Discordance, mobility and agency: Dilemmas for housing reform in Northern Territory Aboriginal settlements

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NINTI ONE

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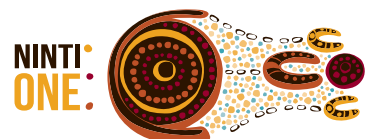
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Abbreviations/Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ALRA	Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976
AHURI	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute
CAHREC	Central Australia Human Research Ethics Committee
CAT	Centre for Appropriate Technology
CDEP	Community Development Employment Program
CDS	Central Desert Shire
CHO	Community Housing Officer
CLC	Central Land Council
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CP	Core Project
DKCRC	Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre
FaHCSIA	Department of Families and Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
GBM	General Business Manager
HRG	Housing Reference Group
ICHO	Indigenous Community Housing Organisation
IST	Indigenous Services Training
HRG	Housing Reference Group
LAB	Local Advisory Board
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NFA	New Futures Alliance
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
NTER	Northern Territory Emergency Response
NT	Northern Territory
NTG	Northern Territory Government
OID	Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage
Qld	Queensland
RPHMF	Remote Public Housing Management Framework
RTA	Residential Tenancies Act (NT)
SCRGSP	Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision
SIHIP	Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program
SSM	Shire Services Manager
TSP	Tenancy Sustainability Program
WA	Western Australia

Executive summary

The second stage of the Northern Territory component of the Centre for Appropriate Technology/ Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre Project, 'Desert Services that Work: Demand Responsive Services for Desert Settlements', examined the delivery of housing and tenancy management reforms from July 2008–November 2009 in two remote Aboriginal communities that are located in two new local government areas. The research found:

1. The significant mismatch between supply side activities and demand side realities means there will be continuing discordance between government program implementation and residents of remote Aboriginal settlements.

2. Housing and tenancy management reforms need to recognise and accommodate the phenomena of agency and intra-community mobility, whereby a substantial percentage of households regularly change composition and houses, impelled primarily by the prerogatives of family and culture.

3. Effective engagement and information distribution processes would reduce the damage done by the concomitant constant turnover in staff that results in the loss of corporate memory, competencies and, most importantly, effective working relationships.

4. Tailored and flexible approaches are needed in housing delivery that are capable of working productively with variability, dispersal, strong local networks, small populations and extreme conditions.

5. For government, accountability is a key value; for residents of remote Aboriginal settlements, family is of primary importance. Recognising the extent of and the need to mediate the different sets of values and competing priorities in a 'recognition space' would help develop long-term, demand-responsive solutions to sustainable housing.

 Discordance, mobility and agency:
Dilemmas for housing reform in Northern Territory Aboriginal settlements

1. Introduction

This report is an analysis of the results of research undertaken in 2008–2009 as part of the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC) Core Project 5 (CP5) 'Desert Services that Work: Demand Responsive Services for Desert Settlements'. This research project was undertaken in the Northern Territory and led by the Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT), a core partner of the DKCRC. The project examined the implementation of new Northern Territory (NT) Government models of housing tenancy and asset management across the shire and community levels of governance, with the intent of mapping accountability and the role of tenant demand as an interface between demand and supply issues. The research contributes to the broader research questions about demand responsive services that were investigated by the whole CP5 research team across four states and a number of service models.

The NT research focused on the impact of changes to service delivery in the communities of Ali Curung and Lajamanu, situated in two new local government shires – the Barkly Shire and Central Desert Shire respectively. Three field research visits were made to each community to develop an understanding of the housing tenancy and management arrangements that operated prior to 1 July 2008; household formation, living arrangements and intra-community mobility; repair and maintenance issues; knowledge of the local government and housing reforms taking place in remote Aboriginal communities; and awareness of the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP), which was the new construction and refurbishment phase of the NT Government's remote public housing model.

The immediate policy context for this research was the abolition of all but a handful of Indigenous Community Housing Organisations (ICHO) in the NT on 1 July 2008, when nearly 60 Aboriginal Community Councils, which had also acted as ICHOs, were replaced by eight large Shire councils. At that point Territory Housing, part of what is now the NT Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services, became responsible for the housing service delivery in remote Aboriginal settlements. At the same time as it was developing a Remote Public Housing Management Framework, Territory Housing was and continues to be contracting the Shires to undertake repairs and maintenance and tenancy management. In addition, the SIHIP, which was first announced in early 2008, was being rolled out. Three DKCRC Working Papers were developed to provide further background information on these complex and far reaching policy changes in the NT – see Porter 2009a, 2009b; Elvin 2009a.

The report addresses and documents many of the circumstances facing the remote NT communities and local, Territory and Australian Governments in the implementation of the new housing regime. As the issues of mobility, appropriate housing design and agency began to emerge during the research, a literature review of related areas was undertaken to assist the analysis. Further, more general evidence of policy discordance and policy cycles affecting the delivery of housing also became evident, and these areas are addressed as a part of the research findings. Finally, the CP5 research questions that initially drove the whole project are specifically addressed in the context of the implementation of the NT housing reforms.

2. Literature review

One of the intentions of the research project was to improve service delivery to Aboriginal communities through informing service providers and policy makers about the many aspects of service delivery. In that context, the literature review comments first on the current rhetoric of evidence-based policy making and broad policy changes affecting housing delivery. Second, the review scans the research on Aboriginal mobility. Third, it covers the literature on Aboriginal housing design elements that specifically deals with Aboriginal mobility and fluctuating household numbers. It should be noted that these were one of the design elements included in the SIHIP design guidelines, but a review of program performance in August 2009 found that:

> In the development of the initial packages of works an imbalance emerged between program objectives. Elements such as design and community engagement were elevated to the detriment of the unit cost required to achieve program targets, thereby skewing program outcomes. (Australian Government 2009, pp. 5–6)

Fourth, it reviews recent literature on the contested relationship between mobility and public housing services. Fifth, it reviews literature on agency, specifically that relating to Aboriginal agency. Overall, the literature review helps to contextualise the results of the CP5 research conducted in Lajamanu and Ali Curung and the housing policy being implemented in NT remote Aboriginal communities.

2.1 Evidence-based policy making

The Hon Jenny Macklin, Minister for Families, Housing, Communities and Indigenous Affairs, made the following point in a speech to the National Press Club on 27 February 2008, at which she presented the Closing the Gap Strategy:

> Inevitably there will be difficult decisions but all these decisions will be driven by one single criterion – **evidence**. This is the government's obsession and we make no excuses for it. It is my abiding fixation and I readily acknowledge it. All our policy decision-making will be based on a thorough, forensic analysis of all the facts and all the **evidence**. Once implemented, all programs will be rigorously and regularly evaluated. This is the principle I will impose across my portfolio. (Pholi et al. 2009, p. 3, emphasis added)

Long, Memmott and Seelig in *An Audit and Review of Australian Indigenous Housing Research* (2007) recall that, in 1979, Dr Michael Heppell reflected on the very limited extent to which Aboriginal housing provision was informed by research. Heppell proposed a theoretical basis to a program of research that would examine:

> How Aborigines perceive and order their environment, how they organise their camps and the spatial areas within a camp, how a camp supports those social institutions which operate within it, the ways in which a group changes its social institutions to adapt to the changed circumstances of a housing scheme and the stresses experienced by individuals and families ... Such **research is most pertinent to a government's housing policies** for remote Aboriginal people and requires phenomenological studies or some duration in the field. (Heppell 1979, p. 3, in Long et al. 2007, p. 109, emphasis added)

Concluding their *Audit and Review*, Long et al. noted that researchers have to a large extent fulfilled Heppell's research vision, but also note that 'there is a need for an ongoing program of research based on a revitalised version of Heppell's research agenda because … such **research is pertinent to the government's housing policies** for Indigenous people' (2007, p. 109, emphasis added).

It is not evident that the call to pay attention to the accumulated evidence has been heeded. In 2007 a *Memorandum of Understanding between the Commonwealth and the Northern Territory Governments on Indigenous Housing, Accommodation and Related Services of September 2007* (MoU 2007) marked the end of a policy change process that started in June 2006 at a meeting of Ministers for Housing and Indigenous Affairs (Fien et al. 2008), which indicated a radical shift away from support for community rental housing to the centralisation of Aboriginal housing services to state housing agencies. Prior to this change all Aboriginal specific housing funds in the NT were channelled into housing stock that was managed by Indigenous Community Housing Organisations (ICHO) – a stock of approximately 6000 housing units in remote locations (ABS 2008).

The MoU 2007 laid out the principles of a 'new housing system for the bush' that included:

- *all new remote Indigenous housing will be publicly owned by Territory Housing;*
- *leases will be able to be established over properties;*
- *existing housing will be transferred to a publicly owned Territory Housing when it meets the remote public housing framework standard;*
- *The* Northern Territory Residential Tenancies Act *(RTA) will apply to tenancy agreements and will govern the rights and responsibilities of both landlords and tenants.*

Housing is one service delivery area that sits within a broader agreement on remote service delivery: in December 2007, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to a partnership between all levels of government to work with Aboriginal communities to close the gap on Aboriginal disadvantage. In 2009 a *National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery* was:

> *Established to implement a new remote service delivery model that clearly identifies service standards, roles and responsibilities and service delivery parameters to ensure that Indigenous Australians living in selected remote communities receive and actively participate in services to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage.* (COAG 2009)

The 15 larger NT remote communities already identified for new housing and infrastructure investment through the SIHIP comprise 15 of the initial 26 nationwide locations proposed for initial investments under this approach. (By February 2010 there were 29 locations). The objectives of the Partnership Agreement are:

1. *Improve the access of Indigenous families to a full range of* **suitable and culturally inclusive services**
2. *Raise the standard and range of services delivered to Indigenous families to be broadly consistent with those provided to other Australians in similar sized and located communities*
3. ***Improve the level of governance and leadership with Indigenous communities and Indigenous community organisations***
4. *Provide simpler access and better coordinated government services for Indigenous people in identified communities*
5. *Increase economic and* **social participation wherever possible, and promote personal responsibility, engagement and behaviours consistent with positive social norms**.

 (COAG 2009, emphasis added)

Similar goals are noted in the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing, which was developed at the same time. This agreement allocated an extra $1.9 billion to a 10 year funding strategy to significantly reform housing in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities. This

amounted to total national funding of $5.5 billion, of which the NT secured the largest portion of $1.7 billion over 10 years. This included the funds previously allocated under SIHIP. 'In effect the National Partnership subsumed the arrangements made under the MOU and SIHIP' (Australian Government 2009, p 16).

With regard to housing services it is a challenge to see how the objectives of the Partnership Agreements can be delivered when evidence of the impact of mobility, Aboriginal kinship (see e.g. Long & Memmott 2007, p. 4), domiciliary arrangements and spatiality does not appear to have informed housing policy. Further, the COAG goals will be challenged in the NT context by the following factors:

- Housing design elements that readily incorporate culturally driven aspects of inter-community mobility such as high levels of visitation will be constrained by the need to reduce housing unit costs in order to meet the number of new houses, refurbishments and rebuilds promised (before costs were fully known) when SIHIP was first announced. Design constraints and reduced specifications will impact running costs for tenants and maintenance costs for asset managers.

- Governance bodies such as community local government councils and ICHOs have been abolished and replaced with advisory bodies such as Local Advisory Boards (LAB) and Housing Reference Groups (HRG) that have no decision making powers – thus reducing the level of community governance and leadership;

- Personal responsibility or agency demonstrated in the management of intra-community mobility that satisfies cultural norms and relieves social tensions will be curtailed by public housing tenancy management regimes; and

- Individuals and nuclear families will be signed up to standard NT Government residential leases thus overlooking preferred Aboriginal household structures and intra-community mobility.

2.2   Mobility literature

In traditional Aboriginal societies social pressures could be worked out in the context of open spaces, mobility of people and relocation of dwellings (Moran 1999, p. 5). This literature review is not concerned with traditional Aboriginal society mobility, nor is it concerned with demographic mobility literature that captures migration. It is interested in recent mobility studies (sometimes called temporary mobility) undertaken in the context of fixed neighbourhoods of European style housing in remote community settlements. It is this facet of mobility that is of particular interest as it provides an evidence base for decision making on 'suitable and culturally inclusive' housing services noted above as a goal of the Remote Services Delivery Partnership Agreement.

As early as the 1972 Aboriginal Housing Conference held by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, it was observed that the depth of cultural issues (abandonment of houses upon an occupant's death, lack of a strong value system of object possession, culturally distinct household structures with high visitation) was obstructing the success of housing as a tool to 'assimilate' remote Aboriginal people (Long et al. 2007, p. 17).

Moran (1999, pp. 5–7) provides a number of examples of Aboriginal adaptation of customary behaviour to fixed community settlement environments. These include changes to funerary observances that limit the time of abandonment; extended families each occupying one bedroom of a house rather than a cluster of dwellings; land and linguistic neighbourhoods based on traditional associations; intra-community mobility through movements from house to house as permitted by extended kinship obligations; and elaborate processes of house swapping as part of sorry business or so that people can relocate closer to family or other groups. Moran (1999) makes the point that these examples underscore the powerful cultural norms that have driven Aboriginal social organisation to a high level of adaptability and ingenuity in resisting the structural limitations of an essentially European living environment.

Sanders (2000) noted two cultural traditions of housing in parallel and interacting: Aboriginal traditions had transformed but still existed side by side with Western housing norms.

Long et al.'s *Audit and Review* (2007, pp. 58–60) of literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility and housing identifies a number of sub-themes:

- Impact of mobility on housing design – for example to accommodate visitors (Memmott et al. 2004, 2006; Foster et al. 2005; Dillon & Savage 2003) and reduce maintenance impacts especially to plumbing, waste disposal and energy needs. Morel and Ross (1993) made recurring maintenance and housing management problems a topic of their central Australian study. Solutions included appropriate sized verandas and living rooms and sufficient service facilities. Other research examined the theme of domiciliary composition: household types and composition (Keys 2000; Memmott 2003; Morphy 2004; Finlayson et al. 2000). A key finding of the latter work was that effective welfare policy must be directed at Indigenous family structures rather than at 'individuals and nuclear families' (Finlayson et al. 2000, p. 125, quoted in Long et al. 2007, p. 53).

- Motivators of mobility – the literature identifies the key motivators as kinship and social relations (Finlayson et al. 2000, Memmott et al. 2006). Loveday and Lea (1985) provided a survey of Aboriginal households in Katherine which included reasons for household mobility. Finlayson (1991) did an anthropological study of Kuranda households that included structure, mobility and economics. More recently Stafford Smith et al. (2008, p. 127), in examining 'communities of livelihood' found:

  > By investing time and resources into family and kin, people effectively make deposits into social capital that they could later draw down … To the extent that mobility builds and sustains social capital, it [is] a sound strategy economically … Mobility is frustrating for service providers used to static populations, but people are exercising a discretionary socio-economic response to the limited economic options in their home settlements.

- Frequency and duration of travels – Memmott et al. (2006) and Long and Memmott (2006) considered various spatial (intra-community, intra-regional, interregional) and temporal (short-term, long-term) scales of mobility through a regional approach between a major service centre (Mt Isa) and two communities (Dajarra in north-west Qld and Alpurrurulam in eastern NT). Mobility practices that emerged from their study were that: (i) frequent travel to visit places within the region for relatively short periods of time during which people relied on relatives for accommodation or they camped; (ii) the pattern of mobility is associated with a calendar of annual Aboriginal social, economic and regional events which are in turn influenced by seasonal climatic events; and (iii) kinship and social interaction (including funerals) are the driving force of Aboriginal mobility.

- Memmott et al. (2006) and Altman (2006) argue for research, policy and services to be developed in response to patterns of mobility in remote and very remote Australia, additionally, migrations to major urban areas in order to access services (Walker & Ireland 2003).

- Within these sub-themes there is a need to research difference in mobility and housing need between male and female youth and between men and women.

Long et al. (2007, pp. 4, 60) recommend that macro-issue research (issues that extend beyond the realm of living environments but impact on them) be informed by an understanding of micro-issues as a primary concern. However micro-mobility or intra-community mobility is noted as an under-explored research sub-theme. Musharbash (2003) has researched this changing residency from night to night in a *jilimi* (women's camp) in the central Australian community of Yuendumu. Musharbash (2008) points out that while Warlpiri people may dwell in suburban style houses, they dwell in them in quite different ways than do suburban Australians. For example, she recorded for 221 nights the sleeping arrangements

of a house and yard-based women's camp and found that more than 160 different individuals slept in the camp during that period. Towards the end of her book *Yuendumu Everyday*, Musharbash reflects on sociality and mobility:

> *Mobility is the constituent part of Warlpiri sociality. In order to relate to others one has to be with them. And Warlpiri networks reach far – throughout the settlement, to other settlements and places all around Australian. This book has focused on intra-settlement mobility by analysing residential movement, and identifying four kinds of residents: core, regular, sporadic and on-and-off residents. Every person falls into each category at different times and places. Another kind of mobility is inter-community mobility, and, of course, mobility is caused by Sport Weekends, big sorry businesses and other events. Through movement people live their relations to others. Movement is halted at night when people stop in camps, and movement defines relations in that moving into a yupukarra [married people's camp] constitutes a marriage and moving out of it the end of the marriage.* (2008, p. 148)

The pressure on housing stock and household numbers is commonly referred to as 'overcrowding' in government housing reports, even though the size and composition of a household may reflect a household preference. Being able to facilitate the visits of kin is an additional factor, but one recognised by the Productivity Commission – the body that produces the bi-annual *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* (OID) report that measures and reports on Aboriginal wellbeing. The report by the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP, 2009 Section 9.1) recognised the cultural and social factors that influence housing usage:

> *Reasons for overcrowding*
>
> *Cultural and social factors influence the way housing is used in Indigenous communities. Households with many members, often of multiple generations and including extended family, are not unusual. Living in large family groupings is not a problem; it can be the cultural norm ([Urbis] Keys Young 1998). Large households need not be overcrowded provided sufficient bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchen spaces are available. Indigenous household and community populations may fluctuate quite dramatically for social, cultural or seasonal reasons. Indigenous people are often mobile, and sharing homes with visiting relations and kin is common (ABS 2004) ...*

Nevertheless, despite the evidence provided through research, the measuring and reporting of Aboriginal wellbeing currently appears to be against a remote service delivery strategy that is aiming at mainstreaming or 'normalising' housing provision. The increasing urgency of the issue is confirmed by a 2010 positioning paper for Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), 'Improving housing responses to Indigenous patterns of mobility':

> *Within the social housing sector, the existence of temporary mobility and its role as an expression of Indigenous culture, as well as its effects on poor housing access and housing instability is understood ... Social housing providers see the effects of temporary mobility on over crowding and subsequent tenancy failure, but lack the infrastructure and strategies to prevent this.* (Habibis et al. 2010, p. 50)

Based on their analysis, the authors of the positioning paper are proposing a research project that includes increased data collection to enable more reliable analysis of demand in the context of mobility and the National Partnership Agreements. In short, the fact of mobility remains uncontested, but it appears still to require further documentation to help social housing providers accommodate the phenomenon.

2.3 Housing design literature

There is substantially more research literature on housing designs than in any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing category (Long et al. 2007, p. 60). This work is defined by three broad categories: culturally appropriate design, environmental health design (Pholeros et al. 1993), and housing as process. Culturally appropriate design or the 'cultural design paradigm' is premised on the belief that to design appropriate residential accommodation for Aboriginal people who have traditionally oriented lifestyles, architects must understand the domiciliary context of these lifestyles (Memmott & Go-Sam 2003 in Memmott & Chamber 2003, p. 13.). Long et al. list 18 different design considerations and authors associated with Aboriginal domiciliary behaviour (2007, pp. 61–62).

Despite this design research history, it is frequently argued that Aboriginal housing is not designed with regard to domiciliary behaviour. This raises questions on the impact this research has had on the decisions of agencies involved in Aboriginal housing services, the costs in terms of length of housing lifecycle and repairs and maintenance, and the impact on service users.

Fantin's (2003) study of kinship and avoidance relationships illustrates the stress caused to users when housing does not correspond with household composition. In public housing Flatau et al. (2005) found that nuclear family house designs were not appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander household size and compositions and impacted the sustainability of tenancies. Memmott and Chambers (2002) have argued that large households are not necessarily 'overcrowded' but include normal sub-units of extended families. What is important is the number and size of rooms to cater for these sub-units. Housing design in response to mobility (accommodation of short- and long-term visitors) has been addressed by Heppell 1979; Ross 1987, 2000; Morel and Ross 1993; Memmott 1997, 2000; Memmott et al. 2000; Dillon and Savage 2003; J and B Wigley 2003, and others.

Recent AHURI research work culminated in a report: Towards a Design Framework for Remote Indigenous Housing (Fien et al. 2008). This report synthesised remote Aboriginal housing design, policy and public health literatures, tested it in field research, and recommended a set of guidelines for policy makers and built-environment professionals. To highlight some of the issues, it was useful to compare the AHURI guidelines with the 2009 SIHIP housing design guidelines and performance specifications, which were to be used to establish the minimum level of amenity and the minimum design requirements for new public housing in 15 NT Aboriginal communities.

The two sets of design recommendations have different purposes; the AHURI design framework focuses on key design objectives and is therefore more general, whereas the SIHIP guidelines are detailed and contain performance specifications for the guidance of alliance contractors. Nonetheless, the two documents can be compared by identifying the SIHIP guidelines that meet the design objective specified in the AHURI design framework (Porter 2009c).

The SIHIP Housing Design Guidelines for Remote Public Housing in the NT outlines seven key design objectives in the development of appropriate housing in remote communities:

1. *Cultural and social fit*
2. *Safety and security*
3. *Responsive to climate*
4. *Support for healthy living*
5. *Accessibility*
6. *Economically sustainable*
7. *Environmentally sustainable*

 (Australian and Northern Territory Governments 2008a, p. 12.)

The AHURI Report, Towards a Design Framework for Remote Indigenous Housing, states that the value of the report lies in:

> ... the synthesis of the experiences of many who have worked in the field [remote Indigenous housing] before, testing and grounding the synthesis in the field through three case studies, and then developing a practical and flexible framework. (Fien et al. 2008, p. 108)

The Framework was intended to assist the response to calls[1] (Brough 2007) for **suitable low-cost** housing options for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing in remote and very remote regions of Australia. The AHURI Report gives these terms the following definitions:

> 'Suitable' housing is housing that is appropriate for residents in terms of cultural, social, health and environmental imperatives and the opportunities for social harmony, employment and economic development that can flow from the appropriate investment of funds in the design and construction of housing.

> 'Low-cost' housing is housing that is 'suitable' for residents and is designed, built and maintained according to principles, processes and systems that would lead to significant cost savings over a specified lifespan of a house. (Fien et al. 2008, p. 1)

The Framework provides an approach that is responsive to six key issues:

1. Cultural appropriateness

2. Eco-efficiency

3. Healthy living habits

4. Employment opportunities and economic development

5. Life-cycle costing

6. Innovation in procurement, ownership and construction systems.

These factors are the 'triple bottom line' of sustainability: reflecting a key finding from the case studies that these design factors are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. The Framework applies these six aspects of sustainability to each of the key decision points in the housing system.

The SIHIP Performance Specifications (Australian and Northern Territory Governments 2008b) for new remote housing are thorough, detailed, specific, and respond to known (but frequently ignored) housing design issues. Further, the settlement and housing design elements have the potential to respond to a number of Aboriginal cultural imperatives and domiciliary arrangements such as orientation to country, location of different language groups, avoidance relationships, kinship obligation (frequency of visitors), households comprising of multiple sub-units requiring separate occupation of rooms/spaces, outdoor eating, sleeping and living preferences and high levels of inter- and intra-community mobility.

In mid-2009 SIHIP came under increasing public criticism for being slow to provide the promised new houses and refurbishments and for allegedly high program, house-unit and administrative costs. The Minister for Families and Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), Jenny Macklin, and the NT Chief Minister, Paul Henderson, commissioned a review of SIHIP. The Review found that:

> It is clear that Alliance Partners are making strong efforts to engage with communities. It is also apparent that a stronger role for government is needed to provide leadership in this area, acknowledging that while it is important that Indigenous people be given a say, the options available to them will be consistent with a public housing program. Australian Government Business Managers and Indigenous Engagement Officers residing in key communities ... are well placed to assist with this ongoing engagement process.

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1 The then Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, used these words in his 16 May 2007 Media Release announcing a boost in funding for Indigenous NT housing.

It is clear that in consultations to date, while the program was responsive to community identified needs, the balance was lost between this and the target unit cost required to meet the program targets over the life of the program. (Australian Government 2009, p. 27)

Clearly, what might have been robust consultation around a set of performance specifications that reflected years of research experience in Aboriginal housing design was considered too costly and inappropriate for a public housing program. This ignores the fact that no public housing program has ever been delivered to remote Aboriginal communities and it is therefore inappropriate to compare mainstream public housing programs with a 'housing system for the bush'. To do so ignores the evidence base on Aboriginal non-nuclear household composition, how houses are used and high mobility rates.

Pholeros refers to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'standard housing cycle' that has been repeated three times in the last 25 years, as follows:

1. *Great need – lack of housing and overcrowding is measured and considered unacceptable.*

2. *Cheaper houses – national funds to provide Indigenous houses remains fixed (or reducing in real terms), so the way to build more houses is to reduce the cost of houses.*

3. *New ideas to reduce cost – this will be achieved by the introduction of new ideas, as the old ideas were unacceptably expensive. Existing design standards or guidelines are labelled excessive and inflationary. Capital cost will be the focus of the new idea, not running costs or maintenance costs.*

4. *House failure – housing design, material quality and construction supervision are all reduced and housing fails.*

5. *Improve standards – review of housing projects are commissioned to find ways to ensure the quality of housing is improved. The establishment of standards and regulations are recommended, which increase the cost of housing.* (2008, pp. 74–75)

Despite the initial promise regarding housing design guidelines and consultation with residents in the first communities that SIHIP alliances are working in, it would appear that the budget (measured against an un-costed but promised 750 new houses, 230 replacements and 2500 upgrades), not performance specifications, will drive SIHIP. The housing cycle described by Pholeros begins again.

2.4 Mobility and housing management literature

In the past few years there has been an increase in research examining the relationship between state service delivery and Aboriginal temporary mobility. This section will recall work from Prout (2008b) on temporary mobility and the state; it will then focus on city and remote town public housing services and mobility; and lastly it will discuss the under-researched area of intra-community mobility or – as it is sometimes called – micro-mobility, to examine implications for tenancy management.

Prout's study of the literature identified three ways in which temporary mobility relates to the state:

• *Indigenous temporary mobilities that are endosocial – that is, they are characterised by socio-cultural inwardness, resistant or impervious to external influence. Endosociality is a characteristic of mobilities that are primarily shaped by familial and cultural obligations and conflicts; are intentionally confined within territories of ancestral belonging and/or networks of relatedness; are ceremonial (unrelated to and often unseen by mainstream Australia), and reflect and/or engender disinterest in, or alienation from, the state.*

• *Indigenous temporary mobility that is generated by an active engagement with the formal economy and the mainstream service sector. Such movements include those that derive from the need and desire to access services, seasonal/short-term employment opportunities, the production and sale of Indigenous art, and obligations on managerial and advisory boards.*

- *Indigenous temporary mobilities that are a physical manifestation of a constant mediation between customary practice and expression, the desire to actively engage with elements of mainstream society and culture, and the expectations of the state.*

(2008b, pp. vi–vii)

It is the third category that consolidates the elements of the first two categories, and will most fully illuminate why the relationship with public housing is contested.

In an alternative analysis, research on Aboriginal housing careers in Western Australia (Perth, Carnarvon, Broome) and the Sydney suburbs of Redfern and Mt Druitt (AHURI 2008; Birdsall-Jones & Shaw 2008) identified three kinds of overcrowding that can lead to loss of tenancy:

- *Overcrowding that arises out of culturally legitimated activities, or mobility.*

- *Overcrowding that arises out of the system of kinship obligation (socially legitimated overcrowding)*

- *Overcrowding that arises out of activities that are neither culturally nor socially legitimated (dysfunctional itinerancy)*

(Birdsall-Jones & Shaw 2008, pp. 15–17)

Loss of housing can lead to itinerancy either by the host family or the guest kinfolk unable to abide the situation or, the landlord evicting the tenants for breaking the lease conditions.

Overcrowding that arises out of culturally legitimated activities, or mobility: This form of overcrowding is associated with funerals, ceremonies and other culturally based activities which require the gathering of the family community and is accepted, short term and planned for. The authors refer to this as 'mobility'.

Overcrowding that arises out of the system of kinship obligation (socially legitimated overcrowding): Changed economic circumstances may force households to find shelter with their relatives. This form of overcrowding is legitimated through kinship obligation but is accepted with some resignations as there is not foreseeable endpoint to the situation.

Overcrowding that arises out of activities that are neither culturally nor socially legitimated (dysfunctional itinerancy): In this form of overcrowding (typically) substance abusers take up residence rendering the household unsafe and quality of life to deteriorate. Even though regarded with disapproval by the family community they may be at a loss on how to remedy the situation.

Prout (2008a, pp. 8–9) warns that understanding Aboriginal spatiality is critical to redressing the inequitable and often inefficient nature of service delivery. In Yamatji country, WA, she found two overarching practices of contemporary spatial movement: a permanently resident Aboriginal population in Meekatharra and a more mobile or transient Aboriginal population. She warns of the 'cycle of alienation': overcrowding; anti-social behaviour/property damage; debt accumulation; eviction; preclusion from public housing; and overcrowding that can become endemic. The cycle of alienation is largely driven by mobility processes, and overcrowding is one of the impacts at the destination place. There are also impacts at the source place. These impacts include leaving the tenancy without giving proper notice or leaving the tenancy in the care of a relative, both of which are likely to incur debts and put the tenancy at risk.

One innovation for working with tenants with complex needs or demanding behaviours that has been developed by state housing agencies over a number of years is the 'sustainable tenancies' approach. This approach requires the public housing provider to put in place programs that will support the tenant to remain in their tenancy. It requires active intervention and support to deal with behaviours that would otherwise led to eviction and a repeat cycle of homelessness and itinerancy.

The AHURI positioning paper (Flatau et al. 2008) and final report (Flatau et al. 2009) *Sustaining At-risk Indigenous Tenancies: A review of Australian policy responses* examines programs aimed at sustaining tenancies for Indigenous people at risk of homelessness. An at-risk tenancy is defined as one in which households:

- *Face significant difficulties in establishing and/or sustaining their tenancies due to immediate or long-standing social, health or economic needs.*

- *Are under threat of possible or actual eviction as a result of rent arrears, accumulated housing debt or tenancy breaches including property damage, inadequate property standards and anti-social behaviour.*

    (Flatau et al. 2009, p. 1)

Tenancy support programs seek to help tenants maintain their tenancy and so avoid eviction and entry into homelessness. The main reasons for referral to support programs (in the case of public housing referrals are made by public housing property managers) are: rent arrears, tenant liabilities, poor property standards, other breaches of tenancy, and neighbourhood issues/conflict (Flatau et al. 2009, p. 3). However, lying behind these tenancy-based referral reasons are the 'drivers' of tenancy problems that cannot be addressed by tenant support programs because they are outside the design parameters of a public housing model. The 'drivers' include:

- *Discrimination by landlords and neighbours.*

- *Failure of landlords and housing agencies to appropriately address cultural behaviour and imperatives such as duties of hospitality to extended family responsibilities and demand sharing.*

- *Lack of understanding of Indigenous patterns of occupation and use of housing (domiciliary behaviour).*

- *Indigenous belief systems and mourning customs.*

- *Inability to meet unforeseen expenses such as funeral costs.*

- *Indigenous patterns of mobility.*

    (Flatau et al. 2009, p. 3)

What is evident is that tenant support programs can only address the symptoms of at-risk tenancies; the 'drivers' of risk lie outside the policy parameters of mainstream public housing service delivery. Cultural imperatives such as those described in the 'drivers' have never been part of the policy-making evidence base for housing service delivery to Aboriginal people. When the public housing model is fully implemented in remote Aboriginal communities these issues can be expected to become more critical unless tenancy management is expressly more flexible or managed from within the community.

In 2009, NT Housing introduced a tenancy support program for Aboriginal tenants called the Tenancy Sustainability Program (TSP) to provide life skills training and a case management service for Aboriginal people living in public housing and town camps in Darwin, Alice Springs, Katherine and Tennant Creek. This program will be expanded to remote communities when SIHIP builds new houses and completes refurbishments and tenants are signed up to leases.

The application of the tenancy rules will vary according to category of dwelling. When the SIHIP construction program is underway there will be three categories of dwellings in remote communities:

1. New and replaced dwellings

2. Up-graded dwellings

3. Legacy dwellings (existing dwellings that have not been up-graded but may have had repairs).

The head tenant(s) in Category 1 and 2 dwellings that meet the standards of urban public housing stock will be required to sign the RTA 12-month lease agreement and to pay a higher rent than those in legacy dwellings. Households that are allocated the new and up-graded houses will be 'normalised' regarding the number of occupants, that is, a nuclear family concept of mother, father and children will prevail. These households will be given intensive support to understand their obligation regarding the lease agreement, to control the number and length of stay of visitors, and to maintain the property as per the lease agreement rules. The aim is to reduce the duress on the dwelling and thereby extend its life cycle (Porter 2009b).

The *SIHIP Review of Program Performance* (2009) recommends that:

> *Governments direct appropriate resources to ensuring robust and effective property and tenancy management to underpin the investment and achieve sustainable housing outcomes for Indigenous people.* (Australian Government 2009, p. 8)

Although stated in the context of 'closing the gap', the following observation by Pholi et al. is equally pertinent to housing:

> *It places a moral imperative upon Indigenous Australians to transform themselves – to distance themselves from those characteristics of disadvantage that have come to define them, and to strive towards another set of characteristics that currently belong to the dominant, non-Indigenous ideal.* (2009, p. 10)

Those sets of characteristics include a fixed population living in housing that is fixed, and there are penalties for moving without proper notice under mainstream tenancy rules. Much is riding on the Australian Government housing reform strategy to contribute to 'closing the gap' targets, including sunk costs in housing, and Aboriginal 'failure' to comply may be critically sanctioned.

Intra-community mobility (sometimes referred to as micro-mobility) has received less attention than temporary mobility. Prout says that intra-community mobility 'has a different, and arguably less complex, set of implications for service delivery than movement between localities' (2008b, p. 3). However, when it comes to housing tenancy management in remote Aboriginal communities there is reason to believe that it will have significant implications.

A key work on intra-community mobility is Musharbash's Yuendumu study referred to in section 2.2. Musharbash notes that:

> *Most studies identify the way in which a house represents the cosmos, for example, and pay little or no attention to the ways in which people live in their dwellings ... the ways in which people relate to domestic space in everyday life through their social practices.* (2008, p. 27)

> *Houses through their very structure allow for and perpetuate stability, privacy and future-orientation; while camps through their very structure allow for and perpetuate mobility, intimacy and immediacy.* (2008, p. 151)

> *So what we find at Yuendumu is the simultaneous building of two types of structures ... Most importantly, these two types of building, camps and houses, do not only spatially coincide, they interrelate through the social practices of the people living in them. Camps are adjusted to fit into new spaces (and times) and houses are appropriated to make camps fit into them. The structures of houses are built for Yapa [non-Indigenous people], who engage with them habitually, amongst other things by building their own structures within them. Such use of houses does not coincide with the way in which they are meant to be used, and consequently, it triggers a steady flow of criticism from the mainstream.* (2008, p. 153)

Although the research in Lajamanu and Ali Curung did not investigate the equivalent of camp structures described by Musharbash in Yuendumu, it did find significant levels of house swapping and movement of sub-units of households from one house to another, particularly because of sorry business, as

detailed later in section 5.2. For example, in some cases, when a person dies the house that he/she lived in must be vacated by the extended family and all his/her possessions destroyed or distributed. The re-organisation of living arrangements that results, based on complex tradition, may involve a number of different dwellings, but it is commonly worked out by the family of the deceased.

2.5 Agency

In examining the role Aboriginal people have in their housing arrangements, the issue of 'agency' underpins much of the debate; namely, do Aboriginal people have the capacity to act or exert power, to exercise agency, or are the social, economic, environmental or ideological structures by which they are housed the overwhelming, determining features? The question applies to all associated issues, for example design, living arrangements, tenancy management, and repairs and maintenance.

Behind the question is a formidable body of thought devoted to the analysis of agency and structure in national and international contexts, particularly in relation to community development, over the past 40 years, where 'agency' 'would appear to be the central concern in the social sciences and the humanities today' (Bhattacharyya 1995). With specific reference to the agency of Aboriginal people, recent work by Howlett (2009) provides a summary of that substantial debate and sounds a note of caution about the realities of transformative agency. Howlett's work summarises the literature on structure and agency, particularly as it applies to Aboriginal affairs. She notes that 'All political theories make reference to either the causal powers of groups (agency) or contextual factors such as the environment, or patriarchy or capitalism (structures)' (p. 5). Structure and agency can be argued to be at the heart of any explanation of social phenomena, and it is how the two interact – whether it is dialectically, in ontological fusion, as a duality, or as separate entities – that is the source of theoretical debate.

Whatever the balance, or however the relationship is defined, there is little doubt that social, political, economic and cultural structures are affected by 'agency', namely the actions of a group of actors or of individual actors who are exercising autonomy or choice, that have an effect on outcomes that we are observing.

The role of agency is recognised across disciplines, although its actual place and power is hardly resolved. In Australian Aboriginal affairs, it is an ongoing source of controversy, particularly in works such as Sutton's *The Politics of Suffering* (2009). Sutton writes at length about the history of Aboriginal communities, their active role in the current state of affairs and the reluctance of many liberals to be seen 'blaming the victim'. For example, with reference to health, Sutton agrees with Kowal and Paradies (2005) that: 'The culture of the Indigenous public health industry in Australia had resulted in an overstructuration of Indigenous ill health and a de-emphasising of Indigenous people's agency.' Sutton describes it as a 'display of moral politics' (2009, p. 138), where causation and blame can become confused, as does individual voluntary and conscious agency and culturally embedded practices. In other words, and at the risk of oversimplifying Sutton's subtlety, blaming colonisation and the resulting structures as the source of Aboriginal disadvantage does not allow Aboriginal people to assume/be attributed any agency.

Similarly, Sanders in 'Ideology, Evidence and Competing Principles in Australian Indigenous Affairs' (2009) makes reference to the role of agency in a neat analysis of the competing principles of what he identifies as 'guardianship', 'equality' and 'choice' that drive approaches to Aboriginal Affairs. Within a framework of 'choice', Sanders observes that agency can be seen both positively and negatively, namely that difference and diversity can represent either 'responsible agency' or 'irresponsible agency', and if the latter, then the principle of 'guardianship' may be evoked to assist Aboriginal people who 'appear' unable to act in their own self-interest (Sanders 2009, p. 8). In assessing the review of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), Sanders points to the Review Board's conflicted

attempts to avoid the push towards guardianship at the sacrifice of agency and the participation of Aboriginal people in decision-making. Respect for agency is easily undermined in the rush to 'fix' the problem.

Sanders also records how the tensions and equivocation were evident in academic debates in the 1990s, where prominent academics such as Tim Rowse celebrated increase in choice for Aboriginal people, only to be contested by other equally prominent intellectuals who pointed to the massive constraints that were still holding Aboriginal people in poverty. With typical understatement, Sanders observes that:

> *These debates over the relative importance of structure and agency as explanations for Indigenous people's contemporary socioeconomic circumstances were never really resolved.* (2009, p. 10)

Despite the continued lack of resolution in the debate, it is important in the current context that the phenomenon of agency be recognised, however large or small, and that it is a factor to be considered as having potential for measurable impact. The imposition of rules and regulations regarding housing may be met with a response driven by the cultural imperatives of sorry business and family – regardless of the rules, the residents need to move. The cultural imperative is itself a 'structure', but residents exercise autonomy in how they respond – if a house is unavailable, or the alternatives an unacceptable donga, they will 'go sleep in the bush'.

Government ministers appalled by old people sleeping on mattresses may not be recognising that choice is being exercised in that act and the supply of new houses may not mean that the mattresses will migrate inside – the air may always be fresher outside.

Nonetheless, countering assumptions of victimhood, passivity and the overwhelming power of the context with examples of agency is not an argument for 'transformative agency'. As Howlett argues, excitement over the possibilities of transformative powers of Aboriginal agency in recent literature needs to be greeted with reserve. Her study of Aboriginal agency involved in the development of a zinc mine is both encouraging – the Aboriginal people had some impact on negotiations after native title become a legal reality – and discouraging – the mine was still developed. Howlett also observed the role of knowledge, that is, that 'The agency of political actors is also subject to their knowledge about the policy context' (p. 16) and the limited access to knowledge about mineral development due in part to limited literacy reduced the local actor's capacity for agency.

There are clear parallels between the studies such as Howlett's on minerals development and other areas such as housing, where a history of policymaking and government ownership combined with inscrutable organisations or lack of information reduces, though does not entirely obviate, the capacity for agency.

In sum, and echoing Howlett, the dialectical relationship of structure and agency whereby each influences the other, also requires recognising existing and emergent structured contexts and, importantly, that:

> *History matters and the historical distribution of resources and interests laid down structurally over time may exert an important enabling or constraining influence on agency.* (p. 8)

2.6 Conclusion

The literature review reveals that a substantial body of research and evidence already exists about Aboriginal housing design, mobility, and housing management, and research projects such as the present one and the latest AHURI positioning paper (Habibis et al. 2010) will continue to add to the available data base. However, despite this substantial evidence base to inform government housing policies, it appears to be regularly ignored due to economic and political imperatives, and thus the reduction in consultation evidenced in the SIHIP reports, and the ongoing intention to 'mainstream' or 'normalise'

Aboriginal people through housing. This is not a new concern; in 1979 Reser likened the movement of traditional Aboriginal people into housing subdivisions as a 'virtual straightjacket' (quoted in Moran 1999, p. 10). Nonetheless, Aboriginal people appear to have continued to be highly mobile in both inter- and intra-community movements, with concomitant effect on household structure. That is, the literature reveals that Aboriginal mobility is persistent across time and space and adaptive to age, gender, kin and services while historically, government policy attempts to impede mobility have failed (Prout, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). There is clearly a tension between Aboriginal practices and desires and the push to mainstream in housing matters.

That communities of Aboriginal people continue to adapt housing arrangements to better suit their needs, regardless of externally imposed rules, which may include large numbers of people in households, sleeping outside and moving houses without formal allocation, may be viewed as an expression of agency, although the literature review points to caution in adopting this approach. The extent and impact of both mobility and agency will be further explored in the following sections in relation to the research undertaken with Ali Curung and Lajamanu communities.

3. Methodology

The DKCRC research project, 'Desert Services that Work', has been guided by five overarching research questions:

1. What are characteristics of the interplay between demand and supply of services, according to the perceptions of consumers and service providers engaged at the local interface?

2. What are the conditions that permit successful practice to develop between consumers and service-providers?

3. At what scales of governance should different service delivery functions be assigned to optimize both demand and supply based criteria?

4. What are the service type and delivery style priorities of consumers within a specified budget framework, and what is their capacity to participate and willingness to contribute to services?

5. What are the critical issues and strategies to improve the service system, including the strengths and weaknesses of different technology and governance options?

These questions provided the initial framework for the particular research project (Moran et al. 2009) on which this report is based, and which was led by the Centre for Appropriate Technology, a core partner of the DKCRC. This project, which was undertaken from August 2008 to December 2009 in the NT, examined the impact of the implementation of new Northern Territory Government model(s) of housing tenancy and asset management across the new shire and community levels of governance, with a view to mapping accountability and the role of tenant demand as an interface between demand and supply issues.

Research was undertaken at Ali Curung and Lajamanu and with the Barkly and Central Desert Shires, with householders in each community (demand side) as well as with staff of relevant local and Territory agencies (supply side). The research approach elicits a comparison between two Shires with different attributes and between two communities with different levels of housing intervention (upgrades and major capital works); and different proximities (close and very distant) to the Shire administrative centres.

3.1 Research permission

The research project received ethics approval from the Central Australia Human Research Ethics Committee (CAHREC) in October 2008. Formal approval for the research was also granted by the Local Advisory Boards (LAB) of Lajamanu and Ali Curung. Community permission to conduct research within the community is required and is a key consideration in the ethical conduct of research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders people. Approvals from the Local Advisory Boards were also critical in engaging senior community residents in identifying appropriate community members to work with the project team as community researchers.

While this process appears to have been fairly straightforward, there exists considerable tension amongst the newly constituted governance organisations as to where the locus of decision making in relation to collaboration on projects with external agencies, including research projects, should reside. Historically, community residents assigned such responsibility to their Community Councils, comprised as they were by senior men and women with appropriate cultural authority. On 1 July 2008 Community Government Councils were abolished as new local government shire structures were implemented across the NT. With eight Shires covering most of the NT and each overseeing a multitude of Aboriginal settlements, a Local Advisory Board was established in each community, replacing Community

Councils but with minimal decision-making powers. In many cases the same senior men and women sit on the LABs as were on the Councils and community residents continue to recognise the legitimate seniority and local authority of the Board members, including the authority to approve research projects within the community. However, some Shires are of the view that local communities cannot determine themselves whether or not they wished to associate, cooperate or collaborate with other organisations, government or non-government on local projects. This extends to the right to approve research projects.

The researchers on this project, as consistent with advice from the National Health and Medical Research Council's Guidelines for the Conduct of Ethical Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (NHMRC 2003), took the view that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples themselves, either individually or through local representative structures that they themselves nominate, are the appropriate people to agree to research with or about them. As stated in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research:

> *There should be evidence of support for the research project from relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities or groups and the research methodology should engage with their social and cultural practice.* (Australian Government 2007, p. 70)

Thus the research conducted at Ali Curung and Lajamanu was approved by each of the LABs and individual consent from interviewees was also sought. Similarly, individual consent from interviewees from the Shires or other government and non-government agencies was sought. At all times the researchers endeavoured to actualise the six core values underpinning research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – Reciprocity, Respect, Equality, Responsibility, Survival and Protection, Spirit and Integrity. In practice this commitment translated into the employment of and capacity building for local community researchers and the reporting back of the research findings in appropriate and accessible formats including face-to-face presentations and pictorial newsletters. However, the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the Northern Territory to approve in-community research projects with or about them remains a contested issue, at least with some of the new Shires.

3.2   Demand and supply side data gathering

The research utilised a multifaceted and tiered approach to information gathering, with distinct demand side and supply side approaches triangulated where appropriate with available quantitative data sets and literature. The research was broadly based on the principles of action research in order to capture learnings as changes to tenancy management and repairs and maintenance were implemented, and to provide information at critical points as well as resources to enhance communication and understanding between both demand and supply side actors and agencies. The research also had a temporal dimension in that semi-structured interviews with community residents (householders) were repeated three times over a twelve-month period to capture policy and program adaptation and responsiveness at the local level.

With the shift of housing and asset management responsibility from Indigenous Community Housing Organisations to Territory Housing (tenancy management) and the new Shires (asset management and maintenance), baseline mapping of current tenancy arrangements, policies, housing stock, condition and repair schedules and allocations was undertaken through the initial survey with community residents (householders) and through semi-structured interviews with relevant local and Territory government staff. The baseline mapping survey (round one interviews with householders and other relevant publicly available data) constitutes the benchmark against which changes observed or reported over the life of the project have been measured.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with similar 'pools' of individuals (householders) in each of the communities and with a range of service providers and agents (government staff) who were identified as stakeholders in housing tenancy and asset management. While interviews with community

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residents successfully captured the same pool of individuals (householders), albeit with some attrition, across the three demand side surveys, interviews with supply side agents exhibited greater variation reflecting the high rates of staff turnover within governments, within staff positions on communities or within related agencies. Interviews with supply side agents thus targeted positions with particular policy or service delivery responsibility rather than tracking the same individual over time. By tracking the sequence of tenancy management practices and experiences over time, including the effects of staffing change or household fluctuations, the research has also provided relevant information in a timely manner to supply and demand side actors and agencies.

The supply side semi-structured interviews were undertaken with individuals holding key responsibilities for housing tenancy management, repairs and maintenance across government and non-government agencies and included interviews with Shire staff, Territory Housing staff, SIHIP managers, Central Land Council (CLC) staff and subcontractors (see Supply side interview questions Appendix A).

Demand side semi-structured interviews, facilitated by community-based researchers, were undertaken with a range of householders in each community. The interviews captured the 'house story', including who the householders themselves see as comprising their household (recognising kinship responsibilities), trends in household occupancy over time, how house responsibilities are managed (rents, amenity), efficiency of repair and maintenance regimes, overcrowding adaptations, house allocation processes, and awareness and impact of housing tenancy management changes and housing investment programs (e.g. SIHIP) underway. Interviews often occurred with groups of 'householders' allowing for a depth of input and the comfort of the participants who usually prefer to have family members present when talking to non-Aboriginal people. Community researchers also facilitated interviews occurring in language and provided appropriate interpretation and translation. Householder interviews were repeated three times over the twelve-month period and thus track the range of changes occurring from the perspective of residents (see Householder interview questions Appendix B).

3.3   Research limitations

The research was undertaken as a time of extraordinary change to Aboriginal affairs policy and programs in the Northern Territory. This included the ongoing roll-out of the Northern Territory Emergency Response, the signing and implementation of National Partnerships on Indigenous Reform, Indigenous Housing and Remote Service Delivery and local government, tenancy management and land tenure reform. Huge investments were being directed towards remote areas of the Territory and new approaches to the dispensing of such funds, such as through a Contract Alliance approach to building and refurbishing remote Aboriginal housing stock, were being developed. The size of these changes was challenging, both for community residents trying to grapple with the layers of change likely to impact on their lives and for the capacity of governments at all levels to deliver. As the research was undertaken over a twelve-month period it was anticipated that the on-the-ground implementation of the changes underway would be significantly well advanced for impacts to be tracked. However, significant delays were encountered, as noted in the review of SIHIP undertaken in August 2009, in response to concerns about the slow delivery of houses, high administrative costs and the over-bureaucratic nature of program governance. These relate to both the complexity of the approach utilized and the capacity of governments and bureaucracies to accelerate progress across multiple and complex but interrelated agendas. For the research project it has meant that changes impacting on the ground in relation to tenancy and asset management and land reform over the twelve-month period were limited. Information gathering through the research has therefore largely tracked, on the demand side at least, how householders and communities are managing regimes of uncertainty, 'lots of talk but little action', and the resultant disaffection and disengagement with governments.

3.4 Community researchers

Community researchers were employed in both Ali Curung and Lajamanu. Those based in Ali Curung had previously worked intensively with the research team during Stage One of the CP5 research work in the Northern Territory (2006–2008). Community researchers in Lajamanu were identified by members of the LAB. The employment of community researchers has been a key strategy in the research for ensuring that the views and perspectives of local residents are authentically captured and captured in a manner that enhances the validity of the research and the benefit arising from research participation. As most of the householders interviewed in this research speak English as a second or third language, the use of community researchers to both facilitate interviews and provide interpretation and translations as needed was considered essential. In a political climate where many Aboriginal people, particularly in the NT, are feeling that they have not been appropriately consulted or engaged in the array of changes affecting many aspects of their lives, research processes that prioritised listening and time to talk in language was considered paramount. On a more tangible level, the employment of community researchers ensured that the nature of benefit arising from participating in the research was both immediate (employment for local residents) as well as long term.

As has been noted in earlier DKCRC research (Rea & Young, 2006), the roles that can be undertaken by community researchers can range from involvement in research governance and facilitation to actually undertaking the data collection. Distinct roles for community researchers emerged in each of the communities with such roles generally aligning with the types of roles that individuals would be expected to fulfil given their cultural seniority or educational achievement. In Ali Curung two senior women undertook the roles of community researchers, providing research direction and facilitation, mentoring to the non-Aboriginal researchers, interpreting and translation where necessary and acting as a sounding board for researchers about the emerging findings. In Lajamanu a total of six relatively young and reasonably well-educated women were identified to assist in the research, with different individuals available to assist during each of the three surveys. They undertook interviews themselves, completed survey forms, provided advice on question rephrasing and provided interpretation when required. Of critical importance to the community and the young women themselves was the provision of paid employment through the research. It was apparent after the first round of interviews that the paid work experience provided through the research project was acting as a pathway to other employment for the individuals involved.

The use of community researchers over the three phases of interviewing has enabled researchers to develop strong relationships with residents and establish a sense of continuity between data collection rounds. The strength of the relationships meant that although by the third round of interviews residents were tired of talking about the housing issue, they were willing to talk with the research team. Community researchers have also been important in ensuring that research findings are disseminated within the communities. In addition, formal reports were given at Local Advisory Board meetings and a community newsletter outlining research findings has been distributed to Board members. This is critically important in maintaining respectful relationships with senior members of each community and in ensuring the conduct of the research embraces the principles of research merit, integrity and beneficence.

The success of this project's engagement of community researchers in each of the research communities is underpinned by a number of factors. First, the lead organisation for the project, the Centre for Appropriate Technology, has a long history of undertaking effective and responsive engagement with Aboriginal communities across the Northern Territory. The organisation is known for the services it has provided, and continues to provide, to communities across the Territory in a range of areas including training, technical support and bush products. The ability to leverage from this reputation was critical in securing early support from the communities for the research project.

Second, the field researcher had significant experience in working with Aboriginal communities and a strong understanding of cultural protocols, the importance of sitting down and talking with people on their terms and in places of their preference and a keen ability to adapt processes for achieving the outcomes required (in this case completing the surveys) to align with community expectations and need. For example, once senior people from one community had identified potential community researchers for the project, significant effort was invested in building skills in undertaking the interviews (asking questions and scribing), in valuing the community researchers' comments on the appropriateness of questions and changing questions if requested and in seeking their guidance on the selection of appropriate householder interviewees. In this community the community researchers continued interviewing residents after the field researcher had left the community, and faxed completed questionnaires as well as time sheets and bank details for payment. As the community researchers also had a range of other responsibilities to fulfil on a daily basis to children and family, mobile phones were used to arrange meeting times and pick up places on an as-needs basis, thus allowing minimal interference with day-to-day life and obligations.

Third, the methodological design of the research was grounded in developing an understanding of what was important to the householders as well as information about broader program and policy changes. Thus interviews with householders began by eliciting the 'house story', of talking about family and kin and thus foregrounded the importance of developing trust and relationships between the researchers and community residents. The interview process prioritised the importance of listening and understanding first before moving on to eliciting commentary about changes to housing tenancy and asset management. Repeat interviews spanning a twelve-month period, although with intermittent phone contact in between visits, enhanced relationship building and offered a stark contrast to the spate of increasingly frequent short visits by governments and other agencies as the Northern Territory Emergency Response activities continued and housing reform was scaled up.

4.   The research sites

The research was conducted in two remote Aboriginal communities: Ali Curung in the Barkly Shire and Lajamanu in the Central Desert Shire.
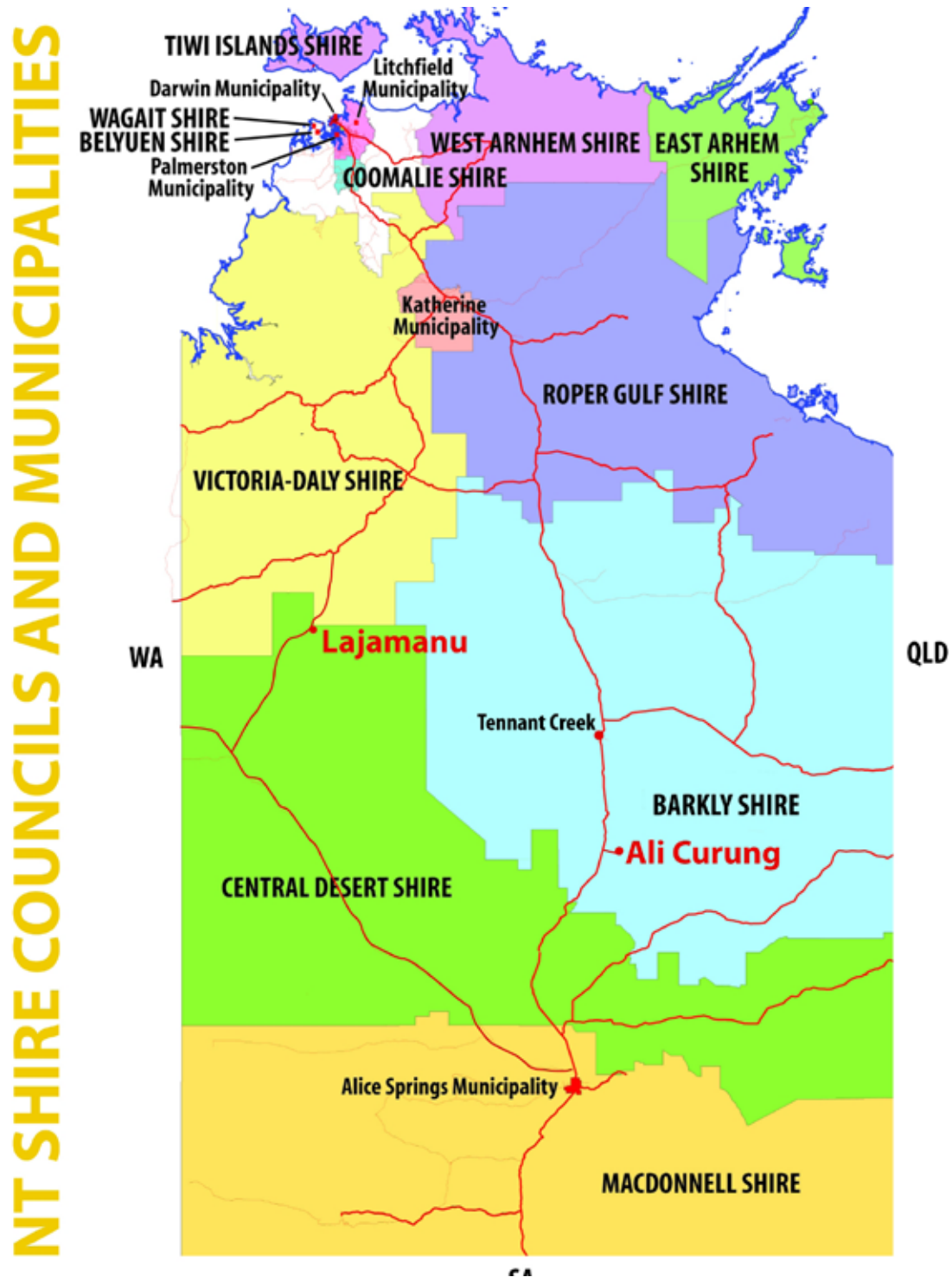

Figure 4.1: Map of NT showing Shires and location of Ali Curung and Lajamanu

4.1 Ali Curung

Ali Curung is a community of approximately 400 Aboriginal people situated 370 km north of Alice Springs and approximately 175 kilometres south of Tennant Creek (Wright 2007, p 18).[2]

Ali Curung is a part of the Warrabri Aboriginal Land Trust, approximately 106 square kilometres in area. The Land Trust borders the cattle stations of Singleton, Neutral Junction and Murray Downs. Beyond this, Epenarra and Elkedra stations sit to the east, Utopia (Aboriginal owned station) to the south, McClaren and Kurundi stations to the north and Willowra (Aboriginal owned station) to the west. Imangarra (Murray Downs) outstation is 33 km south-west of the community and part of the Murray Downs station. Jarra Jarra outstation is 180 km west of Ali Curung on Aboriginal land.

Ali Curung, formerly known as Warrabri, was opened in 1958 (Lea 1989) when people were moved from Phillip Creek mission. Phillip Creek mission was established at the end of 1942 under the operations of the Aborigines Inland Mission and subsequently the Native Affairs Branch of the Federal Government. The primary purpose of the Phillip Creek settlement was to move Aboriginal people from the vicinity of Tennant Creek, which was increasingly being occupied by outsiders moving in to the town for mining (Nash 1984). Unreliable water supplies at Phillip Creek eventually forced the relocation of the settlement to Warrabri.[3]

From 1958 until the formation of the Ali Curung Association Council (and name change from Warrabri to Ali Curung) in the 1970s, the community was run by a Superintendent of the Welfare Department of the Federal Government consistent with the assimilation policies prevalent during this period. The Association Council did not have jurisdiction over land and was essentially an incorporated organisation that pursued the common purposes of its members. The self-determination agendas of the late 1970s that the Councils were to pursue were largely undermined by Federal Government funding that prescribed what activities would be supported (Smith 2002; Rowse 1992).

The abolition of all NT Aboriginal Community Councils on 1 July 2008 and their amalgamation into large Shire Councils spelt the end of the Ali Curung Council. Ali Curung is now a Barkly Shire service delivery centre that is run by a Shire Services Manager, while the Local Advisory Board represents the residents' views to the Shire Council.

4.1.1 Language groups

The proportions of different language speakers at Ali Curung have been changing over time. In earlier accounts of Ali Curung, residents were predominantly from four main language groups: Warlpiri, Kaytetye, Alyawarra and Warramungu. A 1980 land claim report (Office of Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1980, p. 16) identifies the Ali Curung population being comprised of 35% Warlpiri, 20% Warramungu, 15% Kaytetye and 30% Alyawarra people. Today, there are few Warramungu speakers who reside in Ali Curung as they have moved to other areas including Mungkarta at McClaren Creek and the surrounding areas and township of Tennant Creek. Ali Curung has always been dominated by families from the Warlpiri speaking language group although there are now more mixed language groups, including Anmatjere and Warlmanpa, than previously identified.

The change in the mix of language groups in part reflects that many of the other language groups moved to their homelands or other places in the early 1980s, but is also an indication of intermarriage between language groups. The changing relationship between language groups has impacted on the maintenance of the language as many children now speak a Kriol/Pidgin English as their first language.

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2 Alyson Wright compiled this information on Ali Curung as part of the initial DKCRC research on shared responsibility agreements (Wright 2007).

3 Warrabri is a European derived name which combined the two original language groups resident at Ali Curung, Warlpiri and Warramungu, into a single name.

4.1.2 Housing stock

According to a report prepared by the Housing Maintenance Officer, there are 67 dwellings that are classified as 'proper houses' and a further 11 'tin shelters' that are used by 'local Yapa [Aboriginal] people'.

House size	Number
1 bedroom houses	3
2 bedroom houses	9
3 bedroom houses	44
4 bedroom houses	10
5 bedroom houses	0
6 bedroom houses	1
	Total 67 'proper houses'

Five of the tin shelters are fully serviceable; two have power only connected to them; and four have been vacant for a long time or are used for sorry business.[4]

The earliest houses were shelters of corrugated iron. In 1958, Kingstrand shelters consisting of a single room with walls, aluminium roof, concrete floor, louvred windows and a veranda on three sides were built. Some of these are still in use or are locations for sorry camps.

In the late 1990s five houses were design-built by a Darwin architect who consulted with people waiting for housing. According to the Housing Maintenance Officer's report, it was evident from the care and maintenance done on these houses that the people were happy with the design, although over time the occupants had to move out of 'their' houses due to sorry business. More generally, housing design in Ali Curung has not taken into account avoidance relationships, location of the house in relation to people's tribal country, and local climate conditions.

New houses were last built in 2002-2003. Residents consider that more houses are needed to provide additional space for families. However, Ali Curung is not one of the priority NT remote Aboriginal communities that will receive new housing under the current SIHIP funding. It was suggested in conversation that Ali Curung residents had underreported the number of people occupying houses during the early days of the NT Intervention, when preliminary assessments of housing conditions were carried out, due to the fear that children would be taken away from overcrowded households, and Ali Curung was thus not classified as severely overcrowded as other communities.[5]

4.2 Lajamanu

Lajamanu is a community of approximately 1200 people on the northern edge of the Tanami Desert in the Northern Territory. The community is located about 550 kilometres south-west of Katherine and over 900 kilometres by road north-west of Alice Springs. It was previously known as Hooker Creek, and is on the traditional country of the Gurindji people. It is located on the Hooker Creek Land Trust, and the community itself straddles the borders between the Central Desert Shire, which is based in Alice Springs, and Victoria-Daly Shire, based in Katherine. That is, many of the services, particularly power, water and waste disposal, are physically located in the Victoria-Daly Shire, although responsibility for them and the community is under the Central Desert Shire.

The settlement was established in 1949 by the Native Affairs branch of the Federal Government with more than 400 Warlpiri people trucked there from Yuendumu due to drought (Yuendumu is a similar Warlpiri settlement founded in 1946, 450 kilometres south-west of Lajamanu). In 1951, a further 150

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4 Indigenous Community Housing Needs. A short report prepared by the Ali Curung Housing Maintenance Officer, Barry Driver (undated).

5 Interview with Acting SSM, Ali Curung, April 2009.

Warlpiri were trucked to Lajamanu from Yuendumu. Unable to live away from their Dreaming sites, the people all walked back to Yuendumu. Two further resettlements and Aboriginal walk-backs to Yuendumu occurred before the population stabilised and remained at Lajamanu.

Lajamanu ceased to be a welfare settlement in 1970 with the establishment of local government and the Lajamanu Community Government Council. The Council was abolished in July 2008 under the Northern Territory local government reform; the community's local government representative body, the Central Desert Shire Council, is based in Alice Springs.

4.2.1 Languages and traditional ownership

Lajamanu is a strong traditional community and has maintained a strong sense of cultural identity, helped by the settlement's remoteness and its linguistic stability. The language spoken is Warlpiri, with Warlpiri residents predominating. Although it is traditionally Gurindji land, Gurindji is an endangered language, with only 60 full speakers remaining (Meakins 2008). The primary Gurindji community is Kalkaringi/Daguragu (Wave Hill) 120 kilometres to the north. However, the fact that Lajamanu is on Gurindji land means that there has often been a tenuous relationship. Thus in 2002 it was noted by Ryan that:

> *The relationship between the Warlpiri and Gurindji over the issue of land, land ownership and development has always been tenuous. More recently there has been a general understanding that Lajamanu is a Warlpiri community and its direction and development is to be determined by Warlpiri people. Hence the Gurindji have ... appointed three Warlpiri people to the Lajamanu Community Government Council to act in the role of 'Traditional Owners' for, and on behalf of the Gurindji people in relation to matters effecting Lajamanu and its immediate surrounds.* (2001 p. 51)

The issue of ownership has arisen in 2008–09 with regard to SIHIP, and the requirement that leases be signed by traditional owners before new houses are built at Lajamanu. Although there are now very few Gurindji people at Lajamanu (an exact number is unavailable), Gurindji ownership is one of the reasons for some community concerns about the lease arrangements (Skelton 2009).

4.2.2 Housing stock

Information about the existing status of housing stock and design types in Lajamanu was not readily available to researchers due to the lack of a housing manager and access to records over the research period. Archives 'were all somewhere in the back room'.[6] In 2005, Lajamanu was reported to have 109 houses, 81 of which were allocated to Aboriginal residents. The housing is predominantly three bedroom and observed by researchers to be a variety of design styles representing developments over the past three decades. In the same year, Lajamanu had 37 identified non-Aboriginal working residents (Australian Government 2005). The Wulaign Resource Centre manages 12 outstations around Lajamanu: the outstations comprised 18 houses in good condition, 6 derelict houses and 8 houses in poor condition (Australian Government 2005).

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6 Interview with Lajamanu SSM April 2009.

5. Research results

The following sections provide context and summarise the results of the field work. Section 5.1 outlines the baseline data and provides some of the 'house story' that emerged. Section 5.2 assesses the combined results of the second and third rounds of interviews, with a focus on the major emerging themes of mobility, agency, and discord between policy change and understanding of the change.

The number of households interviewed dropped in Lajamanu by 5% between Round 1 and Round 3 and varied by 3% over the course of the three rounds of interviews in Ali Curung. The variation was caused by illness, inter-community visits and, by Round 3, expressed disinterest in any further interviews due to frustration with the lack of response to housing needs by the Government.

Table 5.1: Number of households interviewed in Lajamanu and Ali Curung and percentage of total households interviewed

	No. of households interviewed in Lajamanu	% of households in Lajamanu	No. of households interviewed in Ali Curung	% of households in Ali Curung (based on 2006 Census data)
Round 1 Oct 2008	24	20%	12	13%
Round 2 April 2009	21	18%	9	10%
Round 3 Sept 2009	18	15%	11	12%

5.1 Round 1 – Telling the house story

In the initial round of interviews in Lajamanu, 24 households, or 20% of the community households, were interviewed. In Ali Curung, 12 households, or 13% of community households, were interviewed. The following material is based on the research team fieldwork and a statistical analysis by John Guenther undertaken after the first round (Guenther 2009).

The ratio of males to females interviewed was 3:1, with an age range of 20–60 years (many of the residents said they were 'about middle-aged'). The largest group of respondents said they were on Centrelink payments, with other occupations including store, night patrol, health, parole, education, childcare and administration workers. It is unclear how the gender imbalance – despite efforts by the LABs and researchers to redress – may have affected the results, as the perspectives of male residents, particularly regarding maintenance, may differ from the female household members. On the other hand, it appeared that the women in many cases were the decision makers about domestic matters and thus were in a position to largely if not fully represent household views.

5.1.1 Time in community and current house

More than 90% of all households stated that they had lived in the community either all their life or for 'a long time', with only 3 respondents reporting that they had lived in their community for less than 10 years.

In response to the question of how long residents had lived in their current houses, more than one-third indicated that they had lived in their houses for up to one year. The largest group of respondents (53% across both communities) reported living in their houses for between one and five years. Only three households across both communities had lived in the same house for more than five years.

5.1.2 Obtaining Housing

Houses were obtained through a number of means, including Council waiting lists. Although the official way of obtaining housing was through allocation and waiting lists, in many cases this was pre-empted by other priorities relating to culture and family. That is, Lajamanu households had obtained their

current house through sorry business (46%); by 'swapping' houses (20%); and Council allocation (34%). In Ali Curung, households had obtained their current house due to sorry business (34%); by 'swapping' houses (16%); and Council allocation (50%). It appears that the Council was usually informed of the changes within a day or two, or found out themselves by 'the usual informal' means, namely 'community telegraph'.

5.1.3 Size

The majority of houses had three bedrooms. Lajamanu households were far more likely to report that houses were big enough (83%) than those in Ali Curung (17%). These perceptions did not change significantly when asked about what it was like when visitors came to stay. It is possible that at this stage of the reform process that Lajamanu residents were in a marginally better position than Ali Curung residents, with less 'tin sheds' like those occupied in Ali Curung and the houses in a perceptibly better condition due to an active Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) maintenance team and a smaller number of children per house (3.4 average in Lajamanu compared to 4.1 in Ali Curung). Houses also appeared slightly smaller in Ali Curung, but the difference was not statistically significant. Nonetheless, it appears that these marginal differences may cumulatively explain the difference in household perceptions about satisfactory house sizes at the beginning of the research and reform period.

In relation to house size, rather than house conditions, a third of the respondents interviewed made comment on issues such as poor disabled access or the fact that people needed to sleep in the living room or outside, making it 'a little crowded'.

For both communities, there were on average 3.8 adults and 3.6 children, for a total average of 7.4 people per household. The numbers do not fully reflect the multifamily and intergenerational nature of the households, which became evident in the detailed breakdown of the households by the residents when asked about people moving in or out of the household.

5.1.4 Household composition

Most households were made up of large family groups that included extended family members of multiple generations, namely parents, grandparents, great-grandchildren, in-laws, cousins, aunts and uncles. In one example, the head tenant had taken in her daughter and her daughter's three children as well as her son and his wife and their three children. They all had moved away from the nearest big town and needed to be accommodated in the community. In other examples, the main tenant accommodated her nephew and his wife and their two children as they needed to move away from the house they had lived in, and another main tenant housed her husband's sister, her husband's sister's daughter, and three grandchildren.

It is very rare that households are made up of a nuclear family unit, that is a family group consisting of the biologic parents and offspring, which is the traditional basis for public housing planning and appears to be so with the NT Residential Tenancies Act (Porter 2009b, p. 13). Even where a family unit appears small, the situation changes often as there will always appear to be a need for family members to be accommodated for periods of times.

5.1.5 Visitors

Visitors are an important part of household activity. Reasons for visits were many and varied, with 19 respondents providing 17 reasons for visits. The reasons included family, sports weekends, sorry business, royalty payments, funerals and ceremony. Visitors came from across the Barkly and Central Desert Shire communities to Ali Curung, and from Central Desert Shire, Victoria-Daly Shire and Western Australia communities to Lajamanu.

5.1.6 Repairs and maintenance

Repairs and maintenance were a concern for the majority of households, and problems mentioned included door locks, windows, cupboards, taps, air conditioners, drinking water, hot water, toilets or lack thereof, bathrooms, power, fence and yard, verandas, screens, fences, blocked toilets and non-working white goods. Kitchen items and doors were the subject of more than 25% of the concerns, with stoves/ovens not working, leaks, lack of cupboards and security issues. At the time of the first interviews, the new local government structure had been in place for three months and the majority of residents in Ali Curung felt that there had been either no change or that things had got worse. This was in contrast to Lajamanu households, who at the time did not think there had been any deterioration in repairs and maintenance services, possibly because there was still some local capacity in place and housing being in a slightly better condition. Whereas Lajamanu residents knew who did repairs – CDEP, shire workers, tradespeople – 75% of Ali Curung respondents were unclear about who did the repairs.

Over the whole research period, Lajamanu householders began increasingly to voice their dissatisfaction with the lack of housing repairs with each interview round. In particular, comment was made about the time it took for outside contractors to do repairs, given the distance they had to travel and the need for a large number of jobs to make a trip for a contractor worthwhile.

5.1.7 Training

Respondents were asked a series of questions about maintenance training. Although few residents had any basic training, most placed value on getting some kind of training in trades such as carpentry and plumbing to be able to fix basic problems. Although this would appear to be a useful approach, Guenther and others have pointed out (Guenther 2009, p 25) that this is by no means a simple issue to address given literacy, supervision policy changes, changing households and cultural obligations. Supporting local work teams, such as a painting team that already existed in Ali Curung, might be a more effective way of dealing with small scale repair and maintenance issues.

5.1.8 Rent payment

All adults paid rent of $40.00 each per fortnight, and the majority thought the amount 'OK'. In Ali Curung, there was some more vocal dissension as some questioned why people were paying rent for 'broken houses' or tin sheds. One respondent objected that: 'We pay for nothing because the rent is not fixing our houses now. It's like we live in humpies like in 50s and 60s.' (Guenther 2009, p 18). The issue for residents was the quality of housing, not the rent itself.

5.1.9 Governance changes

A majority of respondents said that they paid rent to the Shire/Council, and not Territory Housing. A minority (less than 40%) said they were aware that changes were happening to tenancy management, but were unable to articulate what the changes might be. One response was as follows (Round 1, October 2008):

> We don't know when Territory Housing took over and what that means. They haven't given written notice to tenants – nothing!

At the time of the September 2008 interviews, only 7 of the total 36 respondents indicated that they knew someone from Territory Housing had been to the community; the majority were, however, aware that the old Council had been replaced by a Local Advisory Board.

In sum, the first round of interviews with Ali Curung and Lajamanu households established a basic picture of complex household composition. When asked at the end of the survey for further comment, respondents reiterated concerns about the need for repairs and maintenance, safety, air conditioning, shady plants, new houses, better government communication, the loss of community control, income management and water usage. Differences between the communities emerged in this round regarding

the level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with repairs and maintenance in particular, with Ali Curung three times as likely to cite repair concerns than Lajamanu and concomitantly more likely to be dissatisfied about the fairness of rent payments.

Residents were not focused on 'overcrowding' as much as the poor maintenance regime that made the houses hazardous. There are clear implications for health in the conditions reported, with non-working toilet, bathroom and laundry facilities, broken electrical fittings and doors, with attendant security issues.

Residents across both communities were also clearly frustrated by the lack of information on the proposed changes, the lack of effective consultation and the lack of action. With comments such as 'They come in, take notes and then nothing' (Ali Curung resident), it is clear that residents are sceptical and there was no indication of trust developing in the new regime.

5.2 Key results from interview rounds 2 and 3

Questions in rounds 2 and 3 focused on whether the households had changed from the previous round; how and why they had changed; how residents had obtained houses; the conditions under which they had an agreement, including rules of eviction; repairs; and information about new tenancy arrangements, governance arrangements and SIHIP.

5.2.1 Intra-community mobility

The second and third rounds of interviews demonstrated considerable intra-community mobility.

In Lajamanu between the first and second rounds, a six-month period, 48% of households experienced change, namely a house change, a change in the household formation, or both. In Ali Curung in a five-month period, 55% of the households experienced change.

Between the second and third rounds of interviews, 22% of the households in Lajamanu had changed, although it should be noted that the number of those interviewed dropped by 25%. In Ali Curung, 45% of households experienced change.

Table 5.2: Household change in Lajamanu and Ali Curung between October 2008 and September 2009

	No. of households interviewed	No. of households that changed dwelling	No. of households that changed composition	Total no. of households to experience change	% of households to experience change
Lajamanu					
Round 1 Oct 2008	24				
Round 2 April 2009	21	5	5	10	48%
Round 3 Sept 2009	18	2	2	4	22%
Ali Curung					
Round 1 Dec 2008	12				
Round 2 April 2009	9	3	2	5	55%
Round 3 Sept 2009	11	3	2	5	45%

5.2.2 Reasons for changes

Reasons for change fell into three broad categories:

1. Family arrangements – includes swapping houses with other family members who needed a bigger/ smaller house; family moving in from elsewhere because of trouble; family moving in, back into town or across town

2. Sorry business – whereby the whole households changed houses

3. Other reasons – included dissatisfaction with the neighbourhood, another house offered through work, the house was too broken to live in, too much noise or house not safe, renovations

5.2.3 Management of change

Where residents changed because of sorry business, nearly 90% let the council/housing officer know the same week. Where people swapped houses, or had people move in with them, the council/housing officer was informed less than 50% of the time. In the great majority of cases, no forms were filled in by residents to record the change. In other words, 90% of the changes to households were 'self-managed', with the housing office recording changes after the fact, if at all.

5.2.4 Tenancy agreements and rules

In the second round of interviews, residents were asked if they had to sign an agreement for living in their current house. In Ali Curung only 33 % responded positively; in Lajamanu, 45% said 'yes'.

Repairing problems involved informing council, with a mixture of responses regarding who paid. Very few cases of eviction were cited – 76% of respondents from both communities were unaware of any evictions taking place.

5.2.5 Awareness of housing and local government reforms

By round 2, in April 2009, over 66% of respondents were unaware of any visits by Territory Housing, the pending new housing conditions or potential new housing or the proposed Housing Reference Groups.

In September 2009, the number had not changed substantially, with 68% of those interviewed saying that they had not been talked to by Territory Housing. Similar numbers were reported when residents were asked whether the LAB, the local Shire or the CLC had talked with residents about what was happening with housing and SIHIP in the community. A Lajamanu resident commented:

> They [Territory Housing] came around with their cameras, taking photos of my house but nothing has been done, nothing has been fixed. I get very sick from living in this house and have to evacuate regularly. They don't listen, don't care. (Lajamanu resident, September 2009)

However, the majority of respondents in Lajamanu knew about the issue of leases needing to be signed before new houses were provided, and had heard about it through community talk and public meetings.

5.3   Supply side results

Over the research period semi-structured interviews were conducted with government officers, shire employees, Aboriginal organisations such as land councils, and members of the private sector working on SIHIP.

Table 5.3: Summary of supply-side interviews

Agency	Number of Interviews
Local Government	23
NT Government	18
Australian Government	5
Aboriginal Organisation employee	3
Private Sector	5
Total	**54**

Initial interviews with Australian and NT Government officers were aimed at understanding government intentions regarding the reform of housing services in remote Aboriginal settlements in the NT and the role of the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP) in the construction of new houses and refurbishment of existing housing through an alliance contracting model.

Supply side interviews were subsequently conducted during the three field visits to each of the two communities. The first round of interviews focussed on the housing management arrangements that existed prior to July 2008. The second and third rounds of interviews focussed on perceptions of the service deliverers (e.g. General Business Managers (GBM) and Shire Services Managers and employees) on the implementation of housing reforms and SIHIP in the two communities.

5.3.1 Housing management prior to July 2008

Prior to 1 July 2008, when the new local government shire structure took effect, housing repairs and maintenance and tenancy management were the responsibility of the Ali Curung and Lajamanu Association Councils. There were no separate housing bodies or advisory groups performing the role of an ICHO. Members of the council received a report from the housing manager as part of their regular council meetings and conducted housing business within the council meeting.

Applications to rent property came to the council for decision. In Ali Curung the application form submitted to the council requested permission to rent a specific property (identified by house number). It was not a generic application to join a waiting list for next available house. Instead, council members made a decision (in confidence) on the basis of the most appropriate applicant for the available house. A *Tenancy Agreement Residential* Premises was subsequently signed by the person named on the form as Applicant.

In Lajamanu people filled out an application form and filed it with the housing manager. It was reported that houses were allocated according to time spent on the waiting list but there was such little turn-over of housing stock that waiting lists were irrelevant.

When repairs or maintenance were required a Housing Maintenance Form was completed by the tenant and given to the housing officer to schedule with the works team. Minor repairs were completed locally. More major works requiring outside contractors were often a source of complaint as a number of months could pass before there were sufficient jobs to make a contractor visit economically viable.

Formally, if a death occurred and a house needed to be vacated, the local council would assist, via the housing manager, with the transfer of people into other houses. In reality the family/kin of the deceased organised the exchange of houses and the council subsequently formalised the changes.

Evictions were not common but could occur for the following reasons:

• Squatting in an empty house before it is formally allocated

• Leaving the house for a long period of time

• Not paying rent (this possibility was reduced by having all adults pay rent via an automatic Centrelink deduction)

5.3.2 Housing management post-July 2008

The transfer of responsibilities for repairs and maintenance and tenancy management to the newly formed Barkly and Central Desert Shire Councils did not immediately change the processes used under the Aboriginal community housing governance model. The building of new houses in Lajamanu and the refurbishment of houses in both communities under SIHIP was still months away. Territory Housing was still developing its Remote Public Housing Management Framework (RPHMF) and would not require the signing of new leases until tenants moved into a new or refurbished house. The following subsections highlight the general lack of information and unreliability of information people did acquire regarding the scope of housing reform and when and how the reforms would be implemented.

Employment and staff turnover

Ali Curung and Lajamanu each had three different Shire Service Managers (SSM) during the research period and both had a further turnover of SSM in late 2009–early 2010.

After initial uncertainties regarding the change to Barkly Shire Management, Ali Curung has a new works manager and a team comprising a plumber, electrician, carpenter and painter. All are subcontractors to the Shire but working full-time between Ali Curung and Murray Downs. The previous Housing Maintenance Officer remained in the housing role and became the Community Housing Officer (CHO) employed by the Shire on behalf of Territory Housing.

In Lajamanu the pre-Shire Housing Maintenance Manager position was made redundant and there was no-one in the team as at September 2009 with the same wide-ranging set of skills (CDEP positions were converted to 5 full-time positions under a works supervisor). Two members of the work team are able to do basic housing maintenance and carpentry but do not have the qualifications for skilled carpentry, plumbing and electrical work. Housing maintenance has reportedly deteriorated under the new arrangements. A CHO was appointed in July 2009 and was tasked with preparing an assessment of the condition of each house in order to build a Central Desert Shire (CDS) data base. An Essential Service Officer position was advertised but was unfilled as of September 2009.

Repair and maintenance of houses

In Lajamanu the procedure for requesting repairs remained the same. A form is filled out at the office and a response scheduled. If the job can be done by the local Shire employees (general carpentry and plumbing) it is done promptly (often within the day). Work that requires qualified tradesmen must wait for a contractor to come from Katherine. Due to distance and cost, contractors do not come until there is a list of work (10–20 jobs) that 'they can come and blitz'. A sense of frustration over the loss of skills that were in the community prior to local government change was evident among Lajamanu service providers and was summed up by the comment that they were in the 'back paddock' of the Central Desert Shire.

In Ali Curung the situation was the same as for Lajamanu up until mid 2009. The difference now apparent in Ali Curung was due to a 10-week training program (Certificate 3 Block Work) supported by Indigenous Service Training (IST) that combined training with the (Territory Housing funded) refurbishment (shelving, cupboards, painting) of 14 houses in Murray Downs and Ali Curung. The training was supervised by the (now) Works Manager and CDEP Coordinator in order to prepare local men for employment by the SIHIP Alliances. However, the delay in SIHIP funded refurbishments created a time gap that was resolved by these trained men continuing to work in Ali Curung under CDEP arrangements. If they are engaged by the New Futures Alliance they will have to come off CDEP for the duration of the refurbishment work. If they return to CDEP work after SIHIP employment they will become income managed. To avoid this disincentive discussions were been held with the Shire to continue to employ the men under CDEP (full-time equivalent) and for the Shire to bill the Alliance for their employment. In November 2009 when the New Futures Alliance was preparing to start work in Ali Curung this issue had not been resolved.

The Director of Works and Services of Barkly Shire made the point that although the Shire was receiving $7000 per house for repairs and maintenance there was no budget for fixing essential services such as sewerage/septic tank systems that were essentially an inherited liability.

Tenancy management

Up until September 2009 Territory Housing had not changed the tenancy management rules that existed prior to 1 July 2008. The forms for application to rent were still being used but there had been no formal allocation of houses since there was no decision-making process to replace the former community councils. Tenancy agreements were null and void and Territory Housing could not use their standard lease agreement as this pertains only to properties covered by the NT Residential Tenancies Act. Rent, sometimes referred to as a 'poll tax', continued to be collected at a rate of $20 per week from every Aboriginal adult person regardless of location, type or condition of house.

In Lajamanu the only change reported was that the housing officer was telling people that there would be new rules that meant there could be no more house swapping and that houses would have to be kept clean. He reported that people were not happy with the news that 'Yapa want to live differently – people in top camp and old people's camp were born in the bush and you can't change the way they have been living for years'. The Chairperson of the LAB commented that if people can't move when sorry business occurs then the house will be left empty and will get busted up by the kids. The GBM said that the two key issues for tenancy management were: (i) mobility: rules will not change behaviour as behaviour is driven by cultural imperative; and (ii) leases will require that a single tenant is responsible for rent (rather than current poll tax). Currently, there is an understanding that people can swap houses if they get agreement and do the necessary paperwork. The GBM said that he was unsure that Territory Housing has the capacity to respond to these issues.

In September 2009 the Ali Curung LAB, acting as an informal HRG, allocated five empty houses. Seven applicants put their cases for housing allocation to the LAB, five were successful. The houses apparently became vacant due to sorry business. The elders told people not to move as they did not own the houses and they had to come before the LAB for the allocations to be formalised. Following these allocations a message was received from Territory Housing that in future a Territory Housing/ Tennant Creek representative must be present at all meetings of the HRG (which was still to be formally constituted) so that the recommendations of the HRG can be formally approved. Further, that there should be no swapping of houses as all decisions will be made by Territory Housing on recommendation from the HRG.

At the November LAB meeting in Ali Curung it was reported that Territory Housing would be signing Residential Tenancy Act (RTA) leases with tenants moving back into the SIHIP refurbished houses. The LAB Chairperson expressed concern that nobody from Territory Housing had been to the community to explain the meaning and implications of signing a lease with Territory Housing and that it could be a 'big trouble making scheme for only basic repairs'.

Local Advisory Boards and Housing Reference Groups

The NT Government intended setting up HRGs to be their link or interface with the community and their focal point for community participation in housing. Draft policy materials recommended that membership of HRGs be determined through a process of consultation that identified people with a mix of skills, including those with social and cultural responsibilities for the area. The Territory Housing Regional General Managers would then appoint approximately 15 people to form the HRG. The operation of the HRG will be supported by Territory Housing and be reviewed for effectiveness after 12 months.

In both communities the LAB recommended to Territory Housing that the LAB and HRG comprise the same people, reflecting the previous arrangement where the Community Council and the ICHO were the same elected body. The practical consideration behind this proposed arrangement was that neither of these bodies are remunerated and there have been difficulties in getting a quorum of members for the LAB (particularly in Lajamanu where the LAB meeting dates have coincided with a Health Board Meeting held in Katherine that pays travel, per diem and sitting fees). Territory Housing agreed to this proposal in the interim with the proviso that two additional people form the HRG.

In October 2009 the Ali Curung LAB formally constituted the HRG as a subgroup of the LAB that will hold separate meetings. The rationale was that the business of the HRG is directly linked with Territory Housing and should be considered separately from the business of the LAB/Barkly Shire.

Leases

Under the NTER Act 2007 the Australian Government compulsorily acquired statutory five-year leases over all 'prescribed townships'. Most of these communities are on land granted to Land Trusts as inalienable freehold title under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act* 1976 (ALRA). The

ALRA already allowed for long-term leasing of land subject to traditional owner consent and ministerial approval through Section 19: however, the ALRA was amended in 2006 to provide for township leasing for a 99-year period.

The NTER five-year leases were a precursor to the Australian Government[7] negotiating long-term leases under the new Section 19A to support their vision of communities becoming 'townships' with businesses, services, accommodation, shops, no need for visitor permits and access to homeownership. Another objective of the NTER acquisition of compulsory leases was to make future funds for Aboriginal housing dependent on the grant of a long-term lease by the Aboriginal owners to the NT Government (MOU 2007).

In communities where a long-term head lease has not been agreed with the Australian Government but the community is one of the 16 prioritised for major capital works under SIHIP, Territory Housing will acquire a 'precinct lease' or housing sublease over the area of land on which new housing will be built. Where a community is scheduled to get upgrades to existing housing stock the current five-year Australian government compulsory lease is considered sufficient protection until such time as a longer term lease is negotiated.

In Ali Curung it is understood that a full community lease will be pursued by government as the community is ear-marked as a future growth town under the NT Working Futures plan. However, as Ali Curung will not get new houses built until the five-year compulsory Commonwealth lease expires in 2012, lease negotiations were not a major issue. It is understood, from informal conversations, however, that there are different views on whether the traditional owners of Ali Curung should sign a township lease.

In Lajamanu the situation is more complicated, as the land belongs to Gurindji traditional owners. Although agreement was made between Gurindji and Warlpiri that the latter would make decisions for their community in Lajamanu, the NT ALRA requires that the lease agreement is made with the Gurindji people through the Hooker Creek Land Trust. Some of the Gurindji agree to the lease but others do not.

Similarly, some of the Warlpiri residents want the lease signed so that they can get new houses, but they also want to have a say in the conditions of the head lease so, for example, their cultural sights are protected. In addition, some argue that the law gives you rights to the country that you are born in, therefore Warlpiri people born in Lajamanu should have their rights recognised too and 'there are many young ones coming up'.

In addition, a member of the LAB pointed out that, before signing a lease, it would be useful to know how many houses there would be in order to inform their decision making.

The CLC proposed in 2009 that, rather than signing a head lease with the Federal Government's Office of Township Leasing, house block leases could be agreed between the Gurindji owners and Territory Housing. This would enable new houses to be built, existing houses to be repaired/up-graded, and all housing stock to be brought under the control of Territory Housing. Territory Housing would then sublease to individual tenants with the conditions of the RTA lease spelt out. Negotiations were continuing between the CLC, Warlpiri and Gurindji at the end of 2009.

SIHIP implementation

Due to the ongoing negotiations around the long-term lease there was no scoping of work or scheduling of the New Futures Alliance to begin work in Lajamanu by December 2009. Planners from the NT Department of Planning and Infrastructure began discussing the proposed Lajamanu Area Plan with the LAB in August 2009.

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7 The NTER Law gave the Australian Government five-year leases over NT Aboriginal communities. Therefore, it is the Australian Government that controls the housing assets. However, the Australian Government has engaged Territory Housing to manage repairs and maintenance and tenancy management.

In Ali Curung there were varying opinions on the number of houses that would be up-graded/refurbished. The uncertainty continued throughout the research period with the number of houses to be refurbished, which did not appear to include the 'tin sheds', diminishing over time. Similarly, expectations of the scope of up-grade/refurbishment were high in the early period and diminished over time as news filtered in that just 30 houses would be brought up to a 'functional standard'. The final number of houses due for upgrade remained unknown. The New Futures Alliance identified around 50 upgrades needed for each house but selected 10 priority areas that fitted the new SIHIP guidelines that were developed following the August 2009 review of SIHIP to reduce unit costs and meet original target numbers. At their November 2009 meeting, the Local Advisory Board was informed that refurbishments were beginning, but would only cover three priority areas to make the house 'safe': that the house was electrically safe, tenants could wash themselves and their clothing/bedding, and tenants could store and prepare food. In addition, under pressure from the community, it was agreed that the houses would be painted – with one coat of paint. The reduced scope of the housing upgrades raised the unanswered question of whether the houses would meet the remote public housing framework standard necessary for the house to be transferred to Territory Housing.

5.3.3 Post-research developments

Although the formal research period for the project finished with the final 'report back' visits to the communities in November 2009, it is worth noting a number of developments since that time that highlight the ongoing problems in consistent service delivery, particularly with regard to communications and misleading expectations. On 3 December 2009, this report (shown on the following two pages) was tabled at the Barkly Shire Council Meeting (Barkly Shire Council 2009).

Further research would be needed to verify the figures noted in the Barkly Council meeting, which would also allow closer analysis of why there appears to be such a gap in the costs of housing refurbishment at Ali Curung. It is possible that this is an example of improper level of service delivery, and it is indeed the regional, Shire level that is best situated to provide the most efficient repairs and maintenance at the local level.

As it is, the work done by the Alliance came under further criticism from residents in February-March 2010 once a number of houses had been done. The dissatisfaction was widely reported in the media with 'Home refurbishment "rip-off"' (www.theaustralian.com.au/in-depth/aboriginal-australia/home-refurbishment-rip-off/story-e6frgd9f-1225832751924). Residents were reported to be considering to refuse to pay the bond on the refurbished houses as they were still in such poor repair. (www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2010/03/23/2854046.htm?site=idx-nt). Adding to the mix, the NT Government was forced to back down on inserting a 'gag' clause in housing maintenance contracts with Shires that prevented Shire staff from commenting publicly on the Aboriginal housing program (www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2010/03/02/2834500.htm). Finally, a Post Review Assessment on SIHIP was released on 17 March, which concluded that indeed the program had improved in line with the recommendation of the August 2009 SIHIP review, but that a new, separate review group would be put in place to oversee the program (Macklin 2008). The following day, the Alliance responsible for some of the Top End communities, Earth Connect, was sacked for poor practices and inadequate progress. (www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2010/03/18/2849276.htm?site=idx-nt).

It is clear from these stories that the news about a pared-down set of refurbishments did not filter out to communities either through the Alliance, local housing representatives or the Local Advisory Board. The apparent lack of amenity remaining after the refurbishment appeared hard to accept for mostly poor residents when it was estimated publicly that each house would receive $75 000 worth of refurbishment, and where the Shire may have been able to do it for less. Even allowing for the high cost of remote construction, there remains a considerable gap between understanding of what was on offer and what was actually provided.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER REPORTS

BARKLY SHIRE COUNCIL

ITEM NUMBER   7.10
TITLE: HOUSING ALI CURUNG
REFERENCE   -
AUTHOR: DWS

RECOMMENDATION: This report is received.

SUMMARY:

This report examines and compares the standard of housing improvements and costs under SIHIP as compared to Council's current standards.

REPORT

Council I has now had the benefit of having seen the refurbishments being undertaken by New Futures Alliance from the Commonwealth and Territory Strategic Indigenous Housing Infrastructure Project (SIHIP) and this report compares this latest renovation package and its comparative cost with what has been done from past Council involvement in Housing renovations.

The DWS, Richard Morris form Planning an Canberra and others inspected and compared the Shire renovated properties and those recently renovated under the SIHIP program on 25 November 09.

Whilst both houses were made safe and freshly painted there were some obvious differences. The SIHIP kitchen was stainless steel while Council's was wood with a stainless steel sink. The SIHIP tap over the sink was a more expensive mixer tap that is unlikely to last. SIHIP agreed that this should have been a more robust squat tap.

The electrical part of the house was repaired for safety purposes. The inside of the house were painted, wall and floor, and the laundry and bathroom renovated. The work by the Shire was better in that SIHIP didn't paint the floors in the bedrooms (due to cost). SIHIP also painted everything the same colour while the shire painted to the chosen colours of the occupant (different colours in different rooms) and the shire did the entire floor.

Shire costs were $10-12,000 plus about 20% for project management and admin (total <$14,500). SIHIP, on the other hand, has a community budget of $3.8M to cover 40-50 houses = about $75 -90,000/house depending on how many houses are refurbished. Had the shire been allocated an extra $4,500/house, we could easily have afforded to install a stainless steel kitchen.

Comparative figures per house, allowing for a full stainless kitchen, renovation of bathroom and laundry as well as safety issues in relation to electrical:

Shire $20,000 – painted throughout to the colour combination requested by the occupant with floors painted throughout.
SIHIP $75,000 – painted a standard colour throughout, and floors painted except bedrooms. (This figure is based on 50 houses completed at Ali Curung).

Richard Morris from Planning in Canberra was amazed at what the shire could and did do for the cost.

Issues still to be addressed include (most of these are OH&S [safety] issues):
- fixing holes (chips) in the floor tiles – these could have been easily filled in from a commercial cement tube;
- providing robust towel racks and hooks behind the door in the bathroom (minimising wet clothes/towels on floors);
- provision of safety rails in the toilet for disabled homes when there are grab rails in the bathroom;
- the shower set to a safe height in the disabled house (The step to the shower was far too high for a disabled person to safely get in and out of the shower:
- there was need of a soap container in the shower (there had been one there and it was broken off);
- a grab rail at the front and rear doors at the steps; and
- Providing curtain hooks so people can put curtains on the windows, especially in the bedrooms where they need some privacy.

Ali Curung has been identified as a Territory Growth Town and, as such, may be visited by a range of people to see the potential for their proposed businesses. As such, the houses at Ali Curung should be to a standard that is as close to others throughout rural Australia.

If Barkly Shire had a third of SIHIP's budget, we could address all the refurbishments and, with the full budget, between 8 and 10 new houses would have been built in addition to the refurbishments of the entire community.

Mr Tim Day, the Director Infrastructure at Central Desert Shire, confirms Barkly Shire figures as below in regard to SIHIP:

- 14 houses in 5 weeks equal 3 houses per week or 1.5 days per house.
- 10 workers on site equals 15 working days per house.
- $1000 per day per worker equals $15000 in labour
- $15000 in materials (probably over-stated) matching labour costs.
- Total cost per house $30,000.

Central Desert informed New Futures Alliance, that the Shire would be happy to have the balance of the NFA budget of $45,000 for the Shires to do more cost effective work with the balance of the funds. NFA said they had some overheads and these needed to be funded.

One can only assume that the Commonwealth Government is too involved in the program to be able to change, but it seems that SIHIP may be more of an industry stimulation package than a program to deliver new and cost effective housing for remote indigenous communities.

6.   Research findings

This section provides an analysis of the information gathered from both supply and demand side participants, referencing the literature reviewed for the research project where appropriate and contextualised within the political and policy environment that was shaping the experiences of both demand and supply side participants over the period of research. Key findings are grouped under theme areas. The theme areas explicate the fundamental issues complicating, and at times compromising, service delivery around housing, asset and tenancy management in the NT.

6.1 Discordance

Within the space of one year following the June 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response, the Intervention, a raft of policy and program changes were introduced by the Australian and NT Governments into remote Aboriginal communities in the NT. Here we discuss only those directly related to housing service delivery.

The Intervention carried with it the compulsory acquisition of statutory five-year leases over all 'prescribed townships' as a precursor to government negotiating long-term leases with traditional owners to support the government's vision of growth towns that would support economic investment and home ownership opportunities that would be free of the constraints of community land tenure and land administration issues. Both Lajamanu and Ali Curung were targeted as locations for initial investment. Soon after the Intervention came the announcement that the SIHIP would deliver 750 new houses including new subdivisions, over 230 new houses to replace those to be demolished, over 2500 housing up-grades, and essential infrastructure to support new houses on the condition that communities transfer their housing to publicly owned Territory Housing on the completion of the repairs and upgrades (MoU 2007, para. 18) and that the Australian Government would have no further responsibility for the delivery of Aboriginal housing, municipal, essential and infrastructure services in the NT from 1 July 2008 (MoU 2007, para. 6). At the same time a restructure of local government was taking place that would amalgamate 60 primarily Aboriginal community councils into eight large shire councils by July 1 2008. Community voice was to be via local advisory boards (unpaid positions with no financial delegation) constituted on the recommendation of the community.

In sum, changes driven by the Australian Government would see the NT Government take responsibility for major reforms across land tenure, local government, a housing and infrastructure building program and housing service delivery to remote Aboriginal communities already beset by the uncertainties of the Intervention and with very little awareness of the governance and housing changes being devised as part of the Aboriginal improvement project.

The size and speed of the policy changes had negative effects which became public in mid-2009 when criticisms of SIHIP failure to meet targets (timelines and costs) for new construction were increasingly aired in the nation's newspapers. Discord emerged between the Australian and NT Governments and between the Governments and the private sector company – Parsons Brinckerhoff – directing the SIHIP over program administration and house building/refurbishment costs and the unlikelihood of delivering the number of new houses and refurbishments promised in earlier SIHIP statements. A review of SIHIP was commissioned to examine high program, house-unit and administrative costs. The outcome was to curtail the engagement with Aboriginal people regarding house design and to limit their options consistent with a public housing program (Australian Government 2009, p. 27). Unfortunately this undermines an aspect of SIHIP – Housing Design Performance Specifications – that reflected years of research experience in Aboriginal house design and catered for, among other things, households of multiple sub-units, avoidance relationships, visitors and outdoor sleeping and living preferences.

To underpin investment in new and refurbished houses Governments want to reduce duress and thereby extend housing lifecycles beyond that previously experienced in remote communities. Under the Remote Public Housing Management Framework, policy was developed in Territory Housing to 'mould' good tenants (defined by small family size, reduced mobility, controlled visiting, regular rent payments and obligation for property damage) through controlling the number and composition of household members who could occupy new or refurbished houses, and then providing intensive support to the tenancy through the CHO. This aim, to underpin investment with 'robust and effective property and tenancy management', was reinforced in the recommendations of the SIHIP Review of Program Performance (Australian Government 2009, p. 8).

While the desire to extend housing lifecycles is understandable, the means of achieving this show scant regard for Aboriginal kinship and domiciliary arrangements for which there is a considerable research evidence base (see Section 2). Rather than extending the life cycle of housing by designing and building houses that meet Aboriginal needs, the Australian and NT Governments have opted to build houses consistent with mainstream public housing and to 'mould' tenants to live in these houses in the dominant, non-Aboriginal way. Aboriginal 'failure' to comply will be heavily sanctioned as improved health, education and safety outcomes in remote Aboriginal communities all ride on improved housing outcomes.

For Ali Curung and Lajamanu there are on average 3.8 adults and 3.6 children, for a total average of 7.4 people per household. These figures do not fully reflect the multifamily and intergenerational nature of households evident in the research or the shifting relationships and negotiation of social tensions that drive the high levels of intra-community mobility.

Interview responses from both demand and supply side agents in Lajamanu and Ali Curung underscore the frustration and anger felt when supposedly positive news proves to have unwelcome conditions or costs. That is, large sums of money are being invested in new houses and/or house refurbishments, but only if land leases are signed, and there will be new rules for living in houses. Fuelling the frustration was the ambiguity or lack of definition about the leases and rules. In Ali Curung the uncertainty about what it would mean to be a public housing tenant still existed at the point where people were being organised to move out of their houses so that refurbishments could be done. All they knew was that they would be required to sign a Residential Tenancies Lease in order to move back into their modestly refurbished house, and the lease had not been made available to them to help them understand the changes, although the rules had been available since August 2009. Discordance is evident between people wanting to live well in good housing and the uncertainty about what constraints would be placed on patterns of occupation and use of housing: as the Ali Curung LAB Chairperson said: 'it [public housing] could be a big trouble making scheme for only basic repairs'.

6.2 Cycles of policy and people

The abolition of the local association councils and their replacement with large Shire Councils left a number of gaps in local governance and housing management (see Elvin 2009b). Research results show that a majority of residents in Ali Curung and Lajamanu were aware that their community councils had been abolished and that the Shire Services Manager was the new 'chief'. However, 'chiefs' appointed from outside the community come and go (for example, the high turnover of SSMs in Lajamanu and Ali Curung) for reasons outside the control of the community, so for all intents and purposes the LAB is still their community decision making body and whether voluntary or not, assumed the role of the former Council. The fact that there was a vacuum in decision making on housing allocations initially had little immediate impact. Residents continued to make their own decisions about how to distribute housing according to shifting relationships and needs.

More apparent for residents was the change in community work teams and the difficulty of knowing who was responsible for different aspects of repairs and maintenance, or indeed, what repairs and maintenance items were being responded to and what was no longer possible. While those household interviews reported getting some things 'fixed', there were always others things that needed 'fixing' but had to wait (for SIHIP, for Shire budgets to be determined, for qualified people) for an indeterminate period of time. Often this resulted in discord between residents and members of work teams (who may be humbugged to do jobs outside of their scheduled work) and in discord between frustrated community-based shire services employees and those in management positions in the Shire headquarters.

As the NT local government reform was abolishing councils and in Lajamanu and Ali Curung the corresponding ICHOs, the NT Government was proposing the creation of Housing Reference Groups (HRGs) as unremunerated advisory bodies to Territory Housing. The proposed functions of the HRG were extensive and ambitious: ranging from advice on everyday management of public housing (waiting lists, allocations, and living arrangements) to housing design, to regional land use and infrastructure planning (see Porter 2009b). It was intended that the HRGs would be set up and operating early enough to be provide advice to the SIHIP Alliances on employment and training, planning and design for new houses.

In Ali Curung and Lajamanu over 66% of people interviewed were not aware of any discussions being held on proposed HRGs. The awareness that did exist was within the LABs and the decision taken to retain the role of the HRG within the structure of the LAB as the locally elected representative body with 1 or 2 additional community members joining for HRG-specific business. There has been no engagement with the communities on the development of the RPHMF and there could well be a reluctance to be advising Territory Housing on housing decisions that could undermine cultural imperatives and practices. Territory Housing has not built the trust needed for establishing effective partnerships with the communities. As Hunt et al. point out from their study of governance:

> *The experience of the COAG trials demonstrates that for 'mainstreaming' and whole-of-government approaches to work, it has to be in partnership with Indigenous communities and their organisations. It requires effective and legitimate governance in Indigenous communities as well as improved governance by governments themselves. If weak or 'dysfunctional' Indigenous governance undermined outcomes in the self-determination era, the same problems are likely to frustrate success in whole-of-government mainstreaming as well, particularly as governments are struggling within themselves to make these new approaches work.* (2008, pp. 41–42)

Apart from the Shire employees and some members of the LABs, there was little awareness of the SIHIP program or the impending change to a remote public housing management framework. Those who worked for the Shire received their information from different sources (for example the CHO in Ali Curing received some information from the Regional Territory Housing staff) and this was frequently conjecture or valid for the moment but subject to change. In reality no one knew for certain as policy and process were still being developed in Darwin.

The mid-2009 publicity around SIHIP combined with the resignations of two high-profile Aboriginal NT Government Ministers in all likelihood created more awareness of SIHIP in Lajamanu and Ali Curung than all previous formal representations. Unfortunately, just as community residents were becoming more aware of promised new houses and/or refurbishments the scope for the SIHIP Alliances to be engaged and responsive to preferred house and refurbishment design elements was extinguished. The impact of the reduction in unit costs in order for SIHIP to meet program targets was made very clear in the Ali Curung in November 2009, when the New Futures Alliance informed the LAB that only 3 of the 10 prioritised refurbishments would be carried out.

Examined from another angle, there may well be a situation where refurbished houses fail to meet the remote public housing framework standard, thus failing to provide the trigger (MoU 2007) for transfer to publicly owned Territory Housing and the signing of RTA leases. If this occurred the number of 'legacy houses' (existing houses that have not been up-graded) would increase and more tenants would be signed up to occupancy agreements, with fewer obligations and lower rents than tenants in houses meeting the remote public housing framework standard.

Government have mooted significant change in remote Aboriginal housing but the experience of residents in Lajamanu and Ali Curung would be that very little positive change has occurred to date.

6.3 Mobility

In the past few years there have been a number of studies examining the relationship between state service delivery and Aboriginal temporary mobility. With the exception of Musharbash's work on Yuendumu (Musharbash 2008), the main focus of the housing-related research has been mainstream public housing provision, albeit in some relatively remote towns (e.g. Carnarvon & Broome). This experience has lead some leading commentators to conclude that intra-community mobility or micro-mobility 'has a different, and arguably less complex, set of implications for service delivery than movement between localities' (Prout 2008b, p. 3). However, when it comes to mainstreaming public housing in remote Aboriginal communities there is reason to believe that it will have significant implications.

In the first round of research conducted in Lajamanu and Ali Curung during December 2008 it was found that more respondents reported obtaining their houses through sorry business and swapping houses (66% for Lajamanu and 50% for Ali Curung) than from the community council waiting list (Guenther 2009). These figures alerted the researchers to the potential significance of intra-community mobility and guided the ongoing collection of data on household movement in the next two rounds of interviews.

The second and third round of interviews demonstrated considerable intra-community mobility. In Lajamanu 48% of households experienced change (a house change, a change in the household formation, or both) within the six months between the first and second rounds. Between the second and third rounds of interviews, 22% of households in Lajamanu experienced change despite there being a 25% drop in the number of households interviewed.

In Ali Curung 55% of households experienced change within the five months between the first and second rounds. Between the second and third rounds of interviews, 45% of households in Ali Curung experienced change.

Reasons for change are provided in Section 5. The main point here is to foreshadow the potential for breaches of an RTA lease that does not recognise multi-unit households and the intergenerational nature of child rearing, domiciliary behaviours, and mourning customs, and that restricts movement between houses when social circumstances/tensions require people to move. In addition, some houses are used exclusively by women and some are used by single men. These houses will experience a high turnover of people as relationships are formed and dissolved.

Tenancies will be put at risk and if this leads to evictions then the 'cycle of alienation' described by Prout (2008a) may become endemic.

6.4 Agency

Factors such as the dependence of remote Aboriginal communities on government transfer, and the susceptibility of the NT communities to interference from all levels of Government, exemplified by the NTER, undermine the possibilities for the exercise of agency by Aboriginal people in communities,

either individually or collectively. This is agency defined as the capacity to act or exert power. However, acknowledging the overwhelming size and power of the structures impacting on Aboriginal lives is not to say that there is no choice or agency being exercised, nor that it can have no impact on the governance of service delivery, at least in the area of housing and tenancy management.

The housing reform research demonstrated that householders were actively and effectively organising and reorganising their household arrangements to accommodate family business or in response to other environmental factors. The intra-community mobility which results has implications discussed elsewhere. That the mobility was self-organised, and the then Council/ICHO was informed after the fact, or was assumed to 'know' of the change through informal community telegraph, is indicative of households' ability to organise themselves and the adaptation of the local housing managers to accommodate that. Thus not all households had signed leases for the houses that they currently occupied, although a lease had been signed at some stage. The housing agencies, for their part, had recourse to withdrawing services to households that stepped too far out of line, although none of the households interviewed knew of evictions occurring in the classical, public housing sense of the word. This would appear to be an example in a small way of the dialectical nature of agency and structure, whereby actions of individuals affect and change the operation of the structure so the needs of both are accommodated.

Where there was a vacuum, as there was following the demise of the ICHOs and community government councils and lack of information about who was replacing them, the self-organising went on while notifications of change and housing applications piled up in the Shire offices, awaiting confirmation of change of governance structure. Thus not only do residents have motivation to act due to family changes or cultural needs, they also have the capacity to do so, and have done so regardless of the external rules, or the lack thereof in this case. This is now recognised, albeit in a very indirect way, by the development of *Remote Public Housing Tenancy Rules* that are targeted to remote area needs and are purportedly more flexible to cater for the conditions, including residents' need and ability to move. In other words, it may be argued that the need for separate rules, despite initial assumptions that the same public housing rule would apply across the Territory, is an indication of the state's response to the expression of agency, both past and expected. Although such agency could not be called 'transformative', it demonstrates that Aboriginal households have the capacity to act,[8] are often the best placed to negotiate the best solutions for housing issues given knowledge of local conditions, and can have an impact on how housing policy is implemented.

In other words, if the new public housing tenancy rules do not allow flexibility to take account of tenants' agency and their ability to act based on cultural and family imperatives, they will not be able to be implemented effectively or will simply be ignored.

6.5 Recognition space

The household interviews in Lajamanu and Ali Curung underscore the low levels of awareness of housing reform in Aboriginal remote communities. Although the Australian and NT Governments made announcements that there would be meaningful 'engagement' with remote communities to ensure good housing outcomes from SIHIP, training and employment of local people to provide skilled workers for repairs and maintenance, and a strong role for HRGs, the experiences in Lajamanu and Ali Curung are distant from the expressed intentions of governments.

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8   A much publicised expression of agency in the NT community context was the "Ampilatwatja walk off" of 2009, where residents of the Barkly Shire community began to set up an alternative community in response to the Intervention and poor services from the Shire. Community members toured Australia seeking support, and actively sought technical support from local Indigenous organisations. They attracted both public and private interests with the donation of at least one house through philanthropic means, with other houses and training promised (see, e.g.www.smh.com.au/national/a-community-with-its-own-intervention-20100212-nxmp.html).

In earlier research for DKCRC Core Project 5, Porter (2009b) adapted Taylor's (2008) use of Mantziaris and Martin's (2000) 'recognition space' to illustrate how, over time, engagement in this space could create a hybrid housing model for NT remote Aboriginal communities. Adopting this working construct does not presume that the 'recognition space' lies between isolated and untainted domains. Rather, these constructed domains are illustrative and the result of exposure, transformation and mutual engagement with each other and other influences (Smith 2008, pp. 154–58). In this example the 'recognition space' can be viewed as representing the area where there is constant mediation between customary practices, active involvement in elements of mainstream society and economy, and the expectations of the state.

Aboriginal values
Kinship systems
Reciprocity
Social identities
Relation to country

Recognition space
Discussion and
negotiation of agreed
procedures and rules

Mainstream values
Transparency
Consistency
Minimum standards
Reciprocal obligation

RECOGNITION SPACE
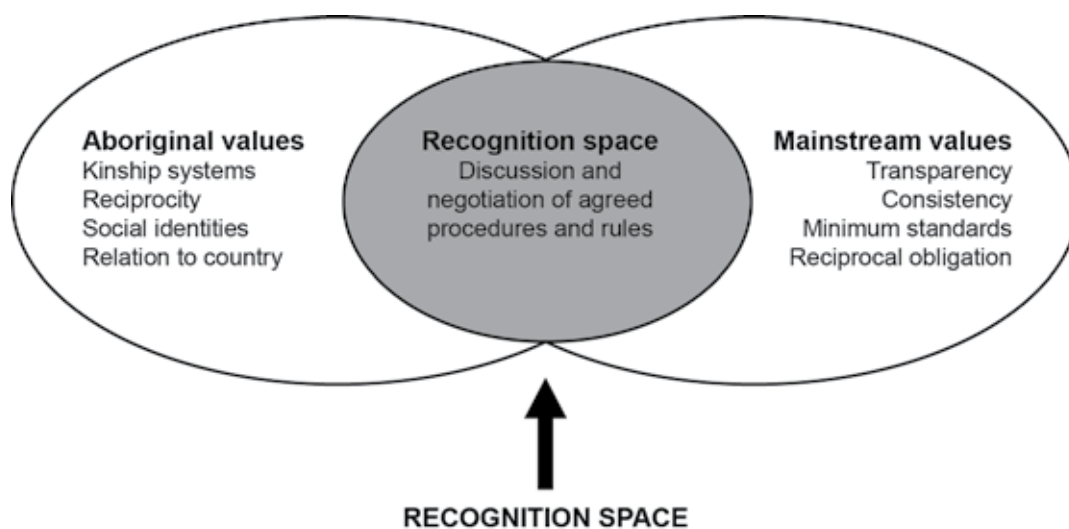
The mainstreaming 'values' of consistent level of service, minimum standards, transparency in decision making on the government side and reciprocal obligation on the customer/demand side is captured in one sphere of Figure 6.1. In the other sphere are the 'values' of Aboriginal culture that include for example, social identities, kinship systems, high levels of reciprocal obligation and a holistic understanding of the relationship between land and people. The area of intersect is the 'recognition space' and represents the extent to which Territory Housing and Aboriginal communities are able to discuss, negotiate and agree on rules and procedures, that is, the extent to which they are able and willing to recognise the existence and validity of each other's priorities and find solutions that give housing services meaning for both partners.

Territory Housing is now the monopoly housing supplier in remote Aboriginal communities and could well refuse to negotiate further on policies and processes that establish a mainstream housing service across the NT. On the other hand, each community is a single client group sharing a strong cultural affiliation to the ways in which they live in their houses and relate to their domestic space.

It cannot be assumed that residents will be pliable to rules that require them to discard their domiciliary practices, and, as we have seen, there is notable capacity for residents to express a form of agency. This suggests that Territory Housing must sustain a two-way communication with the Lajamanu and Ali Curung HRGs around tenancy management. As reported in the previous section, the residents of both communities have experience in organising people and housing in response to shifting relationships, changing needs, social tensions and sorry business.

Solutions that will improve housing outcomes can be negotiated with the community. Building trust will be an essential part of the process. This requires Territory Housing to actively value the contributions of the HRGs and to provide the HRG with sufficient support to engage the whole community in discussions on how to achieve good housing outcomes for both parties. Continuity of Territory Housing contact, and personnel with negotiation skills and decision making powers, is crucial for showing there is a commitment to finding nuanced and sustainable housing outcomes.

6.6 Insights towards constructing desert services that work

In this section insights from the research at Ali Curung and Lajamanu and with government and agency staff will be examined in relation to the five overarching research questions guiding the 'Desert Services that Work – Demand Responsive Services for Desert Settlements' core project.

1. What are characteristics of the interplay between demand and supply of services, according to the perceptions of consumers and service providers engaged at the local interface?

The research identifies a number of characteristics manifest at the interface between householders and service providers (policy makers, programs, discreet services) in relation to housing tenancy and asset management. First, there is a significant gap between how tenancy and asset management continues to play out on a day-to-day basis at the local level and the housing changes being proposed. These proposed changes, such as the move to a public housing model, conceived by and to a large extent still circulating among, supply side actors, are the epitome of top-down solutions onto which consultation with demand side actors is grafted over time. The complexity of the changes planned, together with the extant political economy of remote desert settlements which have experienced sweeping top-down reforms in the wake of the NTER, have required large lead times for implementation. The impact has been that, on the ground, business as usual has continued albeit with voids and cracks appearing as multiple reforms created confusion over tenancy management processes and repairs and maintenance. This led to a perceived reduction in service provision as expressed by a number of householders interviewed and in the rate of turnover of relevant staff on communities, as well as building frustration as anticipated changes to housing and tenancy management (refurbishments, new houses, new rules) are slow to happen and are confusing or less than anticipated when they do appear. There are clear capacity issues at all levels of government to take forward housing development and tenancy reform as centralised and top-down coordination of service provision and community consultations roll out.

Second, the proposed changes to housing are inextricably tied to a suite of overarching Aboriginal Affairs policy agendas such as welfare reform, economic participation and development, land tenure reform and 'normalisation' of services. These agendas are not necessarily the agendas of demand side agents who see more and/or improved housing and better local services in which they have a significant governance stake as the core issue. Thus, effective engagement with community residents and householders, let alone achieving some local buy-in or 'ownership' of the reform process, is compromised by the conflict between the perceived issues and agendas of supply and demand side actors. For householders, local management of housing issues, some 'Yapa' governance, is critical to securing improved services that meet the needs of tenants, especially where those needs are shaped by cultural and family responsibilities. For supply side agents, realising 'desired' social change through housing provision and services is critical. Thus, service provision around housing in Aboriginal settlements is being focussed on shaping the nature of the service recipient to fit the nature of the service to be supplied, rather than negotiating effective services responses to local priorities and local capacities to participate and contribute. Service provision is also confounded and delayed by the need to pursue multiple agendas simultaneously and across tiered, layered and bulky government departments.

Third, much of the rhetoric around Aboriginal housing reform and housing services in the Northern Territory expounds the idea of investing in and aligning housing standards, housing services and tenancy responsibilities with those experienced by and expected of all other Australians. As the Northern Territory moves inexorably towards a public housing model across all Aboriginal settlements, mainstream social housing policy across the rest of Australia is actively progressing investment in community based, locally owned and managed social housing that can provide not just housing but also support to assist with the social and economic participation of disadvantaged tenants (Plibersek, 2009). It would seem that, in terms of housing service provision, Aboriginal tenants in the NT are currently subject to a package of policy measures that are quite at odds with policy intent and action in the mainstream.

2. What are the conditions that permit successful practice to develop between consumers and service-providers?

Good consultation practices were repeatedly requested by demand side interviewees in the research project. While community consultations by Territory Housing and others did occur across the period of the research there was much dissatisfaction expressed by community residents about how it occurred and who was spoken with. Drilling down into such disaffection it seems apparent that the issue hinges around expectations of residents that consultation should involve the building of mutual understanding and facilitate a process of negotiation and agreement-making in relation to housing reforms. As the nature of the reforms to housing, tenancy management and asset maintenance have been largely predetermined, the consultations that did occur could be no more than information giving sessions. While there may be significant up-front costs associated with undertaking more nuanced consultations and putting forward at least some aspects of the proposed reforms on the negotiation table, it is likely that significant cost benefits have been foregone in the current process and approach. For example, house swapping due to sorry business occurs frequently and is largely self managed by residents with deference to appropriate cultural norms and decision making structures. Under the new public housing tenancy rules, house swapping for any reason is explicitly banned. It is likely that the new rules will be ignored by residents and, if enforced, will result in vacant houses at risk of vandalism, increased overcrowding in other housing stock and/or increased homelessness. If this issue had been taken into negotiation with appropriate people in the community tasked with the authority to negotiate such decisions, rules and processes agreeable to both parties may have been able to be established. This would have further facilitated some buy-in and ownership of housing reform at the community level.

It is also apparent that there may be a threshold of essential service provision needed before effective negotiations around rules, rights and responsibilities can be undertaken. At Ali Curung, where no new housing stock is to be built under SIHIP, and the refurbishment of existing houses has been downgraded to three essential areas (from nine), the housing stock may not be up to the standard required for the implementation of the new Public Housing Tenancy Rules. Despite the promises, anticipation, fears and uncertainties (and monies spent) playing out over the past twelve months, life for residents in Ali Curung may not change very much. The timeliness of service provision and clarity about who, what, when and how is a critical condition for successful practice and essential in averting the spread of disgruntled consumers. So too is thoughtful consideration of what elements of service delivery, even when centrally administered as per housing reform, are able to be negotiated and renegotiated at the local level in order to involve participants and support local institutions for developing skills, capacity, leadership and community renewal.

3. At what scales of governance should different service delivery functions be assigned to optimize both demand and supply based criteria?

Housing reforms – both to tenancy management and asset maintenance, and the roll out of new houses and upgrades under SIHIP – are centrally administered from the Territory Government. The new local government bodies will be partnering with Territory Housing to deliver services, delivery of which have become increasingly centralised. Since the SIHIP review published in August 2009 (Australian Government 2009), the Australian Government is also now co-managing the SIHIP program with the NTG.

Experience elsewhere in Australia has underscored the problems with centralised management of public housing stock and tenancies. Issues include the spatial concentration of poverty and disadvantage and its impact on the community, the social and economic participation disincentives that tend to correspond with public housing tenancies, and the inability of large centralised government departments to respond flexibly and promptly to tenant concerns and issues beyond payment of rent.

There is no reason to believe that the experience in the Territory will differ from experience elsewhere, especially given that spatial concentrations of disadvantage already exist, local avenues and institutions that can support improved tenant participation have been dissolved or dissipated, and the inadequacies of centralised service administration are exacerbated by the conditions of remoteness. It may be judicious to retain ownership of housing stock centrally; however, governance of tenancies and repairs and maintenance may best occur locally, whereby response to need and local conditions is tailored and efficient. Although the delegation of service functions regionally and locally is occurring, such as through voluntary Housing Reference Groups (with advisory functions only) and Shire contracts for housing maintenance, governance functions are not similarly being delegated, but remain centralised. Local Advisory Boards are limited in their capacity to make decisions for the local level in response to locally expressed need, and there is thus little local accountability, which will undermine the effectiveness of the housing delivery and its concomitant impact on livelihoods and wellbeing. This is an instance of where applying the principle of subsidiarity may be most effective, inasmuch as it recognises that decision making needs to take place as close to the level of the individual as is appropriate, given capacity and authority to act (Moran & Elvin 2009, p. 421). The evidence gathered in this research project suggests that the further removed governance and provision of essential household (especially those perceived as essential by residents) management and maintenance activities are from the locale of the stock and tenants, the less likely effective accountabilities measures will be implemented.

4. What are the service type and delivery style priorities of consumers within a specified budget framework, and what is their capacity to participate and willingness to contribute to services?

Demand responsive services assume the participation of the consumer in the determination of the service. In the current study of housing and tenancy reform delivery in the NT, the lack of resident participation in the decision making made to date is the outstanding feature. Thus, the initial tenancy rules, including payment and conditions of occupancy, were set without explanation or consultation and the capacity to be involved through governance or other consultative mechanisms was greatly diminished.

Many of those interviewed were unhappy about the fact that, despite rent being paid and the amount being acceptable under the existing regime: 'Alright, but why do we have to pay for broken house?' (Ali Curung resident, Round 1, Guenther 2009, p. 18). Residents did not know where their rent money was going, e.g. to Territory Housing or to the Shires, under the old or the new arrangements, nor during the period of research were they aware of how much and why their rent might be raised. It was only in mid-November 2009, 18 months after the reforms commenced, that four households in Ali Curung, the first to be refurbished under SIHIP, were informed of the new rent for their refurbished houses. In one case, it appeared to the householder that the rent was being increased by 50%, although it was not clear if that was in fact the case. Further, it was not clear to recipients what the basis was for the rent hike and what would be 'provided' as a result (Workshop feedback 16/11/09).

When questioned in the early part of the research about issues of maintenance, training and capacity, many householders indicated a willingness to participate in repairs and maintenance given knowledge and resources to do so. It would appear that the will to participate has been stymied in part by the continued pace of change and the revolving patterns of service providers such as painters, plumbers etc. who in 2008–2009 have been at various times community-based, shire centre-based, or from somewhere else entirely under the NTER or SIHIP.

One example of where householders were effective in making priorities clear was the insistence of Ali Curung residents on the need to have houses painted as part of the SIHIP refurbishment. They were successful in winning concessions within the new SIHIP priorities. This indicated community willingness to participate, to make choices between the priorities given SIHIP's 'specified budget'. This is, however, a singular example.

In combination with the impact of the NTER and the rapid imposition of the reforms with limited information and no choice being provided to householders about the conditions of their tenancy, this aspect of testing the effectiveness of demand responsive services could not be furthered. It can only be assumed, given the examples noted and the results of interviews, that given choice and information, many householders would be willing to participate in a discussion about how they might contribute to improving their housing through fixing as well as finances.

5. What are the critical issues and strategies to improve the service system, including the strengths and weaknesses of different technology and governance options?

The research coincided with the first 18 months of the implementation of major reforms to housing and asset management and the SIHIP program. At the two project research sites, Ali Curung and Lajamanu, it is clear that despite much hype very few on-the-ground changes have occurred. This highlights the very long lead times required to gear up large-scale programs and reforms, especially where such programs need to address issues of remoteness, cultural and geographic difference, and government and agency capacities. It also underscores the importance of understanding the key drivers, the variabilities and vulnerabilities, that shape remote (especially desert) living and service delivery (Stafford Smith & Cribb 2009) and require tailored and flexible approaches capable of working productively with variability, dispersal, strong local networks, small populations and extreme conditions. Such an approach to housing reforms would prioritise local governance structures and the need for local people to do more to manage and maintain the facilities and services they have, and that cannot be secured readily from great distances. It would require the design of infrastructure able to accommodate diverse family living arrangements and the inevitable mobility of people and resources that epitomise remote desert living, as well as innovative service structures and schedules commensurate with the skills of residents and issues of affordability, for both residents and service providers. Program development must engage with the hierarchy of trade-offs that remote living necessitates, particularly the trade-offs between needing to contribute more of what you have and do to live where you choose and the exorbitant costs of running often inefficient centralised services. Part of the trade-offs must also be the securing of enough shelter (and through a variety of means, not just public housing provision) and essential services to match population trends and enable residents to leverage from the amenity provided by a 'house' to invest in building livelihoods for themselves, their children and in securing improved health and wellbeing. Such an approach too requires social and economic change, but perhaps without the assimilationist overtones characterising current tenancy reform approaches.

It is clear that the majority of the people living in Ali Curung and Lajamanu have lived there most of their lives and will continue to do so, despite ongoing circular movements to service centres, schools, hospitals, sport festivals or country visits. The ties to place, to heritage, to family and their embeddedness within the political economy of remote Australia can delineate the dimensions of where the effectiveness of remote service delivery could be heightened. This could include delegated governance over negotiated aspects of housing tenancy management and associated services at the local level, the development of a suite of service networks and supports against an agreed matrix of service and cost responsibilities and accountability monitoring mechanisms (downward and upward) that normalise ongoing improvements to housing stock, service regimes and ensure social participation and inclusion.

7. Conclusion

The 'Desert Services that Work Project' was formulated to test the assumption that services that are responsive to user demand will be more effective as they are better aligned with user needs and behaviours. It explored how or whether service users will choose to participate or not in decision-making about services, and whether some services are best organised or delivered from a central or regional location and others locally, with varying degrees of participation and contribution by the service users. The project hoped to tease out the many elements that may comprise and compromise effective demand responsiveness in remote Aboriginal settlements, and to propose improved solutions to some of the problems highlighted by the research.

In exploring the reform and delivery of housing and tenancy services in the Northern Territory in the period July 2008 to November 2009 as one example of supply and demand in services, it quickly became evident that there were some substantial supply and demand issues slowing up supply that were generated by large swathes of policy change; the lack of recognition by housing service providers of issues of mobility, agency and change in communities; and lack of recognition for the need of a 'recognition space' within which service providers and Aboriginal communities can discuss and negotiate rules and procedures. Information, governance, stability and the ability to recognise competing values were all identified as major components of effective housing services in these two remote communities of central Australia.

At a general level, the rate and size of change during the research period appeared extraordinary, although it could be argued that it was a fairly typical reform process with the drama of the Intervention to compound the discord. The lack of connection between the development of housing and tenancy management changes and other realities, including the history of public housing elsewhere and the realities of Aboriginal community life, was consistent with past practice. That is, it has been made clear through other research and experience that sustained consultation, good information, site-specific practices and recognition of local capacity will result in improved housing service. For example, as shown in this research, housing provision in remote Aboriginal communities needs to take into account intra-community mobility and the impacts of agency driven by family and cultural imperatives. The instability caused by rapid resource change – loss of staff, uncertainty about labour programs, lack of and conflicting information on both demand and supply sides – needs to be recognised, even if the only solution is to stabilise policy and people and thus reduce the amount of change.

As long as the substantial research evidence base on Aboriginal mobility, cultural imperatives, domiciliary preferences and local capacity or agency is neglected in favour of pre-formulated, centralised or mainstream solutions, substantial improvement in remote Aboriginal community housing services will be elusive. The creation of the Remote Public Housing Management Framework and the Remote Public Housing Tenancy Rules in the NT appears to be an acknowledgment, not wholly semantic, of difference in remote communities and may signal recognition of the fact that if residents are likely to act as they need to do, regardless of the rules, the rules will begin to shift to accommodate them. It remains a dialectical process, in which both supply and demand sides have active roles to play.

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Appendix A – Supply Side Interviews

Round 2 – April 2009

Enquiry about tenancy management under the ICHO/Community Council model

Under the previous ICHO/Community Local Council arrangements for housing management can you tell us:

1. The formation of the ICHO – how many positions, how many members, how many members of the ICHO were on the Community Council?

2. How did they become members of the ICHO (nominated, elected, self appointed)?

3. Was there any advisory group to the ICHO?

    If yes, what did this group do?

4. How many houses did the ICHO manage?

5. What records did the ICHO keep?

6. Were the records available for scrutiny for community members?

7. What type of housing waiting list was kept (in terms of criteria for the waiting list)?

8. On average how long did households wait for housing?

9. What was the process for the allocation of a house?

10. Was the process written down anywhere?

11. Were people in the community aware of the process?

12. How were decisions recorded?

13. Did tenants understand how/why allocation decisions were made?

14. Was there a tenancy agreement for every house?

15. Was the tenancy agreement signed by one household member or all adult household members?

16. Were the rules in the tenancy agreement explained to the tenant/household members?

    If yes, how was this done?

    If no, how did people know what was expected of them as a tenant?

17. Were there any rules about the number of people that could occupy a house on (a) a permanent basis; and (b) as visitors?

18. Were there any rules about the people leaving their house for periods of time?

19. When a death occurred and a house(s) had to be vacated, what was the process for doing this? Who made the decisions and how were they carried out?

20. Did tenants ever get evicted from their house?

    If yes, for what reasons?

21. Was there a clear process for eviction? Record the process.

22. Where did people go if they were evicted?

23. Could an evicted person(s) go back on the waiting list?

24. Were tenants satisfied with way the ICHO did tenancy management?

    If yes, what made people feel satisfied?

    If no, what were they dissatisfied with?

25. In thinking about the questions above, what have been the changes since July 1 2008?

26. Do the changes make people more or less satisfied with tenancy management?

Follow on with questions about the present and the status of the community regarding SIHIP construction and Territory Housing's implementation of the RPHMF. For example:

- At what stage are Territory Housing and the SIHIP construction program at with the community?
- What interaction/meetings has occurred with Territory Housing (who, when, what for)?
- What information has been provided?
- Has there been any engagement (talk of engagement) of community members for the construction process?
- Have people been identified for the Housing Reference Group? If so, what was the process?
- What awareness to community residents have of the housing changes?
- How do you think Territory Housing will manage the cultural obligations that impact on tenancy management (e.g. avoidance relationships, mobility, extended family households, sorry business, other)?

Round 3 – September 2009

1. Have there been any staff changes since our last visit? Who/why?
2. Have there been any changes to how housing repairs and maintenance are carried out over the past few months?
3. Has the Shire (as CDEP provider since July) employed any local residents for housing repairs and maintenance or other work?
4. Have there been any changes to how tenancy management is carried out over the past few months (for example, who is making decisions on allocations, rent payment, intra-community mobility etc)?
5. What are the issues around the long term lease agreement with the Australian government?
6. What is your understanding of what the outcomes will be in terms of SIHIP construction of new houses, refurbishments and repairs in Lajamanu?
7. How much contact/consultation has Territory Housing had with the community about the housing reforms and the SIHIP?
8. What communication processes are in place to inform the Local Advisory Board and the residents of Lajamanu of the leasing, SIHIP construction and housing delivery reforms?
9. Are there conflicting views?
10. Has anybody from Lajamanu been engaged by the Alliance in training and employment for SIHIP building work?
11. Has a Housing Reference Group been formed in Lajamanu? If so, what was the process?

Appendix B – Householder interviews

Round 1 – October 2008

NAME

HOUSE Lot Number

Gender (of interviewee)

Age (of interviewee)

Marital status

Occupation/Income

Are you the main tenant?

How long have you lived in this community?

How long have you lived in this house?

How did you get this house? (Sorry? Waiting list? Etc.)

How many bedrooms?

      Bathrooms?

      Toilets?

Who lives in this house?

Which room do they live in?

Number of adults and children?

Any regular visitors? (number, relationship, gender, age, reasons for staying, where from)

Any visitors come for special events (sport, sorry, holiday)

How many and who?

Is the house big enough for everyone?

And when you have visitors?

Any changes that would help?

Do you go away at times for holiday, or clinic, sorry business?

Who looks after the house when you go away?

Is everything working well in the house such as:

      Doors (latches, locks)

      Windows

      Cupboards/wardrobe

      Fans

      Air-conditioner

      Taps/Drinking water

Hot water

Toilet

Bathroom/shower

Kitchen (stove, fridge, cupboards)

Laundry (washing machine)

Power (light switches, globes)

Yard and fencing

Verandahs

Rubbish collection

Any other problems?

Do your recycle anything?

House

If something is broken who do you tell?

Who comes to repair the problem?

Do they come quickly?

Do they do a good job?

Have there been any changes since the shire has come in?

Has anyone in the house received any training in housing maintenance (fixing taps, door locks, toilet leak etc.)

Do you think it is important that someone has that training? Would you like to receive any training?

How much rent do you pay?

Is the amount ok?

Is everyone in the house paying rent?

Is it good that everyone pays rent or only the main tenant?

Who do you pay rent to?

What do you think the rent money should be used for?

Do you know that the housing (tenancy) arrangements have change? Do you know what has changed?

Do you think it has improved?

Has anyone from Territory Housing come and talked to explain the changes?

Have you been asked what repairs/services are needed inside or around your house?

Do you know that the local advisory board has replaced the community council?

Any other comments or ideas you have what could be done about housing?

Round 2 – April 2009

Introductory text for interviewer

We asked you about how you got your house, who lived in it, who paid rent, the condition of your houses and whether you knew about the change to Territory Housing after Council finished up last year.

It was written up into a report that has many tables but no names – some more words, images and diagrams will be added, then we will send it to government/Territory Housing by the beginning of winter.

We also learned that we need to know a bit more about how things used to be to help us to understand better the changes.

NAME

HOUSE Lot Number

1) Are you still living in the same house?

    i) Why did you move?

2) Has anyone moved in or out?

    i) Who?

    ii) Where did they go?

3) Have any repairs been done since our last visit?

    i) What has been fixed?

    ii) Who did them?

4) Last time you told us that you got your house through:

    i) The waiting list

        a) Do you know who else was on the list?

        b) How did you find out?

        c) How long did you have to wait to get the house?

        d) Why did you get this house?

        e) What is most important to you about the house (like being close to family, size of house)?

            GO TO QUESTION 5

    OR ii) Sorry Business

        a) How long did it take to move house?

        b) When did you let the council know that you moved?

            GO TO QUESTION 5

    OR iii) Swapping your house

        a) Why did you swap? (e.g. size, repairs, sorry business?)

        b) Who did you swap with?

c) Did everyone in your house move? (If not, where did they go?)

d) When did you let council know that you moved?

GO TO QUESTION 5

Or iv) Work

a) How long did it take to get your house?

b) Is the house part of your job conditions?

GO TO QUESTION 5

5) Did you have to sign an agreement for living in this house?

6) Did you ever sign an agreement for any house?

7) Was it with the council or Territory Housing?

8) Did only you sign it?

9) Did anyone in you house ever sign a house agreement?

10) Were you told about any rules living in this house?

11) Were you told what council had to do for your house?

12) What do you do if council doesn't fix things?

13) What happens if people in the house break things?

14) Has anyone ever been told by council that they have to move out of their house?

15) Has Territory Housing talked to you about what they are planning since we talked to you last year?

16) What have they explained? How was it explained?

17) Has there been any more talk about the new houses that are coming?

18) Do you know anything about the Housing Reference Group?

i) Do you think it is a good idea?

19) What should Territory Housing do to find out what community needs?

Round 3 – September 2009

NAME

HOUSE Lot Number

1) Are you still living in the same house?

If yes, go to Question 3

2) Why did you move?

3) Has anyone else moved into the house?

i) Who?

ii) Where were they before?

3a) Has anyone moved out of the house?

    i) Who?

    ii) Where did they go?

4) Did you let the Shire Office know that you changed house?

4a) Did you have to fill out any forms when you changed the house?

5) Is this house better to live in then the one you lived in before?

    If yes, what makes it better?

6) Have any repairs been done since our last visit?

    If No, go to Question 8

7)

    i) What has been fixed?

    ii) Who did the repairs?

    iii) Did you report to someone that something needed to be repaired?

    iv) How long did it take to get fixed?

8) Have there been any new rules about living in this house?

8a) If yes, what are the new rules?

9) Has Territory Housing talked to you about what they are planning in Lajamanu/Ali Curung since we talked to you last?

9a) What have they explained?

9b) How was it explained?

10) Is there a Housing Reference Group in Lajamanu/Ali Curung?

11)   i) Has the Local Board talked to you about what's happening with housing in Lajamanu/Ali Curung?

    ii) Has the Central Desert Shire talked to you about what's happening with housing in Lajamanu/Ali Curung?

    iii) Has the Central Land Council talked to you about what's happening with housing in Lajamanu/Ali Curung?

    iv) Has the Government Business Manager talked to you about what's happening with   housing in Lajamanu/Ali Curung?

    v) Has anyone else talked to you about what's happening with housing in Lajamanu/Ali Curung?

12) Has there been any talk about the SIHIP in your community?

13) What do you know about the lease the Federal Government wants traditional owners of this land to sign before they provide new houses?

    i) How did you get to know about this?

15) Since the Shire has been running CDEP, has anything changed?

Appendix C – Community Newsletters: Ali Curung

Thank you!

This is the end of this project at Ali Curung.
The DKCRC and CAT would like to thank the Ali Curung community for letting us do this research with you.
A special thank you to Savannah Long and Rosie Holmes.

What will happen next?

What we found in this project will be written up into a report that will be published on the DKCRC website (www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au) and will be sent to the Northern Territory and Commenwealth Government.

We hope that many people will read this report, including people from the Shires and the Northern Territory Government.

We hope that they will read and understand the issues and concerns of the Ali Curung community about changes to housing and tenancy management. We hope that the research will help governments know how to 'sit down' with community people and listen to their concerns and ideas.

How to contact us:
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PO Box 8044
Alice Springs NT 0871

Centre for Appropriate Technology

DESERT KNOWLEDGE CRC

Housing Research Results

Hello everyone !

The Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT) and the Desert Knowledge CRC completed a research project on housing changes in Ali Curung and Lajamanu. We talked to 12 householders in Ali Curung to find out how the new housing arrangements have affected people since July 2008. This newsletter is to let you know what we found out during this research.

What we did

After the Ali Curung Local Advisory Board approved our research, we came to Ali Curung 3 times. Each time we talked to the same 12 households so that we could find out what had changed in the houses or the households or the management of the houses. We also talked to the Barkly Shire and Territory and Commonwealth Government employees.

During each visit, we had community researchers working with us. This was Savannah Long and Rosie Holmes, who made sure we talked to the right people.

What we learnt

Changing Houses - Moving within the community (mobility)

People in Ali Curung changed houses a lot. More than half of the households we talked to made some change to their household between each of our visits. Some people swap houses, some have family move in or out. This happens because of sorry business or wanting to be with family or moving to a quieter area or the house is too broken to live in any more.

Most of the house swapping was done by residents themselves. People are good in working out which house family members can move to, who needs what house, and they are always willing to take in family members. Family is most important in everyone's life.

Repairs and Maintenance

Householders at Ali Curung knew they have to look after their houses and pay rent. Householders know how to report any repairs and maintenance needed. They also know how to look after their houses. Householders did not think repairs and maintenance had improved since the Shire had begun. Householders knew some things were being repaired but didn't know how the decisions were made. They did think that a locally trained group working on their houses was good.

Consultation

Most householders said that Territory Housing and Government people should sit down and talk to householders directly.

Most householders know how their houses could be improved and how to make a better living space inside and outside.

Government changes

Householders thought that a Housing Reference Group was a good idea, but didn't know any details about it when questioned during the third round of interviews in September 09. Shire and Government people have been confused by all the changes and some of them have left because of that.

Refurbishment of houses

Ali Curung residents were upset that they would not be getting new houses under the 'Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program', called SIHIP. They said that more houses are needed. Some people still live in tin houses without toilet and shower facilities.

SIHIP will only refurbish houses and only fix those parts needed to supply safe and reliable electricity, water for washing people and clothes and food storage and preparation. The government has agreed to do some painting on the houses after Ali Curung people complained.

Rosie Holmes

Savannah Long

Ruth Elvin, Sonja Peter and
Rae Porter from CAT

Community Researchers Workshop

A community researchers workshop was held in Ali Curung on the 17 and 18 November. Both the researchers and a review group discussed the research findings in Ali Curung. During the 2 days each of the women put together their profile, summarising their experiences and skills.

Martha Poulson

Janet Simpson

Jacqueline Robertson

Thank you!

This is the end of this project at Lajamanu.
The DKCRC and CAT would like to thank the Lajamanu community
for letting us do this research with you.
A special thank you to all our community researchers.

What will happen next?

What we found in this project will be written up into a report that will be published on the DKCRC website (www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au) and will be sent to the Northern Territory and Commenwealth Government.

We hope that many people will read this report, including people from the Shires and the Northern Territory Government.

We hope that they will read and understand the issues and concerns of the Lajamanu community about changes to housing and tenancy management.
We hope that the research will help governments know how to 'sit down' with community people and listen to their concerns and ideas.

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Centre for Appropriate Technology

DESERT KNOWLEDGE CRC

Housing Research Results

Newsletter • December 2009

WELCOME TO LAJAMANU COMMUNITY

Hello everyone !

The Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT) and the Desert Knowledge CRC completed a research project on housing changes in Ali Curung and Lajamanu. We talked to 24 householders in Lajamanu to find out how the new housing arrangements have affected people since July 2008. This newsletter is to let you know what we found out during this research.

What we did

After the Lajamanu Local Advisory Board approved our research, we came to Lajamanu 3 times. Each time we talked to the same 24 households so that we could find out what had changed in the houses or the households or the management of the houses. We also talked to the Central Desert Shire and Territory and Commonwealth Government employees.

During each visit, we had community researchers working with us. The community researchers are Zena Kelly, Kylie Patrick, Denicia Luther, Tanya Hargreaves, Natasha Robertson and Matrina Robertson. They helped us get the questions right and made sure we talked to the right people.

What we learnt

Changing Houses - Moving within the community (mobility)

People in Lajamanu changed houses a lot. More than half of the households we talked to made some change to their household between our first and second visit. Between our second and third visit less people experienced change (22%). Some people swap houses, some have family move in or out. This happens because of sorry business or wanting to be with family or moving to a quieter area or the house is too broken to live in any more.

Most of the house swapping was done by residents themselves. People are good in working out which house family members can move to, who needs what house, and they are always willing to take in family members. Family is most important in everyone's life.

Repairs and Maintenance

Householders at Lajamanu know they have to look after their houses and pay rent. Householders know how to report any repairs and maintenance needed. They also know how to look after their houses.

There are ongoing repair issues in houses. Although more then half of the householders interviewed were satisfied with the repairs done, there are always more parts of the house that need fixing. Householders did not think repairs and maintenance had improved since the Shire had begun.

Consultation

Most householders said that Territory Housing and Government people should sit down and talk to householders directly. Most householders know how their houses could be improved and how to make a better living space inside and outside.

Government changes

Householders thought that a Housing Reference Group was a good idea, but didn't know any details about it when questioned during the third round of interviews in September 09. Shire and Government people have been confused by all the changes and some of them have left because of that.

New houses and refurbishment of houses

Lajamanu is to get new houses under the 'Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program', called SIHIP. New houses can only be built once a lease agreement is signed with the Government. Lajamanu residents were disheartend that the Government is placing them in such difficult position. Under SIHIP houses will be refurbished but only those parts that are needed to supply safe and reliable electricity, water for washing people and clothes and food storage and preparation. After the houses are refurbished people will have to sign a lease agreement with Territory Housing.

Denicia Luther and Zena Kelly interviewing

Tanya Hargreaves and son

Community Researchers

An important part of the research work was done by community researchers, local workers who helped us get the questions right, made sure we talked to the right people and that everyone we interviewed understood the questions. They also assisted with interpretation and translations and made sure we behaved respectfully in the community. These are paid jobs, as we value local knowledge and skill.

Over our 3 visits we worked with the help of different community researchers: Zena Kelly, Denicia Luther, Kylie Patrick, Tanya Hargreaves, Matrina Robertson and Natasha Robertson. Even after we returned to Alice Springs Zena and Denicia continued to interviewed more people by themselves and send the completed forms to us at CAT.

Everyone did a great job and we look forward to working with all of you again. A special big thanks to Zena who helped during all three visits. And thanks to the Local Advisory Board who approved our research and initially helped find community researchers to work with us. We hope that all the community researchers will find more ways to use their valuable skills on other projects.

Kylie Patrick and Zena Kelly

Ruth Elvin, Sonja Peter andRae Porter from CAT

DKCRC Partners

AIATSIS
Australian Institute of Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander Studies

Australian Government
Department of Families,
Community Services
and Indigenous Affairs

ANU
THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Centre for Remote Health
A joint centre of Flinders University and Charles Darwin University

CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY

CSIRO

Curtin
University of Technology

desert peoples centre

Government of South Australia
Department of Water, Land and
Biodiversity Conservation

Government of
Western
Australia

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"doing good work with families"