

SUBMISSION

Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing: From Commitments to Houses, Community Control and Intergenerational Equity

SEARMS Community Housing Aboriginal Corporation

Prepared by Thomas R Slookee

September 2026

Purpose: This submission responds to the Productivity Commission's 2026 Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, with a particular focus on housing, Priority Reform 2 (building the community-controlled sector), shared decision-making, government accountability, funding reform and Socio-economic Outcome 9.

Executive Summary

SEARMS Community Housing Aboriginal Corporation makes this submission from approximately 30 years of direct experience providing and managing social housing for Aboriginal people, families and communities. Our central message is simple: Closing the Gap in housing must be measured not only by policy frameworks, consultation processes and expenditure, but by whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have more safe, affordable, culturally appropriate homes and whether Aboriginal community-controlled housing organisations are stronger and more sustainable.

The Productivity Commission's 2026 review is examining progress against the four Priority Reforms and 17 socio-economic outcomes, the factors contributing to progress including funding allocations, successful delivery models, and areas where additional effort is required. This submission responds directly to that framework, particularly Priority Reforms 1, 2, 3 and 4 and Socio-economic Outcome 9.

SEARMS submits that the present housing crisis is intergenerational. In our regional experience, Aboriginal community-controlled housing stock has seen little or no meaningful growth for more than two decades, while need has increased. Overcrowding, housing insecurity, ageing stock, limited pathways for young people, and inadequate housing options for Elders and Stolen Generations survivors are consequences of that long-term shortage.

The central structural problem is that responsibility has been dispersed while long-term responsibility for outcomes has not been clearly matched by adequate capital, operational funding and accountability. Aboriginal Community Housing Providers are often expected to manage ageing assets, complex tenancies, maintenance liabilities and contemporary regulatory obligations largely from rent. That model is not sufficient to build a strong and sustainable community-controlled sector.

SEARMS therefore recommends a national 10–20 year Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing strategy and capital program, sustainable operational and capacity funding for Aboriginal Community Housing Providers, measurable growth targets for Aboriginal-owned and Aboriginal-managed housing, a redesigned Aboriginal pathway through the Housing Australia Future Fund, location-adjusted construction funding, dedicated youth, transitional and Elder housing, and transparent regional reporting of need, investment and completed housing.

Key Recommendations

- Establish a 10–20 year National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Strategy, developed through genuine shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing organisations and communities.
- Create a dedicated long-term capital program to build, acquire, replace and upgrade Aboriginal community-controlled housing.
- Set measurable national, jurisdictional and regional targets for growth in housing owned and/or managed by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.
- Provide sustainable operational and capacity funding to Aboriginal Community Housing Providers in addition to rental income.
- Redesign the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander HAFF pathway so participation does not depend on mainstream-sized balance sheets, large commercial loans or substantial unrestricted cash reserves.
- Provide location-adjusted capital funding and separately fund enabling infrastructure where construction and servicing costs are higher.
- Strengthen Aboriginal governance, property management, development capability, workforce, leadership and local Aboriginal employment.

- Develop dedicated Aboriginal youth, transitional and Elder housing programs and connect housing with culturally appropriate health, disability, family safety and wellbeing supports.
- Require transparent public reporting, by jurisdiction and region, of Aboriginal housing need, overcrowding, homelessness, waiting lists, stock growth, stock loss, investment and completed dwellings.
- Use Closing the Gap accountability mechanisms to test whether Priority Reform commitments are producing stronger Aboriginal community-controlled housing organisations and additional homes.

1. About SEARMS and the Basis of this Submission

SEARMS is an Aboriginal Community Housing Provider with approximately 30 years of experience providing social housing to Aboriginal people, families and communities. This submission is grounded in practical experience of property management, tenancy management, ageing housing assets, maintenance, community relationships and the lived consequences of housing shortage.

Historically, small and locally based Aboriginal organisations were supported through dedicated Commonwealth and State programs, including programs administered through ATSIC, the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program and NSW programs such as Housing on Aboriginal Land. Following the abolition of ATSIC and subsequent changes to housing arrangements, responsibility became increasingly dispersed across Commonwealth, state and territory agencies and mainstream housing systems.

From our perspective, this fragmentation has weakened strategic responsibility and accountability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing. Multiple agencies have responsibilities touching housing, but communities still experience a lack of coordinated national leadership, long-term investment and clear accountability for growth in Aboriginal community-controlled housing.

2. Alignment with the Productivity Commission's 2026 Review

The Commission's call for submissions asks for experiences and views about progress against commitments in the National Agreement, how actions could be improved, and the proposed approach to the review. It expressly states that contributors do not need to answer every question and encourages examples, case studies, data and research.

This submission addresses the review through the practical lens of housing. Housing provides a useful test of whether the four Priority Reforms are changing the way governments work and whether those reforms are producing measurable improvements in socio-economic outcomes.

In particular, the Commission asks how governments are prioritising Aboriginal community-controlled organisations in funding, how sector-strengthening efforts are improving capacity, workforce, leadership and sustainability, who determines success, how governments share decisions, what system barriers affect socio-economic outcomes, and how reforms translate into action. These questions go directly to the experience and concerns set out in this submission.

3. Socio-economic Outcome 9: Housing Must Be Treated as Foundational

Housing cannot be separated from health, mental health, disability, education, employment, family safety and social and emotional wellbeing. Safe, secure and appropriate housing is the foundation from which people can address other difficulties in their lives.

Overcrowding, homelessness, housing instability and poor housing conditions contribute to stress, family conflict, disrupted education and poorer physical and mental health. For Aboriginal people, housing also has

cultural dimensions. Household design and allocation must recognise kinship obligations, caring responsibilities, Elders, children and extended family relationships.

The Commission's July 2026 Closing the Gap material reports that 81.4 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived in appropriately sized housing under Target 9a, while no assessment was available for Target 9b concerning essential services. National figures are important, but they can obscure acute local and regional shortages. Closing the Gap reporting should therefore be complemented by transparent regional data about housing need, stock, waiting lists, overcrowding, homelessness, condition and investment.

4. An Intergenerational Housing Crisis

For more than 20 years, the Aboriginal community-controlled housing sector in our region has experienced little or no meaningful growth in housing stock. A generation has grown up while the number of houses available to our communities has effectively stood still.

The effects are visible across families. Three and sometimes four generations may live in one dwelling. Young Aboriginal people have limited prospects of independent accommodation. Young families remain with parents and grandparents because affordable alternatives are scarce. Elders and Stolen Generations survivors are ageing in poverty and sometimes in housing that no longer meets their changing needs.

This is not simply a shortage at one point in time. It is intergenerational housing inequity. Unless supply, community control and organisational capacity grow together, today's children and grandchildren will inherit the same shortage.

5. Priority Reform 1 – Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-Making

The National Agreement intends Priority Reform 1 to share real decision-making authority with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In housing, genuine shared decision-making must extend beyond consultation about programs already designed by government.

Aboriginal housing organisations and communities should share authority over the identification of need, regional priorities, program design, allocation of capital, definitions of success, evaluation and decisions about who owns and manages housing. Housing decisions should be informed by local cultural authority and practical housing experience.

A recurring problem is that Aboriginal organisations may be consulted but the core financial architecture, eligibility rules, risk settings and delivery model have already been determined. Shared decision-making should occur before those settings are fixed. Otherwise, consultation cannot correct structural barriers embedded in the program.

For housing, genuine partnership should mean:

- Aboriginal community-controlled housing organisations participate in decisions about capital priorities and regional housing growth targets.
- Funding models are co-designed with organisations that understand the actual financial circumstances of Aboriginal housing providers.
- Local Aboriginal organisations have meaningful influence over design, tenancy models, cultural appropriateness and service integration.
- Disagreements about program settings are documented and transparently resolved.
- Government and Aboriginal partners are mutually accountable for agreed actions, timelines and outcomes.

6. Priority Reform 2 – Building the Community-Controlled Housing Sector

Priority Reform 2 is central to this submission. The Commission describes the intended outcome as a strong and sustainable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector delivering high-quality services. Housing policy should be tested against that objective.

Aboriginal Community Housing Providers should not be treated merely as contractors managing government housing. They are community institutions. They employ Aboriginal people, understand local families and kinship structures, maintain cultural relationships and are accountable to the communities they serve.

In our experience, mainstreaming has weakened the Aboriginal community-controlled housing sector. Mainstream community housing providers have grown considerably, while many Aboriginal providers remain small, undercapitalised and dependent largely on rental income. In some circumstances Aboriginal organisations have been expected to accept ageing properties, maintenance liabilities and complex tenancies without the capital and operational resources required for sustainability.

Transferring responsibility without adequate resources transfers risk rather than opportunity. If governments wish to increase the proportion of services delivered through ACCOs, they must also transfer the resources, assets, development opportunities, workforce investment and institutional capability required for success.

6.1 Sustainable Operational Funding

Rent alone cannot be expected to fund the entire Aboriginal community housing system. Rental income must meet maintenance, insurance, staffing, tenancy management, governance, regulatory compliance, inspections, information technology, legal costs, workplace obligations and increasingly complex tenant support needs.

At the same time, providers serve households experiencing poverty and significant social and economic disadvantage. There is an inherent tension between affordability for tenants and financial sustainability for providers. Closing the Gap funding reform should recognise that tension rather than assuming rent can meet every cost.

A sustainable model should provide multi-year operational and capacity funding, particularly for organisations managing older stock and complex tenancies. This is directly relevant to the Commission's question about which funding arrangements strengthen or undermine trust, reciprocity and shared accountability.

6.2 Sector Strengthening Must Build Permanent Capability

Sector strengthening should result in lasting organisational capability, not only workshops, plans or short-term projects. Investment should strengthen governance, financial systems, asset management, tenancy practice, development capability, workforce, leadership, succession, data systems and local Aboriginal employment.

Success should be measured by practical outcomes: stronger balance sheets, better maintained assets, increased Aboriginal employment and leadership, increased development capability, stronger compliance, more housing under Aboriginal ownership or management, and completed dwellings.

7. Priority Reform 3 – Transforming Government Systems

Closing the Gap requires government organisations to change the way they design, fund and administer programs. In housing, transformation means moving away from fragmented responsibilities, short funding

cycles, mainstream assumptions about organisational scale and financing, and program settings that Aboriginal providers cannot realistically access.

Government transformation should include a coordinated pathway for Aboriginal housing developments through planning, infrastructure, approvals and funding. Aboriginal organisations should not have to navigate multiple agencies whose requirements duplicate one another or operate on incompatible timelines.

Transparency should also improve. Communities should be able to see how much funding is allocated to Aboriginal housing, how much reaches Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, how much is directed through mainstream providers, and how many completed homes result.

8. Priority Reform 4 – Data for Local Decisions and Accountability

Aboriginal communities and housing organisations need access to locally relevant data to plan housing growth and hold systems accountable. National averages alone are not sufficient for regional housing planning.

Governments should publicly report, by jurisdiction and region, the number of Aboriginal households requiring housing; overcrowding and homelessness; social housing waiting lists; Aboriginal housing stock constructed, demolished or disposed of; dwellings owned and managed by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations; capital and operational investment; funding directed to mainstream providers for Aboriginal housing services; and progress against agreed growth targets.

Aboriginal organisations should be involved in deciding what housing data is collected, how it is interpreted and how success is measured. Data should support community decision-making, not simply government reporting.

9. Young People, Young Families, Elders and Stolen Generations Survivors

9.1 Young People and Young Families

Youth housing is one of the most serious gaps in the existing system. Many young Aboriginal people have little prospect of obtaining social housing, cannot afford private rental accommodation and cannot remain indefinitely in overcrowded family homes. Young couples starting families face similar difficulties.

Governments should develop Aboriginal youth housing, transitional housing and pathways to independent living, supported by culturally appropriate services and delivered wherever possible through Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

9.2 Elders and Stolen Generations Survivors

Many Aboriginal Elders have lived through dispossession, institutionalisation, removal of children, discrimination and exclusion from economic opportunities. Some Stolen Generations survivors are now ageing while dependent on social housing and limited incomes.

Housing programs should enable Elders to remain connected to family, community, Country and culture while responding to mobility, disability, health and aged-care needs. Ageing with dignity and cultural connection should be an explicit housing objective.

10. A Genuine Aboriginal Housing Continuum

There are too few pathways between homelessness, crisis accommodation, transitional housing, long-term social housing, affordable rental and home ownership. A genuine Aboriginal housing continuum is needed.

Transitional housing should provide sufficient time and support for people to rebuild stability and independence. Housing should connect with culturally appropriate mental health, social and emotional wellbeing, disability, family support, domestic and family violence, alcohol and other drug, education, employment, financial capability and tenancy-sustainment services.

Reform is also required in mainstream systems. Governments should address discrimination and systemic barriers affecting Aboriginal people in private rental, finance and home ownership. Mainstream providers serving Aboriginal tenants should be accountable for cultural safety and outcomes.

11. A Long-Term Aboriginal Housing Capital Program

Australia needs a dedicated long-term capital program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled housing operating for at least 10 to 20 years.

It should support new construction, acquisition, replacement of housing at the end of its economic life, major renovations, disability modifications, Elder housing, youth and transitional housing, crisis and family-safety accommodation, and development of Aboriginal-owned land for residential housing.

Growth targets should be established nationally, in each jurisdiction and regionally. Accountability should focus on whether supply is actually increasing in communities experiencing need, not only on aggregate expenditure.

12. Construction Costs, Infrastructure and Development Barriers

Any serious housing strategy must confront the increasing cost of constructing new homes, particularly in rural, regional and remote communities. Planning approvals, consultant reports, engineering, environmental assessment, infrastructure contributions, utility connections, certification and regulatory requirements can add substantial cost and time before construction begins.

Rural and remote projects can face additional freight, workforce, accommodation, travel, materials, site preparation and infrastructure costs. A standard per-dwelling funding model may therefore produce unequal outcomes between locations.

Necessary safety, environmental, planning and cultural heritage protections should remain. The reform task is to make processes proportionate, coordinated and efficient, remove unnecessary duplication, and ensure enabling infrastructure does not consume the housing construction budget.

Recommended development reforms include:

- Location-adjusted capital funding based on the real cost of delivery.
- Dedicated infrastructure funding for roads, water, sewerage, electricity and other essential services.
- Coordinated and streamlined approval pathways for Aboriginal community housing.
- Reduced duplication between government agencies and regulatory processes.
- Standardised and adaptable designs where appropriate.
- Use of modular, prefabricated and other construction methods where they safely reduce cost and time.
- Long-term procurement pipelines that give builders and suppliers greater certainty.
- Investment in Aboriginal construction businesses, apprenticeships and local workforces.
- Greater use of Aboriginal-owned land supported by enabling infrastructure.
- Transparent reporting of expenditure on administration, consultants, approvals, infrastructure and completed dwellings.

13. Reforming the Housing Australia Future Fund for Aboriginal Housing

SEARMS acknowledges the specific focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing within the Housing Australia Future Fund and measures intended to improve participation. However, the financing model remains a major issue for many Aboriginal community-controlled housing organisations.

HAFF-supported development can require organisations to assemble complex finance, carry development risk, meet pre-development costs and demonstrate cash flow, assets and borrowing capacity. Larger mainstream providers are often better placed to do this because of their scale, balance sheets, portfolios and access to finance.

Many Aboriginal housing organisations manage ageing portfolios, operate largely from rental income and have limited unrestricted capital or assets available as security. They may lack cash reserves for feasibility, planning, consultants, infrastructure and other pre-development costs. A model that assumes access to substantial debt can therefore exclude capable Aboriginal providers even where housing need is clear.

A dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander HAFF pathway should:

- Provide a substantially higher grant component so projects do not depend on large commercial loans.
- Fund feasibility, planning, design, approvals, infrastructure and other pre-development costs.
- Provide flexible security, guarantees and underwriting suited to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.
- Support smaller and regional projects as well as large-scale developments.
- Invest directly in governance, development capability, workforce and financial systems.
- Permit partnerships with larger providers only where Aboriginal ownership, decision-making and long-term control are protected.
- Measure success by homes owned or controlled by Aboriginal organisations and occupied by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

14. National Distribution of Housing Investment

SEARMS recognises the serious housing needs of remote communities and the importance of investment in the Northern Territory and other remote locations. At the same time, a national housing response must also address the needs of Aboriginal people living in regional and urban communities in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, the ACT and elsewhere.

The concern is not that remote investment should be reduced. It is that Closing the Gap requires a comprehensive national approach in which regional and urban disadvantage is also visible, measured and funded. Homelessness, overcrowding, unaffordable rents, deteriorating stock, long waiting lists and displacement from Country and community can be severe even where the crisis is less visible publicly.

Capital investment must therefore be allocated according to demonstrated need across remote, regional and urban Australia, accompanied by investment in the Aboriginal organisations that will manage, maintain and grow that housing.

15. Accountability: From Reform Commitments to Housing Outcomes

The Commission's call for submissions asks how accountability mechanisms are operating and whether reform commitments are translating into outcomes. Housing provides a concrete way to answer that question.

For Aboriginal housing, accountability should ask:

- How many additional safe, affordable and culturally appropriate homes have been completed and occupied?
- How much Aboriginal community-controlled housing stock has been added, replaced or lost?
- Has the proportion of Aboriginal housing owned or managed by Aboriginal organisations increased?
- Have Aboriginal Community Housing Providers become more financially and organisationally sustainable?
- How much funding has flowed directly to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations compared with mainstream providers?
- Are regional overcrowding, homelessness and waiting lists improving?
- Are young people, young families, Elders and Stolen Generations survivors gaining housing options appropriate to their needs?
- Are Aboriginal organisations sharing real authority over priorities, program design, funding and evaluation?

Without this level of transparency, it is difficult for communities to know whether the Priority Reforms are changing systems or whether housing policy is continuing largely as before.

16. Proposed National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Strategy

SEARMS recommends a coordinated national strategy with clearly identified responsibilities, funding and measurable outcomes, developed through genuine shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing organisations and communities.

The strategy should include:

- A 10–20 year capital investment program.
- National, jurisdictional and regional housing supply targets.
- Specific Aboriginal community-controlled housing growth targets.
- An ageing-stock renewal and replacement program.
- Sustainable operational and capacity funding.
- Workforce, governance, leadership and development capability investment.
- Youth, Elder and transitional housing strategies.
- Pathways to affordable rental and home ownership.
- Integrated housing, health, disability, family safety and wellbeing responses.
- A redesigned Aboriginal HAFF pathway.
- Regional and community-level data access and independent public reporting.

17. Direct Responses to Key Productivity Commission Questions

17.1 What funding arrangements strengthen or undermine ACCOs?

Long-term, flexible funding that recognises the full cost of service delivery strengthens Aboriginal housing organisations. Short-term grants, unfunded compliance burdens, reliance on rent alone, transfer of ageing assets without adequate capital, and finance models requiring balance-sheet capacity beyond the reach of smaller Aboriginal providers undermine sustainability.

17.2 How can governments prioritise ACCOs and build transition pathways?

Governments should establish explicit Aboriginal community-controlled housing growth targets, give Aboriginal providers priority access to Aboriginal housing programs, fund organisational readiness and development capability before assets or services are transferred, and ensure resources follow responsibility.

17.3 What is needed for sector strengthening?

Sector strengthening requires sustained investment in governance, leadership, workforce, succession, asset management, tenancy systems, financial capability, development expertise, technology and data. The objective should be permanent capability and increased Aboriginal ownership and control.

17.4 Who should determine success?

Success should be co-defined by Aboriginal organisations and communities with governments. In housing it should include both system measures and community measures: additional homes, quality and condition, cultural appropriateness, local control, organisational sustainability, tenant outcomes and the ability of future generations to access secure housing.

17.5 What are the most significant system barriers to housing outcomes?

The principal barriers identified in this submission are insufficient long-term capital investment; fragmented responsibility; ageing stock; unsustainable reliance on rent; inadequate operational funding; limited access to development finance; high construction and infrastructure costs; complex approval systems; insufficient youth, transitional and Elder housing; mainstreaming; and inadequate regional data and accountability.

17.6 How should reform commitments translate into action?

Closing the Gap commitments should be translated into funded regional housing plans, measurable stock-growth targets, stronger Aboriginal providers, completed homes and public reporting. Consultation, partnership and sector-strengthening activity should be judged by whether they change resource allocation, decision-making authority, organisational capability and housing supply.

18. Conclusion

After decades working in Aboriginal housing, we have seen governments change, policies change, programs change and administrative structures change. What has not changed sufficiently is the number of houses available to many Aboriginal families in regional communities such as ours.

Intergenerational housing inequity is lived every day by families sharing overcrowded homes, young people unable to establish independent lives, parents raising children without secure accommodation and Elders ageing in housing that may no longer meet their needs.

Closing the Gap must now move from commitment to implementation. We need investment, not simply consultation. We need sustainable Aboriginal housing organisations, not responsibility without resources. We need youth housing, transitional housing, Elder housing and culturally appropriate family housing. Most importantly, we need additional houses.

Our children and grandchildren should not inherit a housing crisis that governments have had decades to address. Rebuilding Aboriginal community-controlled housing as a strong, sustainable and properly resourced sector is essential to achieving lasting housing outcomes and to giving practical effect to the National Agreement's commitments to shared decision-making, community control and accountability.

References

Productivity Commission 2026, Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026: Call for submissions, September 2026.

Productivity Commission 2026, Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report, July 2026.

Productivity Commission 2024, Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Study Report.

SEARMS Community Housing Aboriginal Corporation, Submission on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing, prepared by Thomas R Slookee, 2026.

Submission Details

Submitted by: SEARMS Community Housing Aboriginal Corporation

Prepared by: Thomas R Slookee

Review: Productivity Commission – Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026

Initial submissions due: 26 October 2026