Putting the Housing Needs of Indigenous Families and Communities First

Aboriginal Community Housing Limited

Australia is a land, rich in culture, tradition and history. With over 60,000* years of ancestry coursing through the veins of the land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the Traditional Custodians and inhabitants of this land.

Aboriginal Community Housing Limited (ACHL) is an organisation with this ethos at its heart and celebrates the survival and resilience of Indigenous culture across Australia’s many traditional lands and language groups.

Currently a member of the Community Housing Limited Group (CHL), ACHL was established in 2016 to provide better housing options for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and families that suit their needs. It is now an approved Tier 2 community housing provider under the National Regulatory System for Community Housing.

ACHL recognises the right of Indigenous peoples to determine their own future and to live in accordance with their own cultural values and customs. Hence ACHL is developing into an independent national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and managed provider of long-term affordable housing.

It currently manages over 360 homes across the country. The majority of these are in 23 remote communities across two regions (Goldfields and East Kimberley). Elsewhere they are on the North Coast in New South Wales, Gippsland in Victoria and dotted around Adelaide in South Australia. These are serviced mostly by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

With a strong vision to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to develop, own and manage culturally appropriate, affordable and sustainable housing, ACHL aims to:

- increase new supply of housing across diverse styles and locations
- support meaningful self-determination and place based community capacity building
- improve its service delivery performance which is linked to efficiency and accountability
- be an active leader in the industry.

ACHL has seen the existing strengths and leadership in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and aims to build partnerships through respectful relationships. Which is why ACHL is open for memberships to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, and any non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations who commit to ACHL’s vision, mission and aims to provide housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Over the next three-year period an ‘ACHL Toolkit’ will be made available to support the members in the delivery of services.

Endnote
1. Senior Consultant for the project Jenny Sammis led this work and played a leading role in incorporating the Aboriginal community’s expectations into a coherent framework.

[Image]
The decision to invest in ACHL did not come from just one idea, but the realisation of a need. The reality is that the public housing system isn’t set up to fulfill Indigenous people in a way that’s safe and culturally appropriate.

CHL has been supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities for over a decade now. We currently manage 1,183 households where the primary tenant is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, which makes up 14 per cent of our portfolio.

As the second largest non-governmental provider of housing to First Nations people, it became evident that there had to be a better way to approach Indigenous cultural values, particularly in the realm of housing needs, which is so intrinsic to quality of life and community.

In CHL’s starting years, CHL supported the organisation’s growth and development by providing staff, resources, systems, expertise and advice, to enable it to flourish into a sustainable and independent national organisation in the long term.

‘We wanted to invest in and support ACHL, so it can be a support to the communities to develop the skills, resources and capacity required to develop housing solutions suited to them that they so desperately need and deserve. For this reason, majority of ACHL staff are from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background as they understand the community needs and aspirations better than others.

The work that ACHL has set out to achieve stretches far beyond housing. It is a catalyst for fulfilling the dreams, hopes and visions of Aboriginal communities nationwide, which hold unique and nuanced belief systems and traditions. CHL aims to give more communities the independence and freedom over housing choices and connection to the land in a unique and culturally appropriate way.

* http://www.workingwithindigenousaustralians.info/Content/History/2_0_400_years.html

Please contact Preeti Daga, Head of Corporate Communications, Community Housing Limited at preeti.daga@chll.com.au for further information.

By supporting the Indigenous communities, we hope to build them up and empower them, so they can forge their own path and independence.’

ACHL recently partnered with Nyamba Buru Yawuru on a cultural exchange in New Zealand hosted by Te Puna Wanaka, Ara Polytechnic. The exchange focused on sharing cultural knowledge, developing an understanding of where both cultures are at in terms of language revitalisation, the importance of the connection to country and culture, understanding the issues related to intergenerational trauma because of colonisation, and exploring ways of healing and facilitating change in response to systemic discrimination.

ACHL Chairperson Maureen O’Meara said that ACHL is established to serve the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

‘We’re already starting to see the impact of how ACHL is fostering pride and confidence within our own Aboriginal tenure model when it comes to deciding what’s best for them and their communities’, Ms O’Meara said.

‘We have committed ourselves to respecting Indigenous peoples’ diversity and culture, which is why we are committed to ensure that the organisation is managed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. ACHL has strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and direction with majority of our Board consisting of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander leaders including myself as the Chair and we are working to ensure good governance and a robust membership structure for the organisation.’

Chairperson Maureen O’Meara adds ACHL’s governance and partnership framework will allow other organisations to work with ACHL, giving them a consistent, professional and supportive setup for tenancy and property management.

ACHL, with the help of its partners, will establish Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led, place-based community and economic development approaches to assist communities to determine and achieve their own aspirations and will provide a range of products including additional supply of affordable rental and home ownership properties that cater to the needs of our Aboriginal communities.’

Looking ahead to the future, ACHL has identified numerous opportunities for growth nationally with prospects based on:

• ongoing partnership discussions with Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs) and other Aboriginal organisations

• upcoming opportunities provided by changes in government policy

• reforms such as the lifting of caveats on properties previously funded under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSC)

• prospective transfers of Aboriginal Housing Office properties

• negotiations with independent remote communities.

Recently, ACHL has been in discussion with the South Australian Housing Authority, the Indigenous Land Corporation and Aboriginal Elders Community Care Services to deliver a village for Aboriginal Elders. Ongoing discussions are also underway with the Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative (GEGAC), to consolidate existing management of housing in the region and the potential for new dwellings on GEGAC owned land.

On the Horizon is ACHL’s partnership with the Barijma group from the Pilbara, surrounding the management of eight units, which was an opportunity that stemmed from a growing partnership with Marra Worra Wora, which is the oldest and largest Aboriginal resource agency in the Kimberley.

The Future Ahead

ACHL’s approach is one that will continue to be community-led, effective and efficient in its business practice and centred around respectful partnerships. Which is why CHL and ACHL embarked on a formal Reconciliation process by launching its first Reconciliation Action Plan in 2019. This means fostering a culturally aware and respectful workplace for all its employees through appropriate training, policies and work practices.

ACHL Chairperson Maureen O’Meara said that over the next four years, our objectives are to further strengthen our governance and membership structure and establish a culturally competent organisation.

She also said that an additional 5,500 homes were required by 2028 to reduce extreme levels of overcrowding within remote and regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homes.

‘My hope is that ACHL will be able to help to significantly reduce this figure. By 2022 we’d like to manage 3,000 properties that deliver housing management services to communities in both remote and rural locations by achieving our 2019-2022 objectives’, Ms O’Meara said.

Steve Bevington said that while there are many challenges to be addressed such as issues of land tenure, significant maintenance backlogs, and effective engagement, the opportunities available for ACHL and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples far outweigh any challenges ahead.

‘There has been considerable interest in a national body and consultations so far have shown that people understand the value of a national approach backed by the expertise of an established housing group such as that of Community Housing Ltd. We’re very excited for what’s to come and the positive future ahead.’

The nation is on a journey and has committed towards Reconciliation; Indigenous cultures across Australia must be celebrated and supported to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can fully exert their right to determine their own future. By putting their housing needs first, ACHL aims to do just that.