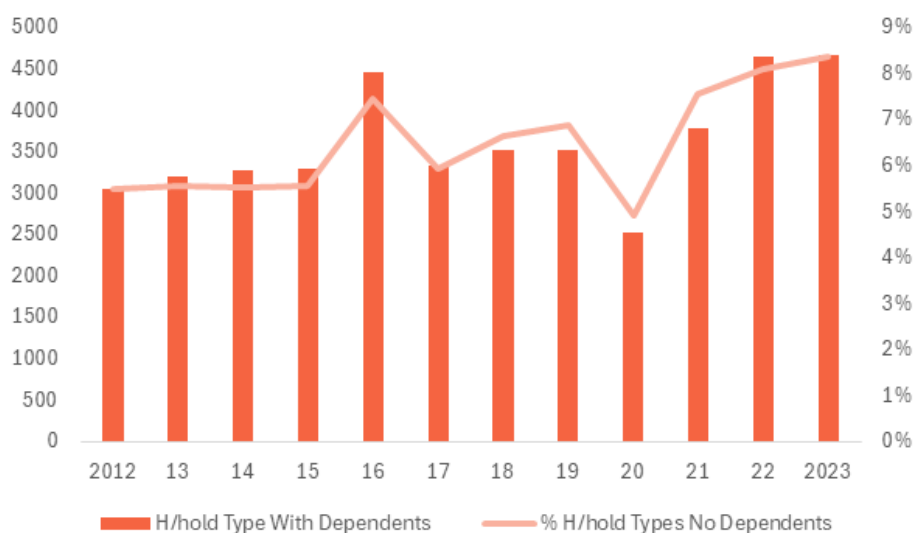


Figure 2. Waitlisted Aboriginal Families.

Unmet housing demand and Child Protection

The evidence for an association between housing accessibility and child protection has been outlined in previous sections of this paper, and suggests that a substantial overlap may exist between child protection contact and Aboriginal children and family requests for housing assistance. This may be a factor in precipitating child removal and act as a barrier to restoration of children to the care of their parents.

Figure 3 illustrates a close association between Aboriginal public housing applicants and the number of Aboriginal children reported at Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH). An observable trend is evident, with an association between areas that experience higher numbers of Aboriginal children reported at ROSH having higher unmet housing demand for Aboriginal applicants.



Figure 3. Aboriginal housing applicants and Aboriginal children at ROSH.

Figure 4 provides a geographical representation of the relationship between Aboriginal housing applicants and Aboriginal children reported at ROSH across DCJ Districts. The longest waitlists for housing coincide with the highest number of Aboriginal children reported at ROSH and is most pronounced in outer regional areas such as Hunter New England, Western NSW, and Mid-North Coast, while Sydney metropolitan and outer metropolitan areas generally have comparatively lower ROSH and housing demand. Across the state, there are 43 Aboriginal housing applicants for every 100 Aboriginal children reported at ROSH.

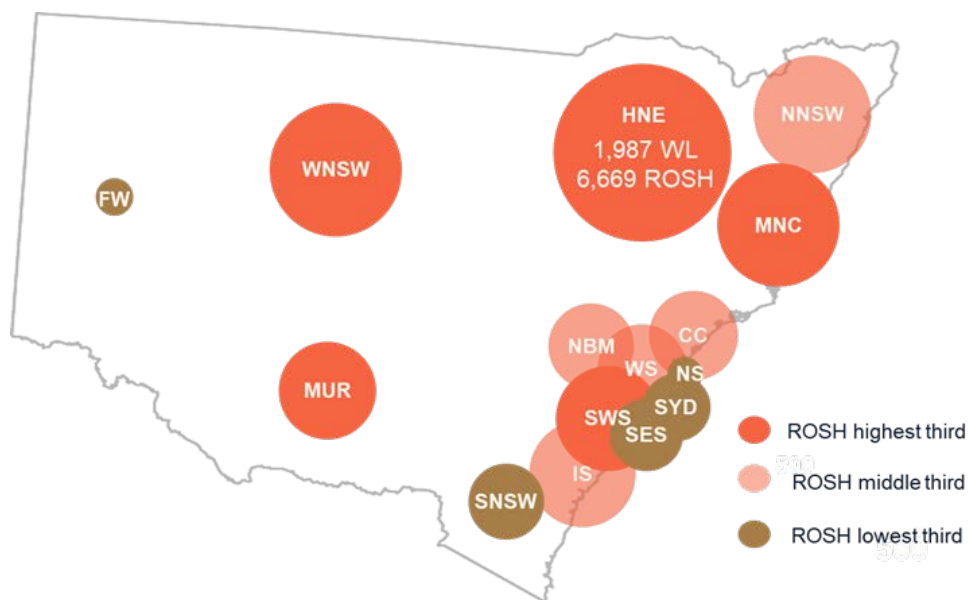


Figure 4 Housing Waitlists and ROSH by DCJ District 2023.

The Experiences of Aboriginal Service Providers, Stakeholders & Families

To elevate the voices of Aboriginal service providers and families, a series of data-gathering activities was conducted, complementing insights from administrative data analysis. These activities enabled ACCOs and other stakeholders to share their experiences and perspectives on the intersections between housing instability and child protection, offering valuable insights from their roles as service leaders and providers.



These data gathering activities included:

- Two in-person listening sessions with ACCOs at the May 2024 AbSec Quarterly Sector Forum, held in Tamworth in May 2024.
- Online discussions with members who expressed interest in participation in data gathering and who were invited to share their experiences.
- Online survey with AbSec members.
- Discussions and yarns with key stakeholders, including Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS), Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO), Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC), Kinchela Boys Home Aboriginal Corporation (KBHAC) and DCJ's Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research team (FACSIAR).

These activities provided a rich foundation for understanding the lived experiences of Aboriginal families and the systemic challenges faced by Aboriginal service providers in addressing housing instability and its impact on child protection.

Case Study: Kinchela Boy's Home Aboriginal Corporation

On 6 August 2024, the research team from AbSec and Lumenia spent some time at the Redfern office of the Kinchela Boys Home Aboriginal Corporation (KBHAC) to yarn with Kinchela Boys Home (KBH) survivors Uncle Widdy, Uncle Roger and Uncle Willy, the daughter of a KBH survivor, Auntie Lesley, and Tiffany McComsey, the CEO of KBHAC.

The yarn was focused on gathering understanding and insights on how for members of the Stolen Generations and their descendants, what Uncle Widdy described as 'the blood trauma that runs through my body and has been passed down to my children and grandchildren through my

bloodline as intergenerational trauma' has impacted their experiences of the housing system and homelessness. The Uncles also provided their ideas for housing system reform and what is required so that survivors and their children and grandchildren can have a place to call home.

It is not possible to capture in mere words the horrific abuse (physical, psychological, sexual and cultural) that the Uncles experienced nor the strength, passion, commitment and generosity that drives their work to provide empowering, healing and healthy peer support for all KBH survivors and their families. We hope these reflections inspire action and change.

Uncle Widdy

Uncle Widdy said KBHAC uses its resources – and needs more resources – to find relatives and to support kin to provide care but a larger, community-led response is required that invests in rebuilding family structures, “A response that helps us and our kids to get the supports we need to address our trauma.

“

We're screaming out for help, we need help... Let us talk to policy makers. We want this to be done and fixed up, we have the right and the knowledge and the skills.

I know I used to use violence to reclaim that sense of safety and autonomy that was taken from me... but we've got to help our Uncles and our children learn how to engage with health and other services. We have the opportunity to develop these pathways to healing but we don't have the resources”.

Later in our yarn, Uncle Widdy's voice broke and he shed tears reflecting on the nature and impact of that blood trauma (intergenerational trauma), “the research says 1 in 4 Australian children are being sexually abused – 1 in 4, how is that allowed? That's not acceptable and police aren't doing their job. We're screaming out for help, we need help... Let us talk to policy makers. We want this to be done and fixed up, we have the right and the knowledge and the skills. The future lies with the descendants, the grandchildren”. Uncle Widdy wants to start up a package of work focused on who needs housing, “we need to know how many houses are required and where”.

Uncle Widdy wants to start up a package of work focused on who needs housing. We need to know how many houses are required and where.

Uncle Roger

For Uncle Roger, his passion is to house young boys and men who can't get jobs and have interfaced with youth justice, “we can support them to learn and employ them at Kinchela to give them a positive life and a wage. It's really important to teach young ones coming out of justice system to enable them to have ongoing wages and economic prosperity... There are lots of employment opportunities including cleaning the local river and removing metals- sorting and recycling. There needs to be gainful employment led by Aboriginal people so they can rent or buy a house... Aboriginal people have always been here to care for Country, to clean it up. Kinchela can start and back this positive movement”.

We asked Uncle Roger what a home would like for him. He said: “I want money to buy a property. Just a small one and I would create a legal document so that the land can't be sold, so that it can be passed down for eternity to my children and their children. I'd like to bring up our kids- fix up trauma- it's not much to ask for. I can build, I can farm, I can bring my family back together but I can't do it without the funding”.

“

I'd like to bring up our kids- fix up trauma- it's not much to ask for.

He is frustrated by governments pretending to listen but doing nothing: “They destroyed my Mum and made her go through losing us twice through to lose us twice... The things they've done to us, the trauma they've caused us – we've had to live with it all our life. Kinchela took away my identity, culture – it stays outside. I didn't know what love was or what colour I was... That's part of life, but I just want that land I want to show I've achieved something in life. I feel like a third class citizen in own country... I just want to teach young blokes, give them a positive wage – and shove that dole – so they can buy their kids what they need”.

Uncle Willy

Uncle Willy talked about the homelessness that he sees growing in regional communities, “people living in cars or seeing mob living on the riverbank in tents... And it’s getting worse. This is a problem for government to sort out... there are solutions like tiny homes, that aren’t being pursued”.



We need to lead this because we know what we need to rebuild. We all got taken from our communities.

He talked about how hard it can be to go back to community when you’ve been stolen, sharing a personal story about how he stole a car at age of 13 to go home, “turned out I gave my mother a lift but I didn’t know who she was. We went home to find love. But your voice had changed, no one knew you at home when you went back as a man. We weren’t part of our families and we weren’t accepted by society.

“A lot of mob want to go back to communities but can’t without housing and the infrastructure you need alongside housing like health and maternity and child health services. Being on Country is part of our human rights- there needs to be a return to Country and that’s a housing issue...

“...We need to lead this because we know what we need to rebuild. We all got taken from our communities. Mob got moved. Because you got taken away it was hard to go back home. We got taken and couldn’t get that culture back to teach our children and grandchildren. Elders are now wanting to go back home and rebuild things for our grandchildren and great grandchildren. Government can support this rebuilding”.

Aunty Lesley

Aunty Lesley’s father was a Kinchela Boys Home survivor and she now works with KBHAC helping to find housing for Uncles and their families. She shared that the challenges and frustrations are huge: “We had an uncle who was 83 and couldn’t get a place despite being prioritised and on a priority wait list. Yet, we look around and see heaps of empty homes, but he still couldn’t get one. Who are their priority? Why do homes stay vacant? What about a register or similar? This feels like an easy fix to me.

“...Every day we bash our head against a wall trying to secure housing for our Uncles. There is so much paperwork and it is hard to complete, if you don’t know what you’re doing. It’s very hard to do those forms if you’re not the type to ask for help”.

Aunty Lesley talked about how much government could save if they thought about and built the little communities that different types of families need,

“Uncles are living in houses and are lonely. There are opportunities to build communities. Right now our community is ageing- we need places they can go together to be connected, to age together”.

Aunty Lesley made connections to a lot of the points made by Uncle Roger and Uncle Widdy about creating employment opportunities, “Social housing repairs have been contracted to the cheapest providers doing a substandard job rather than considering opportunities to empower our young people with training and work with Aboriginal companies. These types of employment are now managed by the Department, and Mob can miss out if they’ve got a criminal history... Mob could do this work and train around this to strengthen their ongoing career pathways.

“I know a descendent getting out of rehab, feeling like a failure because they can’t get a job and secure housing. Another family lost a private rental due to not making a rental payment. Then they had to go to hotel/motel accommodation and got competing advice from DCJ Housing and other services. We tried to support her with understanding information and holding people to account but it’s hard...”

It results in people having to accept housing in poor locations which impacts on their children’s school attendance, health and wellbeing. They are scared to ask for a better location because they are fearful of losing their children as we have three or four generations where children have been removed.



There is so much paperwork and it is hard to complete, if you don’t know what you’re doing.

Tiffany McComsey

As the CEO of KBHAC, Tiffany spoke of the funding challenge in supporting Uncles and their descendants to access secure and community-connected housing. There is no housing funding for Aboriginal men – no housing stock, and no solutions for men and families.

On top of this, the current housing allocation system works against, and serves to trigger and traumatise survivors when they are forced into emergency accommodation...Even in social housing there is pain in places where people have died, suicided, or children have been removed. We need to build healing ritual around this to support families and make these homes safe...Right now we're setting everyone up for failure.

Respect and transparency are missing from the system. For example, when housing stock isn't being maintained or used, there is no communication on when maintenance is planned and when the housing can become available

For KBHAC, the impact of past policies now creates a new sense of urgency. Tiffany explained, the Uncles are ageing in isolation and afraid of engaging in housing. They require innovative solutions that reduce isolation. Sharing meals together, having a home environment which keeps everyone safe such as residential focused care with Kinchela...Or wet centres that support alcohol or substance use rehabilitation combined with models that support healing... We don't get funded to do housing, but we're doing housing every day of the week. We can't be expected to do this, and to do it well, when we don't get funded to do it.

Our yarn closed with Uncle Widdy weaving all the threads together: We want the right to be free and equal, to be heard, to have the resources to rebuild the family structure that they broke, and to have a place to call home."





AbSec Member Listening Session Themes

Two listening sessions which shared emerging findings of the project to date and sought the views of AbSec members and community were held at commencement of qualitative data gathering at the AbSec Quarterly Forum in Tamworth in May 2024. These sessions involved approximately 50 AbSec members and attendees. Alongside these sessions, individual consultations with members who expressed interest in the project were undertaken.

Key themes that emerged regarding the relationship between child protection impacts and housing accessibility for Aboriginal families during these sessions included member perceptions of:

● Lack of Culturally-led Child Protection and Housing Policies

- Lack of consideration of Aboriginal parenting practices across both housing and child protection systems, which impacts on child protection contact for families.
- Members discussed the nature of 'overcrowding' being considered a child protection risk in SDM and other risk assessment processes, where it could alternatively be viewed through a First Nations' lens as a strength, demonstrating strong family supports.
- Need for cultural competence in designing housing and considering its suitability for Aboriginal families.
- Importance of housing approaches which preserve connections to community and enable kinship networks.

"Aboriginal people not only need better access to appropriate housing, but also need to be leading and involved in design, construction, allocation and maintenance of housing."

– AbSec Member

● Practical Challenges to Accessing Social Housing

- Long wait times for social housing, especially in regional areas.
- Online application processes can be challenging for some families.
- Lack of suitable housing options, leading to families declining offers for housing where the available stock would not allow extended family to visit, or where housing was inappropriate or poorly aligned to the needs of families.
- Need for more autonomy and funding for ACCOs in housing provision.

- Direct involvement of Aboriginal people in housing policy development to enable true self-determination and ensure Aboriginal-centred and culturally appropriate social housing access strategies.

“We have about an 8 year wait for social housing [in our service area]. Priority housing waitlists are also huge for our families.”

– Regional ACCO Member

● Social Housing Availability and Quality

- Gentrification leading to loss of housing stock in some areas, with examples including inner-city locations such as Redfern where social housing has been demolished in favour of private housing stock which is unaffordable for most Aboriginal families, forcing families to relocate far from their kin, children’s schooling and support networks.
- Poor maintenance of social housing properties often drive child protection risk assessments and ROSH reports. Members shared examples where lack of responses to social housing maintenance requests has been mistakenly viewed as an indicator of child neglect by child protection authorities.
- Need for improved quality and timely maintenance of social housing stock was frequently referenced, given its impact on safety and wellbeing for children.
- The impact of natural disasters such as the recent flooding in Northern NSW damaging social housing stock which now require repair, exacerbating housing stock shortages and poor condition of available housing.
- Lack of support for intergenerational wealth building through home ownership, with limited availability of housing purchasing schemes, and interest rates which often don’t compare well to those of larger financial institutions. Members emphasised the need to move focus to programs promoting true home ownership for Aboriginal families.

“One mother had reported exposed wires in her social housing property in the attached garage which were not addressed by maintenance requests...”

“Child protection caseworkers came over and told her that these wires were an unacceptable child protection risk, holding this against her, even though she had reported it to Housing and couldn’t do anything more about it herself.”

– Metro ACCO Member

“A family we were working with was experiencing water interruptions due to ongoing damage of water mains outside of a family’s social housing block. This prevented them washing their children’s school uniform.”

“The teacher at the school raised a child protection notification, suggesting neglect, and child protection came to investigate despite this family having explicitly sought maintenance support for these issues repeatedly.”

– Regional ACCO Member

Intersections with Child Protection

- Housing issues are often conflated with child protection risk assessments due to the explicit focus of overcrowding and housing instability in risk assessment tools; biased risk assessment tools like Safety and Risk Assessments and SDM require decolonisation and Aboriginal-led process redesign.
- Mandatory child protection reporting in these circumstances escalates risk of further child protection involvement without providing housing support which families require.
- Members suggested legislative change to prevent ROSH and child removals based solely on housing issues, and to instead mandate supports be more rapidly provided in these circumstances. This may also include enhancing family preservation services which integrate housing support.
- There is a need to decouple statutory child protection system from housing issues, with an opportunity to create pathways of reporting to housing authorities which escalate housing access where families are experiencing housing instability, rather than reporting to child protection.
- Surveillance by housing providers can increase child protection reports. Better communication and less siloed service provision was referred to by members, but a need to consider how this is implemented in strengths- and support-focused approaches rather than punitive approaches was discussed by members.

“So long as DCJ uses Western tools like SARA and SDM, they are going to have bias in assessment that doesn’t see our cultural practices, like living with our [extended] families, as strengths and protective factors and instead marks them down as a risk, leading to removal of our kids.”

– Regional ACCO Member



“I was working in a Child Protection Departmental role where our social housing colleagues were based downstairs in the same building. They would regularly interact with families who were seeking housing supports, and walk straight upstairs and report them as at risk of harm because of their risk of homelessness, not supporting families appropriately and effectively punishing them for seeking supports.”

– Metro NGO based AbSec Member

● Support for Vulnerable Groups

- Young people exiting out-of-home care need additional housing support pathways, with members citing a number of circumstances in which young people leaving kinship and foster care were unable to secure housing and exited to homelessness.
- Single parents face long wait times for housing in many jurisdictions and are increasing in their numbers. More targeted social housing approaches are needed to ensure families can stay together in these circumstances.
- Where families have children in OOHC, members report there are challenges for them in securing appropriately sized housing; children are not residing with them at the time of seeking housing, thus social housing offered to them is not sized to accommodate their children, which then restricts restoration.
- Women experiencing domestic violence with sons were reported to often have limited refuge options due to age restrictions on boys entering these facilities, with questions on the appropriateness and safety of housing offered to mothers raised by members.

“Mothers fleeing violence are allocated social housing in unsafe places, with unsafe people living nearby, or in places far from children’s schools, families, supports and services for Mum and kids. These are places I’d never feel safe driving through, let alone walking around or raising my kids in.”

– Regional AbSec Member

Member Survey

A survey was undertaken with AbSec members to explore their perceptions on the issue of housing accessibility and child protection impacts (Appendix A).

Respondents (n = 18) rated the extent to which challenges in Aboriginal families accessing housing contribute to child abuse and neglect risk at an average score of 6.4 on a scale of 0 – 10, where 10 indicated a great extent. This finding suggests that housing accessibility issues are perceived to have only a moderate impact on increasing the risk of child abuse and neglect.

Survey participants rated the extent to which housing accessibility challenges influence the DCJ decisions for child protection removal at an average score of 8.2, indicating a strong perception that housing accessibility issues play a substantial role in influencing the decisions made by DCJ regarding the removal of children from their families for protection purposes.

Similarly, the respondents rated the extent to which housing accessibility challenges prevent the restoration of children in out-of-home care at an average score of 8.44, highlighting a significant perception that housing accessibility issues are a major barrier to the reunification of children in out-of-home care with their families.

Taken together, these findings underscore the disparity in child wellbeing risk perceived to be caused by housing instability relative to the high perceived likelihood of child protection intervention where families are experiencing housing challenges.

The survey also sought to identify the policies and practices that need to change to enable Aboriginal families to better access housing. The responses highlighted the following key reform opportunities.

Housing Stock and Flexible Solutions

Respondents emphasised the need for increasing the availability of housing stock and providing flexible housing solutions tailored to the diverse needs of Aboriginal families.

Aboriginal Leadership

There was a strong call for Aboriginal people to be leading and actively involved in the design, construction, allocation, and maintenance of housing, and in research and policy design.

Community-Led Housing Management

Respondents highlighted the importance of having the Aboriginal-led organisations managing community housing needs. This was seen to enable a sense of safety, accessibility, and respect within the housing sector for Aboriginal families.

Child-Centered Safety Assessment

Participants suggested a focus on understanding safety from the child's perspective and positioning responsibility appropriately. Many aspects of housing accessibility and social housing maintenance are structural issues beyond the control of families, necessitating an improved housing policy that addresses systemic barriers.

Increased Economic Opportunities

Respondents highlighted the importance of increasing employment opportunities, education pathways, and financial support mechanisms for Aboriginal families.

Legislative Changes

Suggestions were made to introduce legislation that prohibits the removal of children solely due to homelessness or housing insecurity, and considering housing instability separately to escalate supports rather than flag child protection risk.

Decolonising Policies and Assessments

Participants advocated for the adoption of policies and assessments that incorporate an Aboriginal worldview and a decolonising lens, ensuring culturally led practices and removal of tools which integrate known biases.

Social Housing and Maintenance

Recommendations included building more social housing and providing regular maintenance and renovations for existing properties to ensure safe and adequate living conditions for Aboriginal families and reduce child protection impacts.



Photography credit:Image-Source

“The homelessness and child protection service systems are both responding to families – and potentially the same families – with complex needs. Despite the lack of data to support the notion that families are in contact with both service systems there is practice wisdom to suggest this is the case. Again lacking is any robust evidence based data on collaboration or programs where the two service systems are working together to support these families”.



Promising Practices

Whilst there is recognition in Australia that housing instability and homelessness are major risk factors that can contribute to child protection concerns and family separations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families disproportionately affected by housing insecurity and over-represented in the child protection system, there is a lack of well-established, holistic programs that simultaneously tackle housing access and child protection risks in an integrated manner across Australia⁴³.

Advocates have highlighted the need for greater policy and service integration between housing, child protection, and family support systems to empower families and support child wellbeing. In their review of literature in homelessness and child protection services, the Australian Centre for Child Protection noted the lack of service coordination and innovative, holistic approaches to delivery of services to families⁴⁴:

“The homelessness and child protection service systems are both responding to families – and potentially the same families – with complex needs. Despite the lack of data to support the notion that families are in contact with both service systems there is practice wisdom to suggest this is the case. Again lacking is any robust evidence based data on collaboration or programs where the two service systems are working together to support these families”.

Beyond the range of Aboriginal led and ACCO delivered housing initiatives previously described, there appears to be few innovative holistic service provision models which feature in relevant literature. Emerging initiatives are currently being trialed in international settings to address the intersections between housing instability and child protection.

Permanent supportive housing approaches are one such initiative, which provide affordable housing combined with intensive, comprehensive support services tailored to the needs of families experiencing homelessness and other complex challenges. The Keeping Families Together (KFT) model, developed by the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH)⁴⁵ draws on philanthropic funds to locate homes for, and provide wraparound support services to families involved in the child welfare system and experiencing housing instability. The program represents the first permanent supportive housing program in the USA which designed specifically for families involved with the child welfare system due to housing instability and other complex challenges, adapting programs which were previously designed for single individuals experiencing homelessness.

The KFT model⁴⁶ combines affordable housing with intensive, comprehensive support services tailored to address the multifaceted needs of these families. Key features of the KFT model include:

- Providing permanent, deeply subsidised housing without preconditions or requirements for service participation. This approach promotes housing stability and family preservation.
- Offering evidence-based services rooted in cognitive behavioral and family systems approaches, such as parenting support, trauma-informed care, and substance abuse treatment.

^{43, 44} Australian Centre for Child Protection (2010). Investing in our future: Children’s journeys through homelessness and child protection.

^{45, 46} CSH (2024). Keeping Families Together Model.

- Facilitating family reunification by successfully reuniting children in foster care with their families in supportive housing, reducing the number of open indicated cases of child abuse and neglect, as well as substantiated abuse and neglect reports, after families move into supportive housing.

Early evaluations of the KFT pilot in New York City demonstrated promising outcomes, including high rates of housing retention, successful family reunifications, and reductions in child welfare system involvement and substance abuse issues among participating families⁴⁷.



Photography credit: <https://www.ahc.org.au/>

Aboriginal Housing Company

The Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC) takes a holistic, culturally-grounded approach to housing provision that supports strong family and community connections for Aboriginal families, using an Aboriginal leadership model which creates strong outcomes for community and can inform the design and delivery of housing services for families.

As a fully Aboriginal owned and operated company, AHC's housing is designed to enable kinship care arrangements, with adequate space for extended families and facilities including multiple bathrooms to accommodate larger households. The community design promotes peer support networks, reducing isolation and supporting positive parenting. AHC housing allows families to maintain connections to their community, country and cultural identity, critical protective factors supporting wellbeing.

The AHC provides integrated community-based supports to enable children and families to grow connected and strong on Country, with rapid community based responses to safety issues including domestic and family violence which support families. By ensuring housing is fit-for-purpose and facilitating a community environment built on respect and caring for one another, the AHC model addresses risk factors that can lead to child protection system involvement for Aboriginal families.

⁴⁷ CSH (2024). Keeping Families Together Model.

Case Study: Aboriginal Housing Company

A 40-year-old Aboriginal female with two children shared her housing story with AbSec. It involved relocating from Western NSW to Sydney for work, education opportunities and to be close to her support network of family and friends. Initially she was staying with family members but then her family relocated home. Our researcher asked her about her experiences in obtaining housing and the barriers she faced. Her story follows:

"I fell pregnant with my first child at 19 years old. At the time I was living in Dubbo. I had an amazing support network. I did have complications with my pregnancy. As a result, I could not work. I applied for social housing and was offered a 3 bedroom right in the Bronx of East Dubbo after being on the waitlist for 2 years on. My son was six months old when I moved into the property. I was alone with my son living in the house. The first week I moved into the house I was broken into while I was at a doctor's appointment. A week later, a pizza delivery guy was stabbed and bashed on the corner of my street. They threw the metal pole in my front yard. I moved back home with my family after this. I felt so unsafe. I didn't know about transferring to another property or the processes [to enable this].

I moved to Sydney in the early 2000s. I got a good job in Sydney that paid well. I attended over 70 viewing for properties. I treated housing like a full-time job. I would view 3 or 4 properties on Saturdays and where I could attend other properties I would. I was successful in the private market. I rented a place for 7-8 years. The landlord passed away and I was given 90 days to vacant the property as the family wanted to sell.

I couldn't get a rental reference as the family members had no access to bank accounts and they told me directly they didn't know me well enough to give me a reference. I had another child in this time. I registered for Welcome Mat, Bridge Housing, Evolve Housing, St George Housing, City West and Aboriginal Housing Company. I had fortnightly check ins. I had nowhere to live. I used up all the temporary accommodation with both my sons.

I was offered a place at a refuge, but this meant that my eldest son could not stay there with us as he was over the age of 16 years old. My son left to live with my parents. I was only in the refuge for a few weeks before I was offered transitional housing with 4-month leases and case management with the agency / refuge. I was so stressed at every 4 months having to renew a lease and being informed that I was able to stay a maximum of 18 months. I was allocated a caseworker who helped me so much and fought for me and extended my lease. I was paying market value rent at \$730 per week. My eldest son was able to move back in with us. This was a blessing. Even though it was only a 2-bedroom, older property I made it work.

I was at 16 months when I heard back from Uncle Mick Mundine, within 18 months of my applying for Housing Plus. I was calling and emailing every week. I gave all my documentation – support letters, character references and I met face to face with Uncle Mick. After a few weeks of meeting with Uncle Mick, I was contacted to view a property. I viewed the property and that afternoon I received an email telling me congratulations I was successful in getting the property. I cried I was so overwhelmed and so happy. I knew I had my Sista girls living in the same area, so I have support. We carpool the kids to football, and if my Sista girls are sick I'll support her having the kids. It's a community. The security at the property is high standard, I physically feel safe. Even the underground park parking has cameras and I feel safe.

Everyone is embracing and supportive in the building. I feel a sense of pride living in the block surrounded by my people who are working in all fields from employment, health, Aboriginal organisations and starting to go out on their own. I want my kids to be part of this community that is thriving and supportive. Also, I want them to understand the history of all the people that fought for us before us to acknowledge and respect legacy of our leaders past and present.

The condition of the property is near perfect. I'm paying less rent in a modern three bedroom with space for both my children to have their own rooms. It is a 12-month lease with the ongoing lease given I do the right things and pay my rent on time and keep the property in a good condition. I'm not in fear of homelessness."

First Nations' Led Housing First Initiatives

There are emerging examples of Aboriginal Community Controlled Housing First Models being applied in practice in Australia which adapt the Housing First approach and incorporate connections to land, kinship, cultural healing practices. These programs integrate Aboriginal-led services in design and implementation to ensure cultural safety, building relationships and partnerships with communities and embedding Aboriginal understandings of home and wellbeing.

Whilst these Aboriginal led Housing First adaptations are not specifically family focused, their delivery approach provides a model which may guide ongoing program design approaches in this setting. Examples of these initiatives include the Noongar Housing First Principles⁴⁸ and the Aboriginal led Together Home Program's Aboriginal Community Controlled model led by Yerin Aboriginal Health Service⁴⁹, which integrates strong collaboration between the Aboriginal health service and community housing provider, Home in Place, using a client-driven, transdisciplinary model of culturally safe care which embeds cultural safety. Such models may provide a basis of integration of family wellbeing and parenting services to reduce child protection impacts and empower Aboriginal families experiencing housing instability.

⁴⁸ NOONGAR MIA MIA (2021). Noongar Cultural Framework.

⁴⁹ AHURI (2024). Empowering Indigenous communities to reduce homelessness is key to Closing the Gap.

Policy Reform Opportunities

The relationship between housing instability and child protection involvement is evident in interjurisdictional literature, NSW data, and feedback from AbSec members. This scoping review identifies key areas for policy reform that we, as a community and peak body, can advocate for, focusing on self-determination, cultural safety, and empowering Aboriginal families.

- **Aboriginal Leadership**
 - Embed Aboriginal leadership in the design, implementation, and evaluation of housing and child protection policies to ensure they are self-determined and culturally centred.
- **Decolonising Risk Assessment Tools**
 - Redesign risk and safety assessment tools, such as Safety and Risk Assessments (SARA) and Structured Decision-Making (SDM) tools, to eliminate biases and reflect Aboriginal parenting practices and housing needs.
- **Legislative Advocacy**
 - Advocate for legislative changes to prevent child removals based solely on housing issues
 - Mandate housing support and family preservation services in cases where housing instability is a contributing factor.
- **Decoupling Housing from Child Protection**
 - Develop pathways for housing instability to be addressed by housing authorities, separate from statutory child protection agencies, to avoid unnecessary child protection involvement.
- **Collaboration and Communication**
 - Foster stronger collaboration between housing providers, child protection agencies, and Aboriginal communities to adopt strengths-based and support-focused approaches.
- **Maintenance and Disaster Response**
 - Advocate for timely housing maintenance and effective responses to natural disasters to ensure families are not unfairly penalised during child protection assessments for circumstances beyond their control.
- **Social Housing Stock and Prioritisation**
 - Increase the availability of social housing stock and redesign prioritisation models to better support families in need.
 - Trial Aboriginal-designed systems that account for cultural needs, location preferences, and wait times.
- **Targeted Housing Supports**

Expand housing support pathways for specific groups, including:

 - Young people transitioning from out-of-home care.
 - Families with children in OOHC.
 - Families experiencing domestic and family violence.
- **Housing Access Programs**
 - Advocate for housing programs that remove preconditions, drawing inspiration from successful trials in other jurisdictions.

- **Intergenerational Wealth-Building**

- Promote and expand affordable financing and homeownership opportunities for Aboriginal families to build intergenerational wealth.

- **Further Research**

Undertake NSW-based research using linked datasets and community feedback to:

- Examine the timing of housing support requests relative to child protection notifications.
- Understand the proportion of child protection notifications driven by housing challenges rather than neglect.



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Alignment with NSW Government Priorities

A number of these areas of priority areas for reform identified by AbSec members align to recent recommendations of the NSW Audit Office report⁵⁰ and align to NSW Government budget commitments for the 2024/25 Financial Year, including in:

- Delivering up to 21,000 new market and affordable homes.
- Building 8,400 social homes, including priority homes for victim-survivors of domestic and family violence.
- Investing \$5.1 billion in 8,400 social homes, of which 6,200 will be new homes and 2,200 are replacement homes.
- Investing \$1.0 billion to repair 33,500 existing social homes.
- \$250.0 million of funding to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including those leaving correctional centres and mental health services and securing funding for Specialist Homelessness Services and the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector for homelessness services.

Opportunity for Collaborative Action

These commitments create opportunities for collaboration between Peaks, government agencies, and the housing and homelessness sectors to advocate for Aboriginal-led reforms. By prioritising culturally responsive and self-determined policies, these initiatives can more effectively address the needs of Aboriginal families, reduce child protection involvement, and promote long-term stability and family well-being.

Together, we can drive reforms that focus on collaboration, cultural safety, and the strengths of Aboriginal children, young people and families, addressing systemic barriers and creating lasting positive change.

⁵⁰ NSW Audit Office (2024). Safeguarding the rights of Aboriginal children in the child protection system.

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