

The **Allen Consulting** Group



**Tenants' experiences of the
National Partnership Agreement on
Remote Indigenous Housing Property and
Tenancy Management Reforms**

Final Report

February 2013

Report to the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

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Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ANAO	Australian National Audit Office
AHURI	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute
CAAH	Central Australian Affordable Housing Company
CHO	Community Housing Officer
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
DHLGRS	Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services (Northern Territory Government)
FaHCSIA	Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (Australian Government)
GEC	Government Engagement Coordinator (previously Government Business Manager (GBM))
HRG	Housing Reference Group
IEO	Indigenous Engagement Officer
NAAJA	North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency
NPARIH	National Partnership on Remote Indigenous Housing
PTM	Property and Tenancy Management
RTA	Residential Tenancies Act
SIHIP	Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program

Executive summary

An assessment of tenant experiences of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH) Property and Tenancy Management (PTM) reforms in the Northern Territory was undertaken on behalf of the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), in conjunction with the Northern Territory Government. The Allen Consulting Group implemented the project in collaboration with the Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation.

PTM reforms and the new Remote Rental Framework represent a significant change for remote communities and follow a substantial investment in new, rebuilt and refurbished housing stock. The reforms extend urban public housing standards to remote communities with no previous requirement to enter into a formal undertaking on joint responsibilities relating to property and tenancy management. The undertaking relates to all aspects of sustaining the housing and nominates a head tenant(s) responsible for the house and damages.

The objective of the project was to fill critical information gaps about the impact of the PTM reforms on tenants and communities at a relatively early stage in the reform process. Hearing from communities about their experience of the reforms provides important feedback to inform the ongoing development and implementation of policy, program design and effective service delivery.

This report outlines the findings of a survey of tenants in 100 households in selected remote Northern Territory communities, against background information about the roll out of the reforms and local implementation involving over 3,200 new, rebuilt and refurbished houses. Background information was obtained through review of policy and program documentation, and consultation with key government stakeholders and community service providers. Additional background was obtained through a targeted literature review that included relevant government reports and emerging research.

Addressing housing disadvantage

Under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) identified seven building blocks and a focus for action to make a difference in closing the gap in Indigenous disadvantage (COAG 2011). One of these building blocks referred to as *healthy homes*, is concerned with providing satisfactory housing and infrastructure to communities and a program for housing maintenance. Healthy homes has a role in supporting other elements of the building blocks for overcoming disadvantage including good health, safe communities and stability conducive to employment and education.

A ten-year, \$5.5 billion program of action was launched through the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH) giving effect to the commitment of COAG. The allocation to the Northern Territory totalled \$1.7 billion.

The aim of the NPARIH is to take action on severe overcrowding in houses, increase the safety and adequacy of houses and ensure sustainability of rental housing in remote communities. By 2013, the Northern Territory will deliver 934 new houses, 415 rebuilds of existing houses and 2,500 refurbishments across 73 remote communities and town camps.

Key outputs for the Northern Territory under the NPARIH include standardised tenancy management and a program of ongoing maintenance. Approximately \$465 million is available to the Northern Territory Government to support PTM reforms (ANAO 2012).

Property and Tenancy Management reforms

The corner stone of the PTM reforms is the mandated tenancy agreement setting out the rights and responsibilities of tenant and landlord. Embedded in the agreement is the remote rental framework applicable to houses constructed or repaired under the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP), which was incorporated into the NPARIH.

Residents of NPARIH houses pay rent that is calculated according to the total household income and number of bedrooms, capped at a Maximum Dwelling Rate limit. Head tenants and co-tenants sign tenancy agreements while additional residents who may pay rent can enter into Family Agreements.

The challenges in introducing a new tenancy model are not underestimated by government including the expectations of head tenants. Adding to the complexity of effective implementation are the different characteristics of Indigenous families compared to non-Indigenous, the high rates of homelessness and overcrowding in remote communities and the temporary mobility of Indigenous people.

Tenants' experiences and service provider feedback

The following findings are based on survey interviews with 100 tenants across seven remote communities for which a tenancy agreement was verified. Surveys included:

- 30 interviews with tenants who received new houses;
- 15 interviews with tenants who received rebuilt houses; and
- 55 interviews with tenants who received refurbished houses.

In addition, the project findings capture feedback from staff of service providers in communities including health centres, schools, Centrelink, shires and store owners.

Awareness and understanding of tenancy agreement

The majority of survey respondents recalled signing a tenancy agreement with about three quarters of respondents reporting that they understood the agreement.

Good ways of imparting the information about the agreement included involvement of the family and use of an interpreter. Impediments to understanding the agreement included the amount of information and the speed with which it was explained.

Areas of confusion about tenants' responsibilities raised by some respondents included calculation of rental payments, payment for repairs and maintenance and the length of time their house would be kept if they went away.

Almost all respondents would ask either 'Territory Housing' (also known as the Department of Housing, and previously the Department of Housing Local Government and Regional Services (DHLGRS)) or Centrelink for assistance if they were unable to pay rent although most indicated that this was not a problem.

There was universal understanding amongst respondents about their responsibility for keeping their house and yard tidy. Factors that militate against meeting this responsibility were reported as the number of people in their house, particularly children and visitors, and a lack of fencing or disrepair of fencing.

Similarly, there was an awareness of the need to manage visitors but only half of respondents considered that their obligations under the agreement assisted them to achieve this. Cultural considerations were a dominant factor in how tenants managed visitors.

Tenant responsibility to ask for repairs and maintenance was well understood and most respondents were confident about where to go if they needed something fixed. While respondents reported that they knew how to make a complaint about outstanding repairs, the practice described indicated that there was little knowledge or use of alternative methods of complaint or escalation of the problem.

Tenancy management

Survey respondents in some communities were able to identify specific resources provided or a visit from a housing person to explain the rules and responsibilities or how equipment in the house operated. Service providers consulted, however, suggested that generally the Intensive Tenancy Support (ITS) program was not effective.

Local service providers identified the need for ongoing tenant support beyond the initial ITS program. In particular, this support was needed for education in 'life skills' in addition to reinforcement of information about tenant's rights and responsibilities. Service providers were conducting programs in some of these communities that were considered to highlight the broader skills needed to ensure improved outcomes and sustained tenancy.

It was reported that repairs and maintenance were most commonly undertaken between one and four weeks. Responses suggested that tenant understanding of prioritisation of reports may differ from that of Territory Housing.

There was an appreciation of delays in responding to reports being occasioned by the lack of local qualified workers. It was reported that smaller communities can experience more difficulty in getting contractors leading to higher wait times for tenants. Respondent experiences of communication of wait times varied between communities, influencing tenant satisfaction with the process.

For those respondents who recalled experiencing a housing inspection, there was a direct relationship between respondents' understanding of the inspection process and how regularly or recently inspections were reported to have been undertaken. Over half of respondents recalled that housing inspections had taken place.

Broader communication and operation of NPARIH and PTM reforms

Just over half of tenants interviewed recall being individually notified about the housing works to be undertaken in their community. For a small number of communities, some tenants reported that a community meeting had been held as part of notification of the works.

Almost two thirds of respondents indicated dissatisfaction with the way in which they were notified about the works. While the preferred method of communication was when someone comes to talk individually, face to face, where this had occurred there was a perception for many that their views had not been listened to. This also raises the issue of managing expectations about the works.

Based on survey responses and service provider feedback, awareness and operation of the Housing Reference Group (HRG) varies greatly between communities and largely depends on the strengths, availability and input of individual members. This highlights the challenge of effectively disseminating information to communities and individuals through the HRGs.

There was limited understanding among survey respondents of the role of the HRG. Perceived lack of transparency of HRG decision making was a reported concern of a number of respondents.

Perceived broader impacts of the reforms

A majority of respondents believed that their house was better to live in than before. Generally, this applied to respondents in new or rebuilt houses.

While there was often an appreciation of improved amenity, there were significant differences in general wellbeing and other outcomes for those who received refurbished houses compared to those who received new or rebuilt houses. Tenants of refurbished houses and service providers identified that this was primarily due to no change in overcrowding as refurbishments did not allow for additional bedrooms.

In communities where there was an active network of service providers, an increased positive impact on observed outcomes was reported.

Respondents were most readily able to identify improvements to their family's health and their general happiness associated with improved housing, mostly new housing, attributable in part to reduced overcrowding and ability to keep their house clean and tidy.

Having a nicer place to live, getting a better night's sleep and being able to easily clean and tidy their home were reported by tenants as key factors in enabling them to work or look for work.

School attendance was reportedly influenced by the number of people living in the house and proximity to school. Housing improvements complemented other local strategies such as a school bus and absentee follow up.

Conclusions

An ambitious and extensive program of improved housing has been rolled out in remote communities of the Northern Territory supported by information and a range of communication strategies. Findings from the survey of tenants in selected communities and consultations with local government officers and service providers show early gains with good understanding of tenant responsibilities for keeping their house and yard in good order and for notifying repairs and maintenance. There was a real appreciation of the wider benefits of housing improvements for those occupying new or rebuilt houses.

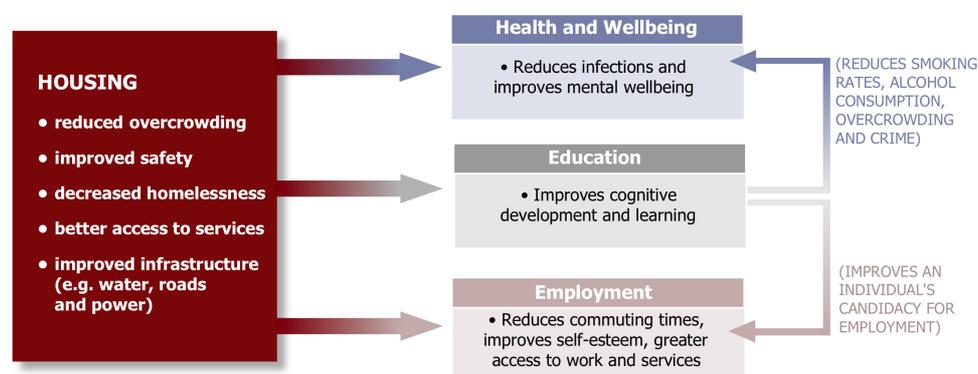
The findings also point to opportunities to better ensure sustainability of the housing reforms. These opportunities include:

- provision of ongoing support and information to address any confusion or lack of clarity about aspects of tenant and landlord rights and responsibilities;
- extended training building on existing community services to develop tenant life skills and their ability to take best advantage of improved housing conditions;
- managing expectations in future engagement with community to ensure understanding about housing decisions;
- strengthened Housing Reference Groups (HRG) as an effective mechanism for representing community views about housing issues and progressing housing conditions;
- better integrating the cycle of inspections, repairs and maintenance to better support tenants in meeting their responsibilities; and
- local housing staff working more closely with communities, HRGs and tenants to continue to improve visitor management.

Housing is an important enabler to a number of objectives under the Closing the Gap policy initiative, as shown in Figure ES 1.1.

Figure ES 1.1

LINKS BETWEEN IMPROVED HOUSING AND IMPROVED WELLBEING OUTCOMES



Source: The Allen Consulting Group 2012.

To realise the significant investment in housing stock in remote communities in the Northern Territory, a coordinated and effective effort will need to be made in securing the sustainability of housing to benefit individuals, families and communities in the longer term.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the project context, objectives, research questions and methodology.

1.1 This report

The Allen Consulting Group, in collaboration with Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation, was commissioned by FaHCSIA to assess tenant experiences of the NPARIH PTM reforms in the Northern Territory. The project was undertaken in conjunction with the Northern Territory Government.

This report outlines the findings of the project, drawn from survey interviews with tenants from a sample of remote Northern Territory communities, interviews with key government stakeholders and community service providers.

1.2 Policy context

Addressing Indigenous housing disadvantage and homelessness in the Northern Territory is central to government policy at a national and territory government level. Across the Northern Territory, a range of government initiatives are in place that provide an important policy and program context for housing works, under the NPARIH, and the wider PTM reforms that have been implemented.

National Indigenous Reform Agreement

In 2007, the COAG agreed to a partnership with all state and territory governments to work with Indigenous communities to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage. Following this agreement the National Indigenous Reform Agreement was developed in 2009 (revised in 2011), which sets out the objectives, outcomes, outputs and performance indicators and benchmarks agreed by COAG. The agreement outlines seven key areas for increased activity, referred to as building blocks, which include: early childhood; schooling; health; economic participation; healthy homes; safe communities; and governance and leadership (COAG 2011).

The *healthy homes* building block aims to provide communities with well-built houses and infrastructure, along with maintaining them. Healthy homes are considered to be vital to good health, family, safety, community and jobs.

National Affordable Housing Agreement

The National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) aims to ensure that all Australians have access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing that contributes to social and economic participation. The NAHA is an agreement by the COAG that commenced on 1 January 2009, initiating a whole of government approach to tackle the issue of housing affordability. This Agreement is central to achieving service delivery improvements and allowing COAG to pursue economic and social reforms to underpin growth, prosperity and social cohesion into the future. The NAHA provides \$6.2 billion of housing assistance to low and middle income Australians in the first five years. This Agreement replaces the 2003 Commonwealth State Housing Agreement.

The NAHA is supported by a number of National Partnership Agreements including the:

- National Partnership Agreement on Social Housing;
- National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness; and
- National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing.

National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing

The NPARIH is a 10 year agreement which commits \$5.5 billion to improve remote Indigenous housing, of which \$1.7 billion is allocated to the Northern Territory. The NPARIH is a joint undertaking of all governments (except the Australian Capital Territory) with state and territory governments responsible for program delivery in their respective jurisdictions.

In the Northern Territory, the NPARIH incorporates the SIHIP. By 2013 the NPARIH will deliver 934 new houses, 415 rebuilds of existing houses and 2,500 refurbishments across 73 remote Indigenous communities and a number of community living areas (also know as town camps).

As part of the whole of government approach to improving Indigenous outcomes, the objectives of the NPARIH are to improve housing outcomes by taking action to:

- significantly alleviate severe overcrowding in remote Indigenous communities;
- increase the supply of new houses and improve the condition of existing houses in remote Indigenous communities; and
- ensure that rental houses are well maintained and managed in remote Indigenous communities.

Key outputs for Northern Territory remote housing under the agreement include:

- safe and adequate housing;
- standardised tenancy management;
- a program of ongoing maintenance;
- construction of new houses and ongoing repairs and maintenance;

- increased employment opportunities for local people;
- progressive resolution of land tenure;
- upgraded housing and infrastructure in town camps;
- hostels and subsidised rental housing; and
- improved data collection.

Property and tenancy management reforms

As part of the NPARIH, it is envisaged that the PTM reforms in the Northern Territory will focus on the continuing maintenance and good repair of the funded new, rebuilt and refurbished houses. Under the NPARIH there is approximately \$465 million available to the Northern Territory Government to support PTM reforms (ANAO 2012).

Central to meeting these objectives is the implementation of robust and effective PTM of all remote Indigenous housing. Effective implementation will ensure tenancy support, rent collection, asset protection and governance arrangements are consistent with public housing standards. PTM reforms focus on the continuing maintenance of, and keeping in good repair, the houses funded under the NPARIH. This will ensure the durability and quality of public housing available to Indigenous people living in remote communities meets and maintains at similar urban public housing standards.

The core aspect of tenancy management under the reforms has been the introduction of tenancy agreements as part of the Northern Territory *Residential Tenancies Act (1999)* and remote rent framework (ANAO 2012).

Further key PTM reforms include:

- the involvement of community people so decisions are appropriate for each community and their social, economic and cultural needs;
- an improved process for repairs and maintenance keeping houses safe, secure and extending their life expectancy, through Territory Housing Service Level Agreements with shires;
- the allocation of housing based on need and determined collaboratively by communities and government;
- a formalised tenancy agreement so both landlord and tenant understand their rights and responsibilities;
- a fair rent system for tenants;
- support services for tenants on how to maintain successful tenancies; and
- sustainable local employment and training opportunities (DHLGRS 2012).

The PTM reforms represent a significant social change in remote Indigenous communities, from previous PTM arrangements that were organised locally and not in a standardised way, to a consistent income-based rental charge.

As part of the NPARIH there is a requirement to report on the implementation of housing reforms and ongoing tenancy management arrangements in remote communities. This requirement ensures that communities have been appropriately engaged in reform implementation. A lack of evidence and understanding about the performance of the NPARIH has been identified in a number of public reports (FaHCSIA Request for Quotation 2012).

Community perspectives are also important to the provision of a sustainable community-based public housing model, in assessing the extent to which the roles and responsibilities of tenants and governments are understood and support services are utilised to maintain housing standards and amenity.

Specific changes to the remote rental framework are detailed in Box 1.1.

Box 1.1

CHANGES TO THE REMOTE RENTAL FRAMEWORK

The housing reforms underway in the Northern Territory seek to align remote public housing with the urban public housing model. This represents a major transformation of housing services.

A new rental system that replaces the old poll tax arrangements has been introduced. The new rental system establishes three categories of housing in remote communities.

- Improvised dwellings — makeshift accommodation considered to be unsafe and uninhabitable. These can range from tin sheds to car bodies and makeshift shelters. These dwellings are not part of the public housing stock and people living in these dwellings are effectively homeless.
- Legacy dwellings — these are existing houses that are considered habitable but have not been refurbished or rebuilt under NPARIH.
- New, rebuilt or refurbished houses (NPARIH houses) — these houses have been constructed or repaired under NPARIH. FaHCSIA and Territory Housing [generally] consider these houses to be compliant with Northern Territory residential tenancy legislation.

Each of these housing categories attracts different rent arrangements and tenancy agreements. The new remote housing policies make it clear that improvised dwellings are not subject to any 'rent, poll tax or similar charges'. Residents of these dwellings are not subject to any formal agreements.

The residents of legacy dwellings continue to pay the poll tax or other rent arrangements unless the amounts collected for the dwelling from all residents in the dwelling combined exceeds a Maximum Dwelling Rent (MDR) limit. All residents of legacy dwellings are subject to an occupancy agreement that sets out the terms of the occupancy.

Residents of NPARIH houses pay rent that is calculated according to the total household income and number of bedrooms, but it cannot exceed the MDR. For a refurbished house the MDR is \$120 to \$200 per week. For new and rebuilt houses it is \$150 to \$250 per week per house. Head tenants and co-tenants sign tenancy agreements under the *Residential Tenancies Act (1999)*. Additional residents who have not been identified as a head tenant or co-tenant can contribute to the rent. Details are captured in Family Agreements.

Source: Commonwealth Ombudsman 2012.

There are a number of challenges faced in introducing a new tenancy model in a remote Indigenous setting, where overcrowding, mobility and cultural practices are present. Specifically, the model has the potential to present challenges for head tenants, including:

- head tenants may be unable to hold other residents to account for paying their share of rent as recorded in the family agreement¹;
- they can be responsible for damage done by other residents of the house even though damage may be the result of overcrowding;
- there may be cultural barriers preventing a head tenant asking another resident to pay a share of the rent or to pay for damage done to a house;
- other residents may not keep the head tenant informed of changes to their income, resulting in potential rental overpayments or underpayments; and
- ultimately, there is a risk that head tenants will accrue rental arrears and liabilities (Commonwealth Ombudsman 2012).

1.3 Key challenges impacting on remote housing

There are a number of key challenges that have and continue to impact on the implementation of the NPARIH and PTM reforms. These are in addition to the challenges of remote service delivery in the Northern Territory such as supporting infrastructure and access. They include differences in the characteristics of Indigenous families compared to non-Indigenous families, high rates of homelessness and overcrowding in remote Indigenous communities and the temporary mobility of Indigenous people between communities. This section briefly outlines these challenges.

Characteristics of families

The housing circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples differ markedly from those of other Australians. Indigenous people are much less likely to own their homes, with 20 per cent of Indigenous households in the Northern Territory owning their own home, compared to 53 per cent of non-Indigenous households (ABS 2011). They are also more likely to receive some form of government housing assistance. The average size of Indigenous households (4.2 people per household) is larger than the size of other Australian households (2.6 people per household) (ABS 2011). Some Indigenous people, particularly those in more remote areas, live in poorly maintained housing sometimes with poor essential infrastructure. Indigenous people are also vulnerable to homelessness because of their relative social and economic disadvantage (discussed further in the section below) (AIHW 2008).

Differences in the characteristics of Indigenous families and cultural practices are important factors to be considered in the implementation of housing works and PTM reforms. Such factors may include the need to design houses with enough bedrooms for larger families and the cultural desire of Indigenous families to live close to their extended family. The extent to which these practices can be accommodated needs to be considered within the framework of a sustainable public housing model.

¹ Family Agreements are not mandatory for families to sign up to, and are non-binding between parties.

Literacy and numeracy

Reported rates of literacy and numeracy have historically been much lower for Indigenous adults when compared to the non-Indigenous population. This trend begins at school, depicted by a lower proportion of Indigenous students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 achieving below the minimum standards for reading, writing and numeracy (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service provision 2011). In addition, English is often the second, third or even fourth language for Indigenous Australians. This can often act as a barrier for understanding one's full rights and responsibilities in relation to tenancy agreements (e.g. rent payments and cleaning and repair duties).

Mobility

Indigenous mobility, or visiting relations, is an important part of Indigenous culture and creates bonds, which provide resilience in times of need (AHURI 2007). The pattern of movement is defined by the location of family within a region, which includes traditional country (AHURI 2010).

The temporary mobility practices of Indigenous people challenge traditional forms of service delivery, and indeed, implementation of a traditional public housing model. Policy challenges identified in the growing body of literature on patterns and practices of Indigenous temporary mobility include:

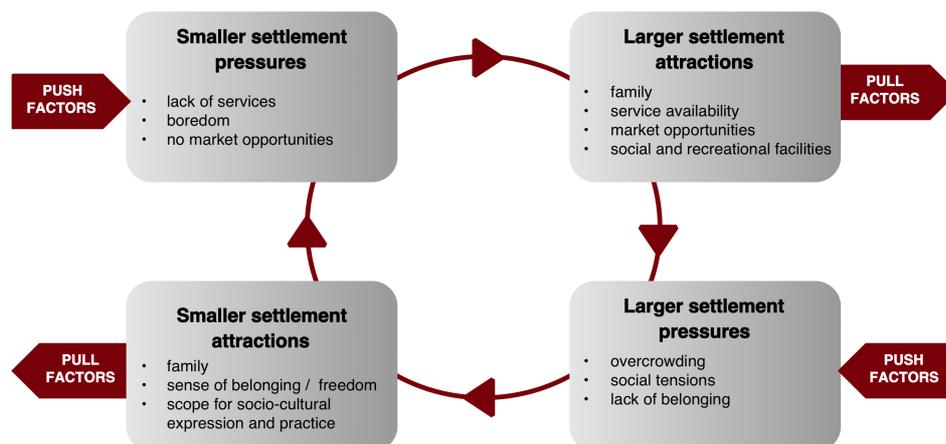
- adapting to the service needs of a changing population or community;
- providing continuity of service delivery (local service provision);
- managing population change and its impacts on social, community and physical infrastructure (such as the inflow and outflow of visitors to remote communities for ceremonial reasons); and
- redressing the marginalisation of mobile Indigenous people within the mainstream service sector (for example enabling children to attend school whilst visiting a community) (AHURI 2007).

Key characteristics and drivers of temporary mobility practices have been identified as including:

- familial and cultural obligations that are linked to ancestral or ceremonial connections to the land or social networks;
- the need to engage with the mainstream economy and service sector; and
- a combination of the two points above, reflecting a mediation between social and cultural aspects of Indigenous culture and practice and the interactions, challenges and opportunities of the broader mainstream economy (Prout 2008).

Features of this 'push and pull' dynamic are represented in Figure 1.1 below.

Figure 1.1

PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

Source: The Allen Consulting Group, adapted from Prout 2008.

The temporary mobility of Indigenous people is particularly important within the housing context in relation to:

- long periods for which the tenants of a house may be away; and
- numbers of visitors staying in a given house.

Overcrowding

Reducing severe overcrowding in remote Indigenous communities is one of the key objectives of the NPARIH. In 2011, based on the Canadian National Occupancy Standard (an international standard for measurement of overcrowding), it was estimated that 33.9 per cent of Indigenous households in the Northern Territory required one or more extra bedrooms compared with 4.6 per cent of non-Indigenous households (Census 2011).

Overcrowding can occur because of strong kinship obligations within Indigenous culture which mean that housed kin will provide shelter to visiting family and family in need (AHURI 2007). This can conceal the rate of homelessness among Indigenous people and result in permanent overcrowding. More recent research has defined different reasons for visiting within Indigenous populations, with a view to distinguishing visiting that involves choice, and visiting that does not. These can be summarised as:

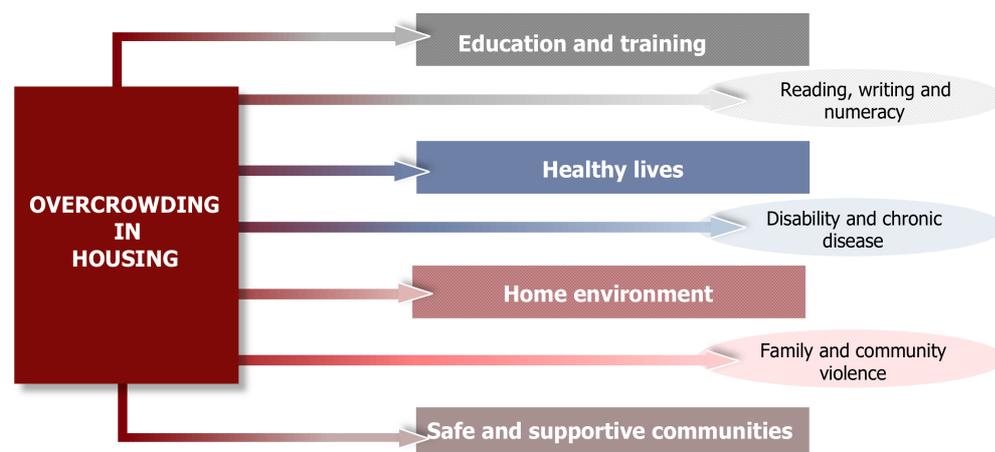
- culturally legitimated visiting — staying with family or friends to maintain relationships, or attend to law business or sorry business;
- socially legitimated visiting — staying with family or friends due to a loss of housing, or to escape violence or abuse; and
- non-legitimated visiting — staying with family or friends due to loss of housing because of lifestyle (Birdsall-Jones et al 2010).

Overcrowding can have significant consequences for the management, maintenance and sustainability of new, rebuilt and refurbished houses delivered as part of the NPARIH. This is primarily because overcrowding puts pressure on household infrastructure that supports health, such as sewerage, pipes and washing machines. It can also have negative impacts on family relationships, contribute to poor educational outcomes and family violence (Productivity Commission 2009).

Figure 1.2 summarises areas of impact due to overcrowding of housing.

Figure 1.2

NEGATIVE IMPACTS ASSOCIATED WITH OVERCROWDING



Source: Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service provision 2011.

Homelessness

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples made up 2.5 per cent of the Australian population in 2011, but accounted for 25 per cent of all persons who were homeless (26,744 people) (ABS 2011). There are three classifications of homelessness, including those living in severely crowded dwellings, those in supported accommodation and those living in improvised dwellings or sleeping out. Table 1.1 provides further detail on estimates of those who were classified as homeless for Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons. As indicated, 75 per cent of homeless Indigenous Australians were living in severely crowded dwellings compared to 30 per cent of homeless non-Indigenous Australians.

Table 1.1

CLASSIFICATION OF ESTIMATED HOMELESS INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS, 2011

Homelessness classification	Homeless	
	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Severely crowded dwellings	75%*	30%
Supported accommodation for the homeless	12%	20%
Improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out	6%	7%
Other	7%	43%

Source: ABS Census 2011

Note: * Same proportion as in 2006.

While rates of homelessness in the Northern Territory have improved, they remain the highest in Australia with 731 persons estimated to be homeless per 10,000 persons in 2011. In the Northern Territory, 85 per cent of homeless persons were living in 'severely' crowded dwellings in 2011 compared to other states and territories that ranged from 12 per cent in Tasmania to 43 per cent in Western Australia.

Further, homelessness can be experienced in various forms including those described below.

- Public place dwellers — incorporating individuals who are short term voluntary public space dwellers, staying with friends or family, through to those whose level of choice has been compromised and therefore are unable to find a home.
- Housed people who are still at risk of homelessness — incorporating individuals who are at risk of losing their housing through either lack of secure tenure, overcrowding or experiences of sub-standard housing, personal and social problems (such as domestic violence) or alcohol and substance abuse.
- Spiritually homeless people — incorporating individuals who are separated from land and kin networks (Memmot 2004).

These unique challenges provide an important context for many of the survey results and related issues discussed in the later chapters of this report.

Other factors impacting on remote housing

Alcohol abuse

The rates of alcohol abuse among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population has been extensively documented. Indigenous men are admitted to hospital at five times the rate of non-Indigenous men for alcohol related conditions and for women it is four times the rate (Department of Health and Ageing 2007). Binge drinking is more common amongst Indigenous men at 17 per cent compared to 8 per cent of non-Indigenous men (AIHW 2011). Alcohol induced criminal behaviour is often reflected by vandalism, stealing and breaking and entering (Brady 1985; Burns et al 1995; d'Abbs et al 1993 & Larson 1996). Therefore intoxication can pose significant risks to an individual's capacity to sustain their tenancy. In addition, damages to a dwelling can often lead to an accumulation of debt (Copper & Morris 2003). Debt, as Memmott and Fantin (2001) point out, can act as an 'insurmountable barrier' in obtaining future housing and meeting rental payments.

Crime and family violence

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are often subject to domestic violence as well as recording higher rates of incarceration. For example, Indigenous women are 40 times more likely to be sexually assaulted, and in 2010 it was recorded that Indigenous people were imprisoned at 14 times the rate of non-Indigenous people (Days 2011; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service provision 2011). Crime incorporates instances of vandalism, breaking and entering and stealing, therefore crime can play a significant role in an individual's/family's ability to sustain their tenancy.

Domestic violence often means children will leave the family home and take up primary homelessness, humbergging, violence and robbery (AHURI 2010). As a result the demand for housing services in Indigenous communities is consistently high, reflecting the wishes of women and children to leave abusive households (AHURI 2010).

1.4 Supporting housing

Reducing Indigenous homelessness and improving housing requires a broad policy response that addresses many of the causes of homelessness and disadvantage among Indigenous people (AHURI 2009). Supporting tenancies of Indigenous people who have received a new, refurbished or rebuilt house under NPARIH is an important part of sustaining tenancies, avoiding homelessness and maintaining new public housing infrastructure.

Tenancy support programs seek to assist tenants at risk of losing their tenancy to maintain their tenancy and so avoid eviction and entry into homelessness. Tenancy support programs may also be implemented at the outset of a new tenancy to support formerly homeless or disadvantaged people to enter and sustain a new tenancy (AHURI 2009).

Tenancy support programs offered in communities address a range of housing and non-housing needs. This can include, to varying degrees: mental health conditions; drug and alcohol dependency problems, relationship breakdown; domestic and family violence, overcrowding; poor knowledge of tenancy responsibilities; low income; lack of coping skills; locational disadvantage and social isolation; and a lack of contact with, or awareness of, services and entitlements. Support measures can include advice/information/support, education and/or case management (AHURI 2009).

There is limited evidence in the literature regarding outcomes of tenancy support programs. However AHURI (2009) identifies that from available evidence, eviction and consequently homelessness is avoided for the vast majority of Indigenous participants in tenancy support programs. Other key outcomes identified include:

- reduction in rent arrears and tenant liabilities;
- improvement in property conditions and reduction in charges relating to property damage;
- fewer reports of disruptive behaviour;
- increased linkage to services and improved access to counselling services, referrals to mental health and drug and alcohol services and financial counsellors;
- capacity building among clients; and
- increased self-esteem, confidence and trust resulting in a greater capacity of tenants to engage with local community support services and participate in community activities (AHURI 2009).

1.5 Broader impacts of housing on health and wellbeing, education and employment

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement (COAG 2011) recognises that an integrated approach is required to achieve improved outcomes on a range of targeted and interrelated areas of Indigenous disadvantage relating to life expectancy, health, education and employment. Housing and the provision of 'healthy homes' is one of the approaches, which in concert with a range of other strategies are aimed at 'closing the gap'.

Housing is crucial to outcomes in all other areas of life. Children cannot grow up healthy and get a good education if their home environment is unsafe and overcrowded (Australian Government 2010). The literature identifies strong links between poor housing and homelessness and poor overall wellbeing, health and educational outcomes. Further, much of the literature describes the potential for improved housing to positively impact the wellbeing, health and education of families.

Housing and health and wellbeing

As described above, housing has been identified as a major factor affecting the health of Indigenous people. The shortage of housing for Indigenous Australians has both direct and indirect effects on health (Bailie & Wayte 2006). Housing directly impacts on physical health through material conditions as well as affecting mental health and wellbeing. For example, material conditions can relate to overcrowding or issues of dampness and mould; whereas mental health issues arise from housing insecurity, debt insecurity, and a lack of feeling at 'home' (Bailie & Wayte 2006). Housing indirectly improves access to general facilities, increases social capital and reduces social fragmentation. Health related problems associated with remote Indigenous communities have been broadly categorised into three interrelated categories: infectious diseases; issues arising from social disruption and despair; and 'lifestyle-related' diseases as a result of poor nutrition, lack of exercise and emotional stress (Menzies School of Health Research 2000). All three categories are strongly related to the quality of housing. Infectious diseases have the most profound affect on Indigenous children and are directly linked to housing features, such as water supply, sanitation and overcrowding (Menzies School of Health Research 2000).

Housing initiatives in remote Indigenous communities in Australia are aimed at ensuring the nine 'Healthy Living Practices'. The 'Healthy Living Practices' are used as a methodology for measuring, assessing and fixing household hardware (Plethora et al 1993). This is seen as essential for improving health. The nine initiatives are included in Table 1.2, in descending order of importance. The practice of maintaining good hygiene is dependent on individual knowledge, but it must be partnered with the availability of functioning infrastructure. Quality infrastructure can ensure the following:

- adequate water supply for washing, drinking and cooking, which will improve domestic hygiene and health;
- effective sewerage systems will reduce malnutrition and increase individuals resistance to infection;
- protection from heat, cold and dust, will reduce the risk of heart, respiratory, eye and skin infections;
- privacy, which will improve personal hygiene and reduce social stress; and
- reliable and safe power supply for quality lighting, safe cooking and to reduce exposure to extreme weather conditions (Bailie & Wayte 2006).

Table 1.2

THE NINE "HEALTHY LIVING PRACTICES"

Practice	Effect
1. Washing people	Ensuring there is adequate hot and cold water and that the shower and bath work.
2. Washing clothing and bedding	Ensuring the laundry is functional with separate taps for water, the washing machine and tub.
3. Removing waste safely	Ensuring drains aren't blocked and that the toilets are working.
4. Improving nutrition	Assessing the ability to prepare and store food, making sure the stove works and improving the functionality of the kitchen.
5. Reducing overcrowding	Ensuring health hardware can cope with the actual number of people living in a house at any time.
6. Reducing the impact of animals, vermin or insects	To reduce the health risks posed to people. For example, ensuring adequate window and door screening.
7. Reducing dust	To reduce the risk of respiratory illness.
8. Controlling temperature	Looking at the use of insulation and passive design to reduce the health risks, particularly to small children, the sick and elderly.
9. Reducing trauma	This will reduce the risk of non-life threatening issues arising.

Source: Plethora, Rainow & Torzillo 1993, Housing for Health: Towards a Healthy Living Environment for Aboriginal Australia & NSW Government, 'Housing for Health'.

As noted previously, Indigenous households tend to be larger than non-Indigenous households. The high number of people in Indigenous households is a primary contributor to poor housing infrastructure. Additionally, it restricts the ability of a household to practice the 'Healthy Living Practices'. Crowded houses have a higher incidence of common infectious diseases and parasitic conditions (Bailie & Wayte 2006). The ubiquity and recurrence of such infections causes poor growth development and can exacerbate existing chronic conditions. This may include bacterial ear infections, scabies, renal and heart diseases, as well as tuberculosis. Overcrowding can also have an impact on individuals' mental wellbeing. The prevalence of smoking in Indigenous households will negatively impact children within the home as a result of passive smoke inhalation. Furthermore, housing acts as a potential generator of chronic stress due to the following reasons:

- those that are unemployed tend to spend a lot of time in the home and thus are constantly reminded if their housing is inadequate (AHURI 2008); and
- housing absorbs a large proportion of disposable income, and thus interacts with the key issue of inadequate resources/finances included in all hassle scales (Reding and Wijnberg 2001).

Changes to health and wellbeing as a result of housing improvements and PTM reforms are discussed further in Chapter 6.

Housing and education

Educated Australians experience a range of positive outcomes, such as higher incomes, higher levels of employment and improved health outcomes. Remote communities benefit from investment in education resulting in spill over effects that include improved productivity and positive role models (Biddle 2007).

Biddle (2007) conducted a study that linked the probability of attending high school with a range of household, individual and geographic factors. The findings indicate that the number of household members did not have a significant effect on high school participation. However, the results show that the number of individuals per bedroom did negatively affect high school participation. Moreover, access to home ownership, which is used as a proxy for access to economic resources, had a positive and significant correlation with high school participation (Biddle 2007).

The negative relationship between overcrowding and attendance is explained by the AHURI as a result of limited private space, which inhibits cognitive development and learning (AHURI 2008). That is, overcrowding affects the ability of children to study, and have sufficient sleep, both of which are vital for school attendance and performance (Productivity Commission 2009). Additionally, a child's school performance suffers from frequent household relocation causing disruption to studies and a removal from important social networks (Phibbs & Young 2002). A strong education when young will enhance the social and cognitive skills that are needed to perform well at school as well as later in life (Productivity Commission 2009).

Biddle's findings assist in building the evidence that relates improved housing to improved education. Strong evidence already exists regarding the links between education and wellbeing outcomes — to which housing may contribute. The results from a 2011 report by the ABS linking education and Indigenous wellbeing are summarised in Table 1.3 below.

Table 1.3

THE LINK BETWEEN EDUCATION AND WELLBEING

Factor	Effect of Education
Employment	The rate of full time employment more than triples for Indigenous adults, from 18 per cent for those with below Year 10 attainment, to 63 per cent for those with a Bachelor degree or above.
Smoking	The likelihood of being a smoker is reduced with higher rates of educational attainment. For example, holding a Bachelor degree will decrease the probability of being a smoker to 23 per cent, down from around 55% for those who did not finish year 10.
Risky/high risk alcohol consumption	Lower rates of engaging in risky consumption of alcohol are associated with higher educational attainment. For example, 10 per cent of those with a Bachelor degree engage in excessive alcohol consumption compared to 21 per cent who did not finish year 10.
Overcrowding	Improved levels of home ownership and reduced levels of overcrowding are strongly associated with higher levels of education. Just over 5 per cent of Indigenous Australians with a Bachelor degree live in overcrowded houses compared to just over 30 per cent for those who did not finish year 10.
Crime	Those that achieve higher education levels are less likely to have been arrested in the last five years than those with low educational attainment.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011, 'Australian Social Trends March 2011 – Education and Indigenous wellbeing', Catalogue no. 4102.0

Housing and employment

Bryson (2000) identifies that having a secure place to live makes it easier to cope with other parts of an individual's life that may make it easier to gain employment. Further, the broader literature highlights that often the quality of an individual's dwelling impacts on the individual's self esteem and sense of worth. This will indirectly affect their ability to gain employment due to issues of self worth and confidence (AHURI 2008).

Those who reside in areas closely linked to public transport will have greater access to work and job seeking opportunities as well as a range of services. Services may include access to childcare and job assistance programs that have a significant affect on the ability of sole parents to join or stay in the job market (AHURI 2008). Moreover, Bridge et al (2003) point out that those who face shorter commutes have a higher probability of maintaining employment.

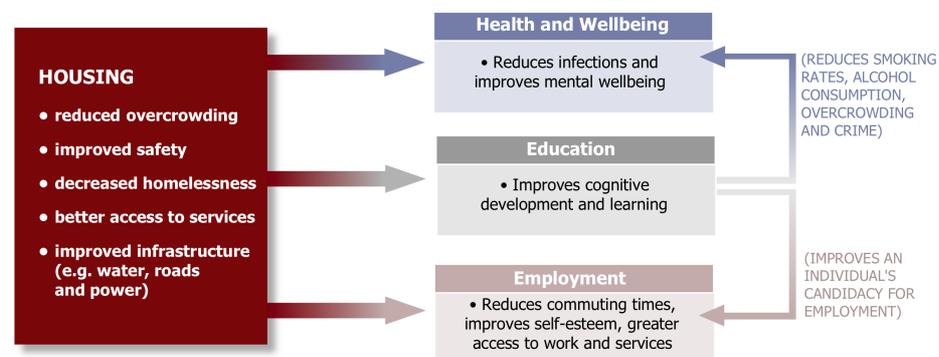
There is evidence supporting the proposition that a relationship between community characteristics and employment exists. It concludes a negative relationship between the concentration of households with high levels of unemployment and the probability of gaining employment (AHURI 2008).

Housing costs will reduce a tenant's disposable income. This will affect an individuals need to supplement income through work and capacity to afford additional costs linked with working — these may include the costs of travelling to work and necessary clothing (AHURI 2008).

Figure 1.3 summarises the links between improved housing and the potential for improved health, education and employment outcomes, as discussed in previous sections.

Figure 1.3

LINKS BETWEEN IMPROVED HOUSING AND IMPROVED WELLBEING OUTCOMES



Source: The Allen Consulting Group 2012.

1.6 Structure of the report

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- *Chapter two* — describes the project context, objectives and methodology.
- *Chapter three* — describes tenants' understanding of their tenancy rights and responsibilities, such as paying rent, keeping their house and yard clean and tidy, processes for reporting repairs and maintenance and having visitors to stay.
- *Chapter four* — presents tenant views on tenancy management including the levels of tenancy support available, repairs and maintenance undertaken and housing inspections.
- *Chapter five* — discusses tenant perspectives on the communication of housing works and property and tenancy management reforms including, notification of housing works, preferred methods of communication by tenants, Housing Reference Groups and managing community and tenant expectations.
- *Chapter six* — discusses the broader impact of the housing reforms, as perceived by tenants and community service providers.
- *Chapter seven* — summarises the findings and conclusions of the research.

Chapter 2

Project objective and methodology

This chapter details the objective of the project and the methodology.

2.1 Project objective and research questions

The new Remote Rental Framework (described in Box 1.1) is a significant change for tenants who have previously had no formal rental arrangements or paid rent through the previous poll tax system. Further, responsibility for the house and damages now sits with the nominated head tenant(s). It is recognised that the magnitude of the housing reforms will require a sustained and long-term approach for effective implementation.

With this in mind, the objective of the project is to fill information gaps about the impact of the PTM reforms on tenants and communities. The project provides an opportunity for tenant feedback at a relatively early stage in the reform process, along with providing information to inform, enhance and improve future policy, program design and service delivery arrangements.

Research questions addressed by the project explore the key areas of PTM reforms, which are concerned with:

- the effectiveness of communication tools and ensuring local input to housing decisions;
- supporting tenants to understand and meet their rights and responsibilities under tenancy agreements; and
- ensuring houses are well maintained providing a safe and healthy living environment and improving the lifecycle of housing (FaHCSIA Request for Quote 2012).

The specific aims of the project are represented by the key research questions, which are set out in Box 2.1.

Box 2.1

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is the level of awareness of the PTM reforms in remote communities in terms of rights and obligations and support?
- To what extent have tenants' rights and responsibilities been understood?
- What is the level of satisfaction with access to tenant support services, the type of support provided and the repairs and maintenance work?
- What problems have tenants encountered in meeting their obligations?
- What are the perceived broader impacts of the reforms on remote Indigenous health, education, employment and general wellbeing?

Source: FaHCSIA Request for Quotation 2012.

Specifically, the project reviewed tenant experiences in relation to: the communication and understanding of the reforms; understanding landlord and tenant rights and obligations; rent collection; housing allocation; satisfaction with repairs and maintenance; satisfaction with dwelling amenity; and ongoing support needs. The project also investigated any perceived broader benefits of the reforms.

Table 2.1 describes the alignment of key PTM reform areas and research questions to data collection tools and the following chapters of the report.

Table 2.1

ALIGNMENT OF KEY REFORM AREAS & RESEARCH QUESTIONS TO TENANT DATA COLLECTION & REPORT STRUCTURE

Report chapter	Key PTM reform area(s)	Research question	Survey section
Chapter 3	Supporting tenants to understand and meet their rights and responsibilities under tenancy agreements.	What is the level of awareness of the PTM reforms in remote communities in terms of rights and obligations and support? To what extent have tenants' rights and responsibilities been understood? What problems have tenants encountered in meeting their obligations?	Section 3: Understanding of tenancy
Chapter 4	Supporting tenants to understand and meet their rights and responsibilities under tenancy agreements. Ensuring houses are well maintained, providing a safe and healthy living environment and improving the lifecycle of housing.	What is the level of satisfaction with access to tenant support services, the type of support provided and the repairs and maintenance work?	Section 4: Tenancy support, house inspections and maintenance
Chapter 5	The effectiveness of communication tools and ensuring local input to housing decisions	What is the level of awareness of the PTM reforms in remote communities in terms of rights and obligations and support?	Section 2: Communication
Chapter 6	Ensuring houses are well maintained, providing a safe and healthy living environment and improving the lifecycle of housing.	What are the perceived broader impacts of the reforms on remote Indigenous health, education, employment and general wellbeing?	Section 5: Outcomes

Source: The Allen Consulting Group 2012

Table 2.5 summarises the questions used as the basis for surveying tenants' awareness, understanding and/or practice relating to each of the survey sections. Input to the final questionnaire was provided by FaHCSIA and Territory Housing. The research questions were also informed by stakeholder consultations as described in section 2.2.

2.2 Methodology

The project achieved its aims through:

- key informant interviews with selected government officials involved in implementation of the PTM reforms;
- survey interviews of tenants in communities in which PTM reforms have been carried out; and
- discussions with service providers in communities, including health centre staff, schools, Centrelink staff, shire staff, local storeowners, art centre staff and women's shelters.

Discussions within communities also included Government Engagement Coordinators, Indigenous Engagement Officers, Community Housing Officers and other regional housing staff.

Ethics approval

Ethics approval to undertake survey interviews with tenants and interviews with service providers in communities was gained through FaHCSIA's Human Research Ethics Committee on 27 September 2012.

Communities sampled

Seven communities, where significant NPARIH activity had taken place, were visited as part of the project during October 2012. While the sample was not representative it did take into account the following factors:

- overall population size of the community;
- number of new houses, rebuilds and refurbishments undertaken;
- timing of housing works undertaken;
- remoteness; and
- distribution of communities across Northern Territory Government regions.

Table 2.2 provides further detail on the communities visited, including the Northern Territory Government region.

Table 2.2

COMMUNITIES SAMPLED

Community	Region	Proposed cluster*	RSD	TGT	Minor community
Wurrumiyanga	Darwin	Tiwi Islands	✓	✓	
Galiwinku (pilot)	Arnhem	Galiwinku	✓	✓	
Ngukurr	Big Rivers	Katherine	✓	✓	
Warruwi	Arnhem	Maningrida			
Ali Curung	Barkly	South of Tennant Creek		✓	✓
Hidden Valley (town camp)	Central Australia	Alice Springs			
Nturiya	Barkly	South of Tenant Creek			

Notes: RSD = Remote Service Delivery Community, TGT = Territory Growth Town. * Proposed clusters defined as prescribed areas where NPARIH works have been carried out.

The duration of each visit was between two and three days, depending on the size of the community and number of Tenancy Agreements in place.

Pilot community visit

The first community visited formed the pilot community. The pilot visit included observation of a full meeting of the HRG, a presentation to the HRG, and a number of survey interviews and post interview discussions to ensure an effective survey instrument.

Attendance at the HRG meeting was essential in demonstrating and experiencing how the HRG provides advice on housing and related issues for the community.

Pilot tenant surveys were conducted with assistance from Community Housing Officers. Pilot surveys confirmed the importance of the availability of an interpreter through the Aboriginal Interpreter Service.

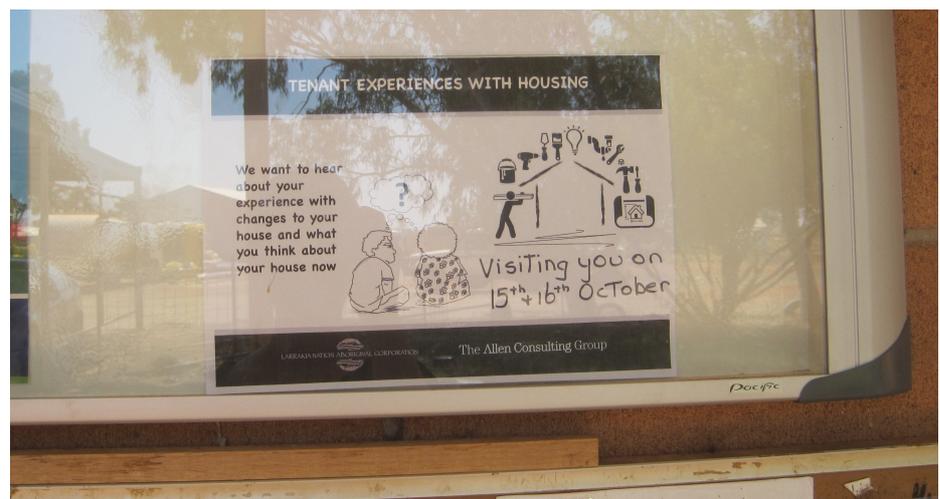
Following the pilot visit, changes were made to the survey tool to reduce repetition and to improve clarity and sequencing of questions. The changes to the survey did not diminish the scope of the survey.

Community engagement

Prior to each community visit a poster was sent out to communities (through the Community Housing Officer or Government Engagement Coordinator) to raise awareness of the research among tenants in the community. A copy of the poster is provided at Appendix D. An image of the way in which the poster was used is provided in Figure 2.1. It shows a copy of the poster pinned to a notice board outside the local shire office with advice of the visit dates added.

Figure 2.1

TENANT EXPERIENCES WITH HOUSING POSTER



Source: The Allen Consulting Group 2012.

Community meetings were held, where possible, with HRGs to raise awareness of the research and to gain an understanding of changes to housing and property and tenancy management arrangements in each community. Lunch was often provided by the research team at these meetings. Where it was not possible to meet with the HRG, researchers ensured that members of the HRG participated in survey interviews.

Visits completed

Table 2.3 details the community visits undertaken. A total of 108 survey interviews were completed during community visits with households. Eight survey interviews completed in Wurrumiyanga could not be verified as having a tenancy agreement in place based on information provided by FaHCSIA and Territory Housing. However, tenants completing the survey identified that they had a tenancy agreement in place. These surveys have been excluded from the analysis. Of the remaining 100 surveys:

- 30 interviews were undertaken with tenants who received new houses;
- 15 interviews were undertaken with tenants who received rebuilt houses; and
- 55 interviews were undertaken with tenants who received refurbished houses.

One survey was completed for each household.

Table 2.3

TYPE OF WORKS UNDERTAKEN, TENANCY AGREEMENTS IN PLACE AND INTERVIEWS COMPLETED

Community	New houses		Rebuilds		Refurbishments		Total Tenancy Agreements	Total survey interviews completed	Total service provider interviews completed
	T	C	T	C	T	C			
Wurrumiyanga	90	11	63	6	97	6	250	31*	2
Galiwinku (pilot)	90	2	20	2	51	-	161	4	3
Ngukurr	35	14	26	1	34	3	95	18	3
Warruwi	-	-	-	-	24	16	24	16	3
Ali Curung	-	-	-	-	59	11	59	11	4
Hidden Valley (town camp)	24	3	16	6	7	1	47	10	3
Nturiya	-	-	-	-	24	18	24	18	3
TOTAL	239	30	125	15	296	55	660	108	21

Source: The Allen Consulting Group 2012.

Note: T = Total new houses, rebuilds or refurbishments completed. C = Total number of survey interviews completed by the research.

* = For eight of the survey interviews with tenants in Wurrumiyanga, the tenants identified as having a tenancy agreement but it was not possible to verify this based on data provided by FaHCSIA and Territory Housing.

There are only eight remote communities in the Northern Territory in which new houses were built, the majority of communities received refurbishments

Table 2.4 provides an overview of characteristics for each community visited based on 2011 Census data. The number of people per dwelling in the communities visited ranges from 4.3 to 5.6 with an average of 5 people, which is above the average of 4.2 for Indigenous households in the Northern Territory.

Table 2.4

COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS (2011)

Community	Population**	% Indigenous	Median age	Av. children per family	Av. people per dwelling
Wurrumiyanga	1,527	88%	26	2.4	4.3
Galiwinku	2,124	89%	24	2.6	5.3
Ngukurr	1,056	92%	22	2.4	5.6
Warruwi	423	95%	17	2.5	5.6
Ali Curung	535	90%	22	2.4	4.8
Hidden Valley*	-	-	-	-	-
Nturiya	95	-	25	-	4.8

Source: 2011 Census data. * Data unavailable for Hidden Valley town camp. ** Population including Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Note: Northern Territory wide, the average number of people per dwelling is 4.2 for Indigenous households compared to 2.6 people per non-Indigenous household in the Northern Territory.

Meetings with Territory Housing regions and other government stakeholders

Prior to undertaking community visits, meetings were held with Territory Housing staff in each region, including Arnhem, Big River, Barkly and Central Australia. Several attempts were made to meet with representatives from the Darwin region however this did not eventuate due to time pressures on regional staff. These meetings usually included the Regional Executive Director and key members of the tenancy and asset management team.

Further, as part of community visits, interviews were also undertaken in many cases with community-based Australian and Northern Territory government staff, including:

- Government Engagement Coordinators (GEC);
- Indigenous Engagement Officers (IEO);
- Tenancy and Asset Managers and Team Leaders; and
- Community Housing Officers (CHO).

The purpose of these discussions was to gain an understanding of how PTM reforms had been implemented within each region, as well as within individual communities, and any key issues that may provide context to survey results in that region/community.

Territory Housing regional and community-based staff also supported the organisation of community visits, including changes to communities to be visited within short timeframes. These changes were often due to 'sorry business' or other ceremony occurring in communities. Further, changes were made to the overall timing of the research to avoid the period leading up to the Northern Territory Election held in August 2012.

Survey interviews with tenants

The purpose of survey interviews with tenants, as summarised in Table 2.1, was to provide a snapshot of tenants' experiences of sustainable property and tenancy management reforms at an early stage of a long-term approach to implementation of reforms. As outlined previously, this research also provides information on where future programs and effort should be focused and where improvements can be made in relation to tenants' understanding of their rights and responsibilities under tenancy agreements.

The survey instrument was developed in consultation with FaHCSIA and Territory Housing. Table 2.5 provides an overview of the areas the survey covered and related questions. A full version of the tenant survey is included at Appendix A.

Table 2.5

TENANT SURVEY SECTIONS AND QUESTIONS

Survey section	Survey questions
Section 1 Introductory questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long have you been in your house? • How many bedrooms are there in your house? • How many people currently live in your house?
Section 2 Communication	<p><i>Works undertaken on the house</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you find out about the works that were done on your house? • Were you able to talk about the changes that you wanted to your house? • Was this a good way of talking to you about the works? <p><i>Signing the tenancy agreement</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When the works were finished, what were you told about the new tenancy agreement you needed to sign? • Was there anything that was hard to understand from this information? <p><i>Support provided to live in your house</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After you signed the tenancy agreement, what information were you given about living in your house? • Do you know the Housing Reference Group in your community? • If yes, what does the Housing Reference Group do? • If yes, does the Housing Reference Group ask for your views?
Section 3 Understanding of tenancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many people in your house help pay rent? How do you pay your rent? • Do you always have enough money to pay rent? • If you did have trouble paying your rent, who would you talk to? • Would you like extra information about the rent you pay? • As a tenant do you let someone know if you are going away; keep your house tidy; keep your yard tidy; ask for repairs and maintenance? • Are any of these hard for you to do? • Are you better able to manage visitors since being in your new/improved house?

Survey section	Survey questions
Section 4 Tenancy support, house inspections and maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When something needs fixing in your house, who do you tell or where do you go to ask? • Once you told them something was broken, did they come and fix it? • How long did it take for them to come and fix it? • Does someone come to inspect/look at your house? • When was the last time they came to look at your house? • What did they do to your house? • Have you ever made a complaint about things not being fixed in your house? • If yes, who did you complain to? • If no, do you know how to make a complaint about things not being fixed in your house?
Section 5 Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is it like living in your house now? Is it better than before? What are some of the things that are better? • Since living in this house, has it made it easier to have a job or look for work? • Has living in this house helped your family to be healthy? • Has living in this house made it easier for your kids to go to school? • Do you have any other comments about your house or housing in your community?

Source: The Allen Consulting Group 2012.

Note: Researcher notes accompanied survey questions (see Appendix A), allowing the researcher to elaborate where tenants were having difficulty understanding the question. Picture prompts were also used.

Survey interviews with tenants were restricted to tenants with a tenancy agreement in place for occupied dwellings. The tenancy agreements fall under the New Remote Rental Framework, which came into effect in July 2010.

A total of 100 surveys were undertaken with households who hold a tenancy agreement. Surveys undertaken were qualitative in nature. Each survey took an average of 40 minutes to complete with tenants. The nature of surveys allowed for in-depth discussions with tenants regarding their housing and the challenges they were facing, along with exploring the impact that improved housing has made on their lives.

Members of the Allen Consulting Group and Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation delivered the tenant surveys. Interpreters (through the Aboriginal Interpreter Service) were engaged to help conduct the survey and ensure tenant understanding. In some cases CHOs helped facilitate this process. For two communities, although previously arranged, interpreters were not available on the day(s) research was conducted. This had an impact on the number of surveys undertaken in some communities.

As mentioned above, meetings with Territory Housing regional staff and HRGs aided researcher's understanding of the nuances between communities, for example, how community members refer to different programs and roles.

Where tenants had difficulty in understanding survey questions, researchers had the capacity to elaborate on the question using explanatory information for researchers that accompanied the questions. Picture prompts were also used in delivering the survey to ensure tenant understanding (see Appendix B).

Interpreters engaged for the survey were briefed on the research and its objective. Interpreters were encouraged to be as literal as possible when explaining and relaying information.

To acknowledge the time spent by tenants in undertaking the survey, a bag containing a t-shirt and water bottle was offered to tenants on completion of the survey.

Service provider interviews

Along with the conduct of survey interviews with tenants, interviews were also undertaken with service providers in each community to gain a broader understanding of the impact of changes to housing on the community.

Service providers interviewed varied by community, but included:

- schools;
- health centres;
- local Centrelink staff;
- women's shelters;
- store owners; and
- employment providers.

A copy of the discussion guide provided to service providers prior to interview is included at Appendix C.

Feedback to communities

Feedback will be provided to communities through the GEC, and IEO where relevant, and the HRG. The feedback will take the form of a poster to provide summary information about key findings to the community.

The feedback process will refer to information gaps or lack of clarity / understanding about service arrangements or access indicated by the survey findings, and provide an indication as to how these will be addressed.

Chapter 3

Understanding of tenancy rights and responsibilities

This chapter explores tenants' awareness and understanding of their tenancy rights and responsibilities.

Key reform area:

Supporting tenants to understand and meet their rights and responsibilities under tenancy agreements.

Research questions:

What is the level of awareness of the PTM reforms in remote communities in terms of rights and obligations and support?

To what extent have tenants' rights and responsibilities been understood (e.g. reporting repairs and maintenance through the right channels, paying rent, keeping the house clean)?

What problems have tenants encountered in meeting their obligations?

Survey sections:

Section 2: Communication. This section of the survey asked tenants about how they found out about the works that were undertaken on their house, and whether tenants were asked about their views on these works.

Section 3: Understanding of tenancy. This section of the survey asked tenants about their responsibilities as a tenant.

Section 4: Tenancy support, house inspections and maintenance. This section asked tenants about housing inspections, how they look after their house and whether they have had any help.

3.1 Awareness of rights and responsibilities

Territory Housing has developed a range of tools to assist with the dissemination of housing information. It has worked with the Northern Territory Aboriginal Interpreter Service to produce DVDs about tenant rights and responsibilities in 15 key Indigenous languages; developed a suite of fact sheets; explained the tenancy agreement and rules in plain English; introduced radio advertisements; developed story boards in numerous languages; and introduced more face-to-face interaction between Territory Housing and tenants at the start of, and at key points during a tenancy.

Survey questions:

When the works were finished, what were you told about the new tenancy agreement you needed to sign?

Was there anything that was hard to understand from this information?

Awareness of tenancy agreement

The first section of this chapter explores survey respondents' awareness and understanding of information provided around the time of signing the tenancy agreement.

Nearly three quarters of tenants surveyed remembered being told about and signing the tenancy agreement. The remaining respondents who could not remember being told about the agreement were evenly spread across the seven communities.

Understanding of tenancy agreement content

Figure 3.1 shows the results for when tenants who recalled signing a tenancy agreement were asked whether they had difficulty in understanding information in the agreement.

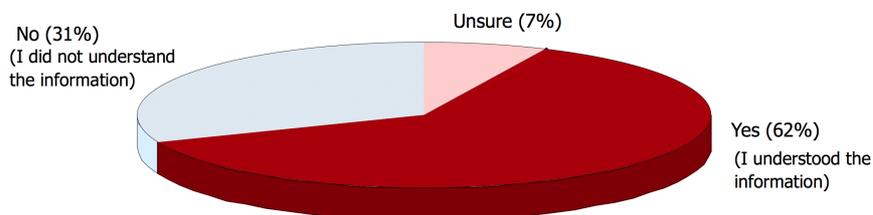
A number of service providers had reservations about tenants' understanding of the tenancy agreement and the information within it. As one service provider described:

'A twenty-eight page long lease agreement is totally inappropriate'.

The majority of residents surveyed (62 per cent) indicated that they did not have any difficulty in understanding the information. Some Territory Housing staff and local service providers cautioned that in some cases tenants' might be embarrassed about not fully understanding the agreement.

Figure 3.1

TENANTS' UNDERSTANDING OF TENANCY AGREEMENT CONTENT, N=88



Source: Allen Consulting Group analysis of tenancy survey data 2012

For those respondents who reported that the information had been difficult to understand, the main areas of confusion related to: payment of rent, tenants responsibility for payment for repairs and maintenance and the length of time their house would be kept if they went away. For most tenants, however, the main difficulty noted was that it was too much information to digest or it was explained too quickly.

Tenant interviews also revealed some good practice examples of the way in which the information was provided:

'They brought an interpreter with them and sat down with me and explained everything, that was really good.'

'They sat down with my whole family and me and explained it to all of us. That was really good because now my family all know what I have to do.'

Key points

- *Three quarters of respondents remembered signing a tenancy agreement.*
- *Of those who remembered signing a tenancy agreement, 62 per cent of tenants said that the information in the tenancy agreement was not difficult to understand.*
- *The main difficulty in tenants' understanding of the content of the tenancy agreement is the amount of information and speed with which it was explained.*
- *Payment of rent, tenants responsibility for payment for repairs and maintenance and the length of time their house would be kept if they went away were specific areas of uncertainty for a number of tenants.*
- *Tenants provided some good practice examples of the way in which information had been conveyed.*

3.2 Paying rent

The payment of rent was a topic of discussion in tenant interviews in some communities. The next section explores tenants responses regarding their ability to pay rent, payment methods and available information about the rent they pay.

*Survey questions:**How many people in your house help pay rent? How do you pay rent?**Do you always have enough money to pay rent?**If you did have trouble paying your rent, who would you talk to?**Would you like extra information about the rent you pay?***Ability to pay rent**

Tenants' were asked whether they always have enough money to pay rent. Their responses are outlined below.

- Over 80 per cent of tenants said 'yes'.
- Just over 10 per cent said 'no'.
- A small proportion were unsure.

Respondents who said 'no' were fairly evenly distributed between the communities visited. The factors that impact on tenants' ability to pay rent included:

- whether the tenant believed the level of rent they were paying is too high;
- the number of people contributing to rent in the house; and
- coordination of payment days for rent payers in the house — if tenants were paid on different days this could sometimes impact their ability to pay the whole rent amount for the house and have leftover funds for other essential services.

Assistance if having difficulty paying rent

Respondents were also asked to nominate who they would go to if they were having difficulty managing their rental payments.

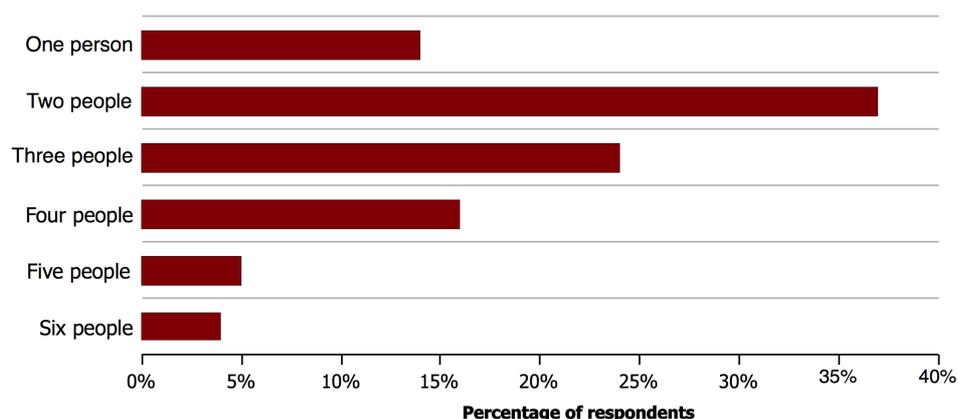
Almost all respondents in all communities reported that they would talk to the housing officer in their community or Centrelink if they were experiencing difficulties. Only a very small number advised that they would contact the Shire or a family member.

Number of people who contribute to rent

Households surveyed identified that between one and six people contributed to paying rent. In over one third of households, two people contribute to paying rent, followed by three people paying rent in just under a quarter of households (see Figure 3.2). In approximately 14 per cent of households, tenants identified that only one person contributed to rental payments.

Figure 3.2

NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO PAY RENT IN A HOUSE, N=93



Source: Allen Consulting Group analysis of tenant survey data 2012

Just over 70 per cent of respondents indicated their rent was deducted from Centrelink payments, and approximately 20 per cent indicated their rent was deducted through payroll from their earnings.

In many houses there was more than one method of payment.

Information and understanding about rent paid

The final question tenants were asked about rent related to whether they needed any additional information about the rent they paid. The responses to this question highlighted a number of difficulties experienced in understanding how the rent level is calculated.

Requests for additional information related to levels and calculation of rent, including the provision of information as to when changes to rent may be made.

Respondents who knew how much rent they paid indicated that they did not require any additional information.

The method for rent calculation is discussed in Box 1.1.

In one community, all tenants interviewed knew exactly what they paid and why. They attributed this to the good work of the local housing officers:

'They come out and explain already when rent is going up. May also get a letter from Centrelink. Ring Territory Housing and then a few days later they come out and fix it. The rent we pay is OK.'

'No I don't need any more information. It is fine. I know how much I pay.'

For the other communities, awareness of the level of rent paid was limited. Those who paid from payroll earnings generally had higher awareness, as they could access the amount on their payslip.

'No, can tell how much I pay through my payslip, don't need anymore information.'

Those respondents with least awareness were those who paid through automatic deduction from their Centrelink payment.

'Yes, never know how much we pay. Have asked the housing mob to tell us but they haven't got back to me.'

'Yes, why we pay as much as we pay and how long we are going to be paying that much?'

'Yes, would like to know what we pay. Why different people pay different amounts?'

'Yes. Why the rent has gone up? No one told me, I just noticed it in my Centrelink statement. Centrelink and Housing should have talked to me about it and let me know.'

'Yes, would like to know more about my rent and where it goes to.'

'Yes. I don't know how much I pay or when. I think I pay fortnightly. Would also like to know how much other people in the house pay.'

'Yes, how the rent is calculated. [For example], do I pay a higher amount than others because I work'

Service providers interviewed, including housing officers, also acknowledged that the rent calculation method is complicated and made it difficult to explain to tenants.

Respondents occupying refurbished properties also expressed dissatisfaction with the levels of rent they paid. Some of these tenants had difficulty in understanding why their rent had changed following the refurbishments, particularly when tenants were not satisfied with works done or works done were not visible — such as electrical repairs. For example, one tenant of a refurbished house asked:

'Why we pay so much rent? We are paying too much rent for the old house we are in.'

Tenants made a range of other comments about rent. Many of these were echoed in the Commonwealth Ombudsman's report (2012), which notes that the new tenancy model has the potential to place a heavy burden on tenants in remote Indigenous settings, where overcrowding, mobility and cultural practices present additional challenges. Specific issues raised in the Ombudsman's report include:

- head tenants' may have no mechanism for holding other residents to account for paying their share of rent as recorded in the Family Agreement;

- they can be responsible for the damage done by other residents of the house even though wear and tear and other damage may be the result of overcrowding;
- there may be cultural barriers preventing a head tenant asking another resident to pay their share of the rent or to pay for damage done to a house;
- other residents may not keep the head tenant informed of changes to their income, resulting in potential rental overpayments or underpayments; and/or
- ultimately, there is a risk that head tenants will accrue rental arrears and liabilities, particularly given problems with accessing rental statements (Commonwealth Ombudsman 2012).

Key points

- *Over 80 per cent of tenants surveyed reported having no difficulty paying rent.*
- *Just over 70 per cent of respondents indicated that they pay rent via an automatic deduction from their Centrelink payments.*
- *Almost all tenants indicated that they would ask either Territory Housing (through the housing officer) or Centrelink for assistance if they were unable to pay rent.*
- *Between one and six people contribute to paying rent. In over one third of households two people contribute to rental payments, followed by three people in just under a quarter of households. In approximately 14 per cent of households, tenants identified that only one person contributed to rental payments.*
- *In a number of communities, respondents were unaware of the level of rent they paid and how it was calculated.*
- *Those respondents who had refurbishments were generally less satisfied with paying rent than those occupying new/rebuilt houses.*

3.3 Responsibility for cleaning

Tenants were asked a series of questions about their tenancy responsibilities.

Survey questions:

As a tenant, do you:

- *Keep your house tidy?*
- *Keep your yard tidy?*

Are any of these (tasks listed above) hard for you to do?

All respondents, in all communities agreed that it was their responsibility to keep their house clean and tidy. The result is similar for tenants' yards — over 95 per cent of tenants agreed that it was their responsibility to keep their yard tidy.

Respondents who disagreed that they were responsible for keeping their yard tidy were confined to two communities visited. The main reason these respondents disagreed was due to dissatisfaction with municipal services in the community and the need for fencing repairs. This impacted on whether the respondent felt they had much control over the cleanliness of their yard.

'Don't know when they pick up the rubbish in the community. Sometimes it sits here for a week before it gets picked up.'

'Would like them to fix the fence to stop drunks from walking about. Make gates that can be closed — supposed to do that when renovated houses. People can drive through side of the house, don't bother slowing down.'

'Need my fence fixed so I have a proper fence to protect from horses, cows etc. They mess up my yard.'

Tenants were also asked whether it was difficult to keep their house and yard tidy. The results were evenly distributed between communities.

- Approximately 18 per cent of respondents said it was difficult.
- Over 30 per cent said it could be 'sometimes' difficult.
- Half of tenants surveyed said that it was not difficult.

For those who said it can be difficult, fencing has a big impact on the ability to keep the yard safe and keep out community animals. Other factors included:

- the number of people residing in the house, particularly children and visitors; and
- the health of the tenant and whether others in the house assisted them with the cleaning and tidying.

'Yes, it can be hard to keep things tidy. I clean up but people come in and trash [my house].'

'Yes, I try but the dogs are bad. I try to tell my mob not to put stuff in the bins that the dogs will go for.'

'Yes can be hard. The kids and grandchildren mess up the house. It is hard for me to clean up because I have a broken wrist and no one helps me.'

Key points

- *All respondents in all communities understand that it is their responsibility to keep their house tidy. The main factors that influence their ability to do this are the number of people in their house, particularly children and visitors.*
- *Over 95 per cent of respondents also understood that it is their responsibility to keep their yard tidy. The small number who did not are those respondents also dissatisfied with assistance by municipal services in collecting rubbish.*
- *Respondents identified a lack of fencing or fencing in a state of disrepair as impacting upon their ability to keep their yards tidy and safe from vehicles.*
- *Half of respondents said it was not difficult to keep their house or yard tidy, and the other half said it was hard, or could be sometimes.*

3.4 Ability to manage visitors

As discussed in Chapter 1, visitors are a significant part of life for Indigenous Australians and they can impact greatly upon tenants' living conditions.

Survey question:

Are you better able to manage visitors since being in your new/improved house?

Survey respondents reported that visitors can influence their ability to keep their house and yard tidy. Tenants were also asked directly about their ability to manage visitors now with their new/improved house.

- Close to 50 per cent of tenants surveyed reported that they can manage visitors better.
- Just over 40 per cent reported that they cannot manage visitors better or that there has been no change from before.
- Approximately 10 per cent commented that they could only sometimes manage visitors better.

Visitors remain a difficult area. Many tenants surveyed were reluctant to say that visitors were ever a problem for them and reported that they could manage visitors coming to stay. Many tenants answered that:

'...visitors do not stay very long, so not a problem...'

Further, some were confident that:

'...they help me clean up and go home when I want them to so not a problem'.

In some situations service providers verified that particular tenants had in fact had some difficulty due to visitors staying with them, such as breakages, or that visitors had been in the community for a long time despite the tenants' responses.

However, in two of the seven communities visited there did appear to be significant awareness or practice of the use of the tenancy agreement to better manage visitors.

'Yes easier to manage. I ask them questions about where they are going to stay and how many nights they stay. I use the tenancy agreement to manage.'

'Helps that people know that signed tenancy agreement that no visitors allowed to stay for long period and let them know that here to stay.'

'Yes. Helps to get visitors to help clean up. They know I have to do it. Visitors generally only stay for one week.'

Some tenants interviewed were also quite open about cultural considerations and their reluctance to enforce their responsibilities.

'No. Can't control when they leave. They don't leave when I want them to.'

'Some stay. Visitors don't know how long they will stay. I know I have to do it [manage the visitors].'

'No, that's not in my culture. I want no restrictions on visitors. Works both ways — I will stay with them sometimes. It's all family looking after each other. It's not a good rule. It's up to family to talk to family if there's a problem, things being broken. The tenancy agreement is not meaningful compared to family courtesy.'

'Not really. They do help but they are guests so I don't like that they help. Hard because they are family. Don't mind having them. Up to them when they leave.'

There appears to be a reluctance to enforce such responsibilities due to cultural considerations, however, some tenants are now more willing to do so than before. Those tenants that reported they could manage visitors better now were generally those who had received a new house. The reasons given for easier management included:

- having more room for visitors than before; and
- liking that they could show their visitors their new house.

Other issues with visitors included whether tenants could ask visitors to pay rent or not.

Key points

- *Close to half of tenants reported that they can manage their visitors better now than before. Approximately 10 per cent reported that they sometimes are able to.*
- *Tenants were reluctant to say that their visitors created any issue for them, which in part could be attributable to a disconnection between cultural practices and tenant responsibilities.*
- *Cultural considerations continue to be a dominant factor in how tenants manage visitors.*
- *Tenants provided some anecdotal examples where the tenancy agreement had been used to assist them in better managing their visitors.*

3.5 Asking for repairs and maintenance

Survey questions:

As a tenant do you:

- *Ask for repairs and maintenance?*

Are any of these (tasks listed above) hard for you to do?

When something needs fixing in your house, who do you tell or where do you go to ask?

Responsibility to ask for repairs and maintenance

Tenants were also asked about their responsibility to ask someone when their house or yard needed repairs and maintenance.

Nearly all respondents in all communities (over 95 per cent of tenants surveyed) agreed that it was their responsibility to ask when they needed repairs or maintenance.

The very small number of respondents who indicated that they did not notify repairs appeared reticent rather than negligent:

'If someone breaks in you have to pay for it.'

'I am a bit shy about asking for repairs and maintenance.'

Tenants contact when asking for repairs and maintenance

Tenants were asked to identify who they would ask or tell when they needed something fixed in their house. The majority (just over 80 per cent) of respondents will tell the housing representative in the community or contact the housing office, while just under 20 per cent tell the shire or Shire Services Manager.

The distribution of answers was consistent between communities. Some respondents also noted that they may tell the local maintenance person in the community if they saw them walking past but this was generally in addition to notifying Territory Housing or the shire.

Tenants' identification of who the housing representative is in their communities differed, as there are different responsibilities for this role between some of the communities visited. For example, the 'housing mob' can consist of people visiting directly from Territory Housing, CHOs or Central Australian Affordable Housing (CAAH) (also referred to locally by residents as Tangentyere Council).

Some tenants, particularly those in communities located near regional centres did call Territory Housing directly. The most common answer from all tenants was, however, that they:

'...would go and see the housing mob at the shire office and fill in the form.'

A smaller number of respondents waited until the housing officers conducted an inspection of their house to notify housing of any problems. Inspections are explored further in the following chapter.

Key points

- *Over 95 per cent of respondents understood that it was their responsibility to ask for repairs and maintenance.*
- *Just over 80 per cent of tenants would contact their local housing representatives if they needed something fixed.*

3.6 Going away for long periods

Another area of questioning in relation to tenant responsibilities was the requirement of tenants to notify the housing representative if they were going away.

Survey questions:

As a tenant, do you:

- *Let someone know if you are going away?*

Are any of these (tasks listed above) hard for you to do?

A majority of respondents agreed that they did notify someone when going away. However, the results vary between communities. In three of the communities, awareness of the need to notify housing was limited. The majority of respondents in these three communities reported that they would notify a family member if they were going away.

Across the other communities, with a few exceptions, respondents outlined they would notify Territory Housing if they were going away and understood that this would affect whether they would continue to pay rent so that their house would not be 'taken away'. Approximately 14 per cent answered that they did not think they needed to tell someone if they were going away.

Key points

- *Majority of respondents understood that they have to let someone know when they are going away.*
- *Understanding who should be notified varied between communities. In one community, respondent awareness of notifying Territory Housing was limited with most tenants notifying only family.*
- *In most of the communities visited tenants understood that they must let housing know and only a small number notified only family or did not let anyone know.*

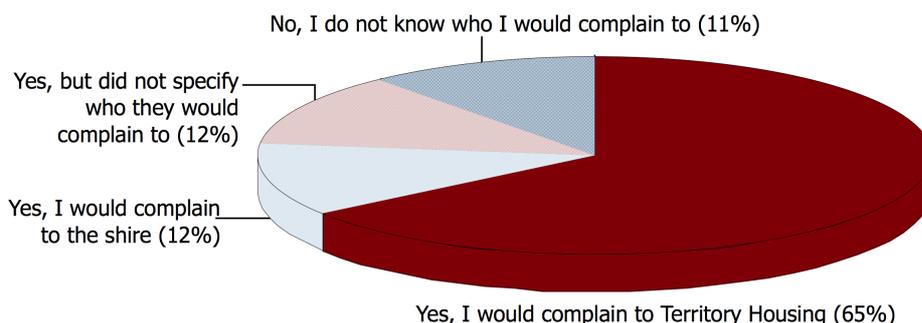
3.7 Complaints

Survey question:

If no [ie the respondent has not previously made a complaint], do you know how to make a complaint about things not being fixed in your house?

Tenants' awareness of the complaints process was tested. Tenants who had not previously made a complaint were asked whether they would know where to go if they needed to complain about something not being fixed in their house. The results are summarised in Figure 3.3. The majority of these tenants reported that they did know how to make a complaint and they would make a complaint to Territory Housing.

Figure 3.3

WHO TENANTS WOULD COMPLAIN TO ABOUT REPAIRS NOT BEING MADE, N=40

Source: Allen Consulting Group analysis of tenant survey data 2012

The responses to the question were again relatively evenly distributed between the communities visited. Those who were unsure where to complain constitute a very small number of tenants confined to two out of the seven communities visited.

Respondents' main understanding of the complaints process is not the alternatives that are available to them to complain or escalate the situation — such as the Commonwealth Ombudsman or the Northern Territory Government 1800 report repairs and maintenance number — but rather as many tenants responded:

'[I] have to keep telling housing again and again.'

Almost all tenants responded that they would go back to tell the Territory Housing or the Shire Officer that a problem had still not been fixed, which would be an appropriate initial response. This may be an area requiring further education, such as about priority work and waiting times for repairs to provide a realistic expectation of response times.

However, it should be noted, in one community visited it was outlined that tenants had taken further action:

'A couple of communities around here have taken action through legal aid against Territory Alliance due to their inaction through maintenance. I think it is because we are a smaller community, things don't get done.'

The issue of responsiveness of maintenance and repairs is explored further in the next chapter, including the experiences of tenants who had previously made a complaint about things not being fixed in their house.

Key point:

- *Approximately 90 per cent of tenants who had not previously made a complaint reported that they knew how to make a complaint, however, in practice tenants' method of complaint is to repeatedly tell the person they reported the problem to initially. Alternative methods of complaint or escalation are not widely known and used.*

Chapter 4

Tenancy management

This chapter explores tenants' level of satisfaction with tenancy support services including repairs and maintenance and housing inspections. It also explores the quality and responsiveness of repairs and maintenance work as discussed by tenants.

Key reform areas:

Supporting tenants to understand and meet their rights and responsibilities under tenancy agreements.

Ensuring houses are well maintained, providing a safe and healthy living environment and improving the lifecycle of housing.

Research question:

What is the level of satisfaction with access to tenant support services, the type of support provided and the repairs and maintenance work?

Survey sections:

Section 2: Communication. This section of the survey asked tenants about how they found out about the works that were undertaken on their house, and whether tenants were asked about their views on these works.

Section 4: Tenancy support, house inspections and maintenance. This section asked tenants about housing inspections, how they look after their house and whether they have had any help.

4.1 Tenancy support

The Commonwealth Ombudsman's report (2012) outlines that when Territory Housing allocates a new, rebuilt or refurbished house, it meets with the residents of that house to provide intensive tenancy support. This includes discussing the tenancy rules and agreement in detail and, where necessary, using an explanatory DVD in one of 15 key Indigenous languages.

It also notes that significant effort has gone into communication strategies and support for tenants, including interpreters, information booklets, story board books, DVDs, factsheets and posters.

The following section explores the tenancy support provided to tenants *after* they signed the tenancy agreement.

Survey question:

After you signed the tenancy agreement, what information were you given about living in your house? For example, how to clean your house, where to put rubbish or looking after your yard.

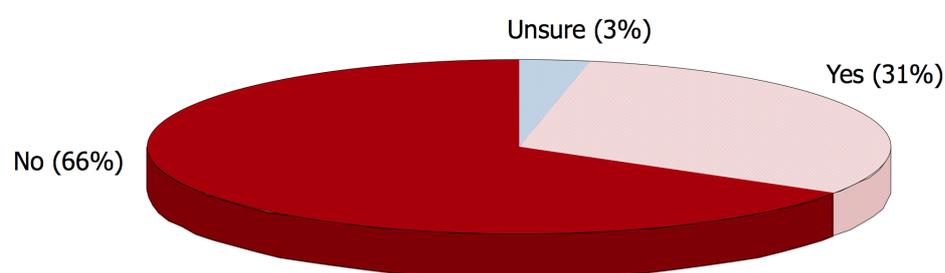
Information given after tenancy agreement signed

Tenants were asked to report whether they had received any additional follow up information on their rights and responsibilities or about living in their house, after the initial information provided at the time of signing the tenancy agreement.

The results are shown in Figure 4.1 below. The majority of tenants said that they had not received any form of information since they signed their tenancy agreement while one third said they had.

Figure 4.1

WHETHER TENANTS WERE PROVIDED WITH ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AFTER THEY SIGNED THE TENANCY AGREEMENT, N=97



Source: Allen Consulting Group analysis of tenancy survey data 2012

Those tenants who had received information were mainly concentrated within three communities visited. These communities included two RSD/TGT communities and one non-RSD community, where the Housing Officer had been particularly supportive of tenants in providing additional information. In these communities it was made apparent that particular housing representatives had made an effort to provide tenants with some ongoing information. The types of information provided had been:

- a brochure/booklet explaining rules and responsibilities and how to look after the house;
- housing representatives coming and re-explaining to tenants the rules and responsibilities and how to clean up the house (including prior to inspections); and
- housing representatives explaining to tenants how items and appliances in the house work such as the fire alarm.

Intensive Tenancy Support (ITS) Program

The ITS program (as distinguished from the broader tenancy support programs described in section 1.4) is outlined in Box 4.1. It provides induction and education to tenants to understand their rights and obligations under a tenancy agreement and how to maintain a safe, healthy home and living environment. The ITS program is delivered over three phases covering six topics. It is delivered to tenants at the time of signing their tenancy agreement; therefore, theoretically all tenants receive the ITS program.

Box 4.1

TERRITORY HOUSING INTENSIVE TENANCY SUPPORT PROGRAM

The ITS program is part of the Remote Housing Tenant Support Framework, which outlines the different levels of tenant support available to tenants in remote communities. The ITS program is provided to tenants and their families as they move to formalised tenancy agreements under the Remote Public Housing Management Framework.

The ITS program provides induction and education to tenants so that they understand their rights and obligations under a tenancy agreement and how to maintain a safe, healthy home and living environment. The content is tailored according to the tenants' needs and delivered via face to face visits in a flexible, culturally appropriate manner.

The six topic areas covered include:

- understanding the tenancy agreement;
- transitional arrangements;
- managing money and resources;
- managing visitors and crowding;
- household orientation and functionality; and
- maintaining a safe, healthy and hygienic home.

The program includes a comprehensive information booklet that is given to the tenant at the time of receiving the executed tenancy agreement.

The ITS program is delivered by Territory Housing staff in collaboration with local CHOs. The use of registered interpreters during delivery of the program is encouraged.

The ITS program is mandatory for all remote public housing residents when they enter a tenancy agreement.

Source: DHLGRS nd

Service provider perceptions of the ITS program is that it is not overly effective. Some service providers in particular, while supportive of intensive support, had concerns about the current design of ITS:

‘The ITS programs are put up as a cure all. But it is not provided in a way that is culturally appropriate for people to understand. We make them go through ‘modules’. You have to explain to people not just how they do it but why they have to do it.’

Further, some Territory Housing regional staff identified that not all topic areas of the ITS program had been able to be delivered to tenants as tenancy agreements were signed. This was due to resourcing constraints (numbers of staff) and the large number of ‘hand overs’ that had to be completed within limited timeframes.

In section 3.1, tenants' awareness of their rights and responsibilities was discussed. Although over 60 per cent of tenants who recalled signing a tenancy agreement, said that the information in the tenancy agreement was not difficult to understand, the main difficulty in tenants' understanding of the content of the tenancy agreement is the amount of information and speed with which it was explained. This highlights that for some tenants, the program is not being delivered appropriately. Indeed, tenants themselves also expressed a need for additional information or for things to be explained properly:

'I would have liked information about how to clean the house. I don't need support but other family members needed support and when I visit them I give them information about how to clean their house.'

'When we got to the house they never explained how to turn on the power, only a week later did we work out how to switch on the power.'

'[There is] no communication from Territory Housing with communities. Need more information about the tenancy agreement and responsibilities. More feedback from housing. Need to have inspections and support for people. Posters would be good about how to live in the house in each house. Need living/life skills/ home care programs.'

Many service providers stated a need for ongoing intensive tenancy support past this initial program. In particular, service providers echoed education in 'life skills', in addition to supports to reinforce information about rights and responsibilities. For example, service providers commented:

'Life skills...that is the key. It has to be two months at least, every day, daily reinforcement. Not once off information provision. The problem is there is no money anywhere for this'.

'Education of rights and responsibilities is not undertaken adequately. It needs constant reiteration. Can't just tell people once, especially when you are telling them a whole lot of other information.'

A number of service providers consulted in communities visited were running programs they believed highlighted the broader skills that are needed to ensure tenancy is sustained and real outcomes are achieved. Programs include those targeted at the health and wellbeing of families, such as Families as First Teachers educating parents to look after their children and in turn learn again how to look after themselves. Other examples included programs run as joint initiatives by the school and health clinic, for example:

'[The] clinic has an ongoing program of healthy baby community with the Red Cross to tackle failure to thrive kids. They have planted their own garden (vegies / bananas), have cooking classes with the mums and a freezer for mums to store foods. Education is provided on healthy eating to tackle anaemia. There has been a decrease in anaemia amongst the failure to thrive kids from 17 to 11 per cent over 1 year.'

The results outlined in the earlier part of this section suggest that currently, the much needed reiteration of rights and responsibilities to tenants, and/or further support to ensure tenancy sustainability, is not fully occurring.

Key points

- *Sixty-six per cent of tenants identified that they have never received any additional information or support since signing their tenancy agreement.*
- *Thirty-one per cent have received additional information and this is concentrated in a small number of communities visited. The information provided was commonly a brochure or booklet or a visit from a housing person explaining rules and responsibilities or how certain appliances in the house work.*
- *Service provider perceptions of the ITS Program is that it is not overly effective.*
- *Service providers emphasised the need for life skills training for tenants and the importance of repetition of tenants rights and responsibilities beyond the initial provision of information upon signing the Tenancy Agreement.*

4.2 Repairs and maintenance

The Remote Housing Framework in the Northern Territory includes reforms to streamline and improve processes to repair and maintain the public housing stock. Service Level Agreements between Territory Housing and the shires include arrangements to request, authorise, undertake and invoice for repairs and maintenance work. They also include response timeframes for categories of repair and maintenance work. The categories are:

- *immediate* — four hours;
- *urgent* — two days; and
- *routine* — within the timeframe indicated on the work order or within six months.

It should be noted that the timeframe for repairs and maintenance work does not commence until Territory Housing issues a work order. The effectiveness of the system relies on the process adopted by each shire.

Survey questions:*Once you told them something was broken, did they come and fix it?**How long did it take for them to come and fix it?**Have you ever made a complaint about things not being fixed in your house?**If yes, who did you complain to?*

The following section explores tenants satisfaction with the quality and responsiveness of repairs and maintenance.

Had something fixed

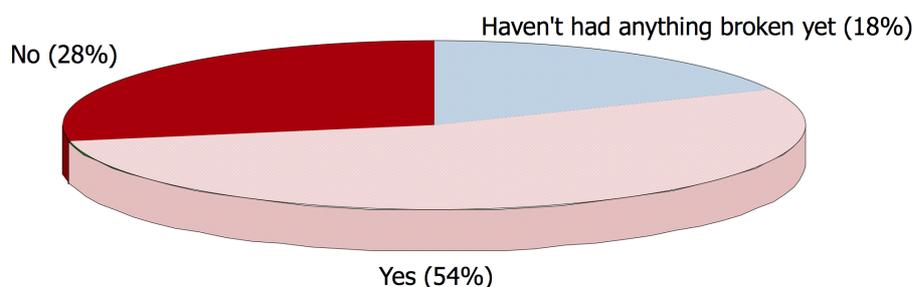
Figure 4.2 below shows the percentage of tenants interviewed that had:

- reported something as needing repair and it had been fixed ('yes');
- reporting something as needing repair but it had not been fixed yet ('no'); and
- not had anything broken yet.

Over half of tenants surveyed indicated something had broken that had been repaired. Common repairs were identified as plumbing and electrical, including leaking taps and clogged plumbing, doors and windows, and broken fans and air conditioners.

Figure 4.2

WHETHER THE TENANT HAD REPORTED SOMETHING AS BROKEN AND IT HAD BEEN FIXED, N=95



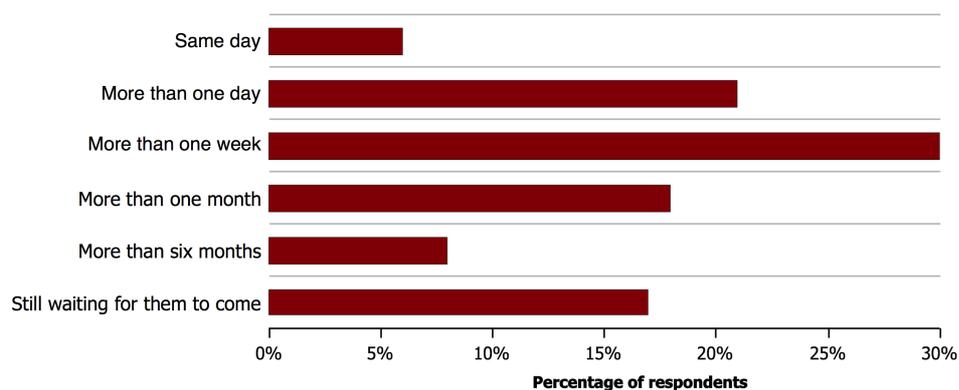
Source: Allen Consulting Group analysis of tenant survey data 2012

Responsiveness

Tenants were also asked about responsiveness — how long after they reported the item as 'broken' did it take for someone to come and fix it. The results are summarised in Figure 4.3.

- Most commonly it took between one and four weeks for repairs and maintenance to be undertaken (30 per cent).
- Some repairs were undertaken in less than one week (21 per cent) or on the same day (6 per cent).
- Eight per cent have taken more than six months, which is outside the stipulated time for even routine repairs.
- Of the 17 per cent still waiting for something to be fixed, these tenants had all reported the item within the last two months.

Figure 4.3

HOW LONG IT TOOK FOR THE ITEM TO BE FIXED, N=77

Source: Allen Consulting Group analysis of tenant survey data 2012

A number of tenants outlined that they thought the timeframe for repairs and maintenance was ‘too long’.

There were, however, differences in the timeframes for different communities. Those tenants in smaller or more remote communities stated that it took longer for repairs to be done as they had to wait longer for parts to arrive from town or for more than one person to have a particular problem in the community to justify bringing a contractor in.

Service providers confirmed that the length of time typically varies depending on the availability of the skills within the community and whether a contractor is needed. In addition, the availability of parts for repair was noted as a factor.

‘Depends on how many other people need help as to when the people from the community come. Town takes longer, a week plus.’

‘Really hard to get things fixed here. Have to wait for parts to come from the city.’

Service providers also indicated some difficulties with the maintenance and repairs processes, including those directly involved. Issues with responsiveness at both ends were outlined — the timeliness of local officers submitting work orders and the timeliness of Territory Housing’s response or approval for works to go ahead.

An important factor in tenants’ satisfaction is the notification of why repairs and maintenance are delayed. In two of the communities visited, residents were given feedback as to why repairs may be taking some time. In the other communities reasons were not clear to respondents. There was a marked difference in satisfaction between these communities.

‘Doesn't take too long. Sometimes have to wait for the materials, the parts. Good mob though, they tell us when we have to wait.’

It was also apparent that those repairs that tenants consider a priority do not always match with Territory Housing’s response categories.

‘Yes, but it does take them a while. The situation is only ever seen as urgent when it is power.’

For example, air conditioners were a common point of discussion. For respondents, this was seen as a very important item due to its impact on tenants' ability to sleep comfortably, particularly for the elderly and children. However, this was an item tenants also often stated they had been waiting an unacceptable amount of time to be fixed. In some communities, some tenants were also unsure whether it would be fixed at all, as it was an item they had purchased themselves. Air conditioners purchased by tenants are their responsibility.

Quality of works and repairs and maintenance

There was a significant level of dissatisfaction among tenants about the quality of work that had been undertaken, including the initial housing work and repairs and maintenance.

'I have had an electrical problem. I asked them to fix it, they said nothing was wrong and didn't fix it. This was six months ago.'

'They fixed the fan for me before but now it is broken again. They didn't do it properly.'

'The houses weren't done properly. Everything was already starting to break when I moved in'.

'They need to put new cupboards in the bedrooms and in the bathroom. I also need a fan. All they did to the bathroom was put in new plastic mirrors.'

The reason for this extends from dissatisfaction with the initial consultation process as outlined in Chapter 3. However, it is also apparent that a significant proportion of tenants have made complaints about repairs and maintenance not being undertaken or not undertaken properly in their house.

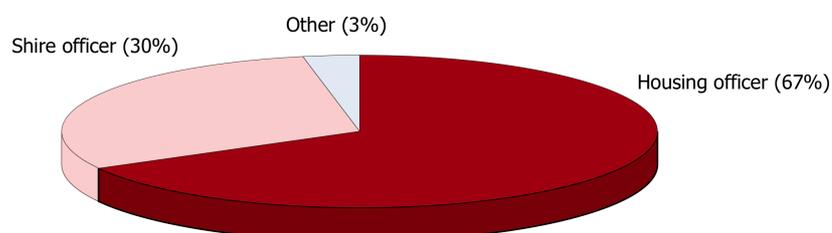
- Over 80 per cent of tenants reported they had made a complaint.
- Over 10 per cent reported they had not.

The results are evenly distributed across communities.

Respondents were asked to outline who they had made the complaint to. The results are very similar to those in section 3.7. The majority of tenants had complained to the housing officer and most of the remainder had complained to the Shire Officer. Other sources included the local plumber or electrician.

Figure 4.4

WHO TENANTS COMPLAINED TO, N=59



The Ombudsman (0%) Legal advocate visiting the community (0%) NTG 1800 repairs and maintenance phone number (0%)

Source: Allen Consulting Group analysis of tenant survey data 2012

Almost all respondents identified that they would go back to tell the housing or Shire Officer that it had still not been fixed. Therefore, this may be an area requiring further education as tenants do not know of or use alternative avenues for complaint. The exception, previously mentioned, was in one community where tenants from a number of communities were reportedly taking legal action.

Key points

- *Most commonly, it takes between one and four weeks for repairs and maintenance to be undertaken.*
- *Respondents' understanding of priority repairs and maintenance may differ from Territory Housing.*
- *Responsiveness of repairs and maintenance are impacted upon by the availability of skilled workers and parts in the community.*
- *Smaller communities can experience more difficulty in getting contractors and may have to wait until there are a number of similar problems in a community to justify the contractor's visit, which leads to higher wait times for these tenants. Difficulties included higher wait times due to general remoteness and accessibility during the wet season.*
- *Between communities, communication of wait times varied impacting upon tenants' satisfaction with the process.*

4.3 Housing inspections

As specified in tenancy agreements, tenants must maintain their property to provide a clean, healthy and safe living environment. As part of PTM reforms, housing officers undertake a minimum of four inspections each year to determine whether houses are being looked after and if any immediate or long-term maintenance and repairs need to occur. Housing officers also work with communities, offering support to ensure tenants understand their terms of agreement and are able to maintain successful tenancies.

Throughout the year, additional inspections may occur if a maintenance request is made. Any damage that is determined to be the tenant's responsibility must be repaired within 28 days, at which point a follow up inspection will take place. The housing officer will also conduct 'drive-by' inspections to assess the upkeep of property grounds. Tenants may be required to pay for repair work caused through misuse, and deliberate or intentional damage.

Inspections regarding lease extensions are carried out six weeks prior to the expiry of a fixed-term lease. When moving house, inspections will occur to ensure the property and house are restored to the conditions specified in the tenant's Property Condition Report.

Inspections include assessing the condition and cleanliness of:

- walls and doors;
- cupboards and wardrobes;
- ovens and stoves;
- floors;
- light fittings, power points, switches and controls;
- taps;
- bathrooms, toilets and laundry;
- ceiling and exhaust fans;
- windows; and
- external areas including verandah, paths, lawn and garden, garden sheds, fencing, gates, clothes line.

One of the NPARIH performance indicators relates to the inspection of houses through a standard property inspection regime (ANAO 2012). The final section of this chapter explores tenants experiences of housing inspections.

Survey questions:

Does someone come to inspect/look at your house?

What did they do to your house? For example did they organise for something to be fixed?

Whether tenants had experienced an inspection

Over half of respondents identified that an inspection had been undertaken on their house, or that they had been notified that one was to occur soon. Close to 40 per cent identified that they had not had an inspection undertaken on their house. Reasons for not experiencing an inspection varied. Some respondents had only been in their house for a short period of time, whilst others could not remember ever having had someone come to inspect their house. A few respondents thought that Territory Housing might have come to undertake the inspection whilst they were not at home.

Further, a number of Territory Housing regional staff identified that in some communities, four housing inspections per year could not be completed due to resource constraints (number of staff).

Those tenants who had not experienced an inspection were concentrated in particular communities. They included those communities where housing works had only recently been undertaken. However, this was not universally the case. Some tenants who had been resident in their home for a significant length of time reported that they had not experienced an inspection. Frequency of inspections between communities was varied and is discussed further below.

Tenants' understanding of the inspection process

Respondents who had experienced a housing inspection were also asked to outline what housing inspectors did during their house inspection. The majority of respondents identified that housing inspectors talk to them and write down what needs to be fixed. Other responses are outlined below.

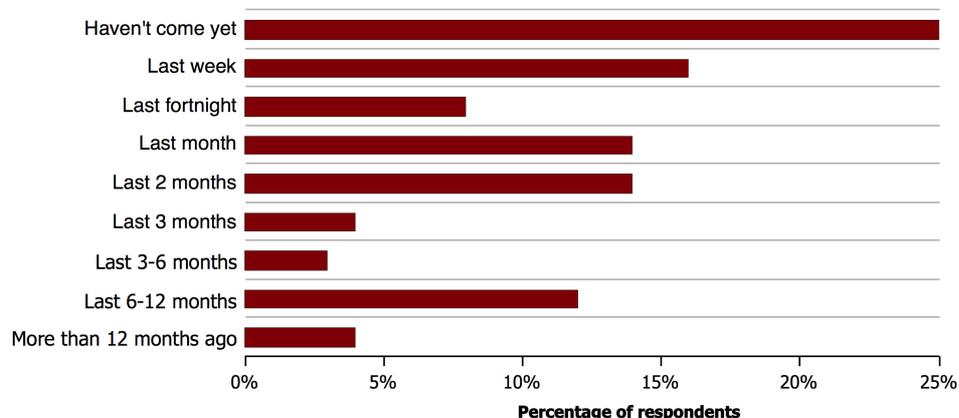
- 5 per cent stated that the inspectors did 'nothing'.
- 7 per cent commented that inspectors 'just look around'.
- 8 per cent were unsure.

Length of time since last inspection

Respondents who had experienced a housing inspection were also asked about the length of time since their last inspection. As shown in Figure 4.5, timeframes varied from not having come yet (25 per cent), occurring in the last year (71 per cent), to occurring more than 12 months ago (4 per cent). The timeframes were, however, usually consistent within each community where it would be expected that housing officers would conduct all inspections in a community in a similar timeframe. However, the analysis shows that the conduct of housing inspections, and the time between inspections, is inconsistent between communities.

Figure 4.5

LAST TIME PERSON CAME TO INSPECT THE HOUSE, N=68



Source: Allen Consulting Group tenant survey data 2012

There is a correlation between tenants' understanding of the inspection process and how frequently inspections are undertaken. Those respondents who had recently experienced an inspection were better able to outline what had taken place. Similarly, respondents who commented that inspections had been regular also had a better understanding of the inspection process.

The difference in frequency and process varied between communities. In one community in particular the process was well known, with almost all tenants articulating the following process:

- two weeks before the inspection the housing people send a letter to tenants notifying them of the upcoming inspection;
- the local Aboriginal representative organisation comes around the community and lends tools and supplies to tenants to clean their house and yard prior to inspection; and
- the inspectors are representatives from housing and when they arrived they complete a housing condition report, including identifying with the tenant what needs to be fixed.

In other communities respondents identified that inspections were infrequent and no notification was given prior to inspections. For example one tenant commented:

‘Someone came in and inspected and didn't ask properly if ok to come in. I was asleep. I told them to get out.’

Finally, it was also reported by some respondents that they were not sure if the inspectors understood what they were saying and were concerned this was impacting on getting things fixed. As one tenant noted:

‘It's a big problem for people who don't know how to speak. It's not just about getting things fixed its about asking to get things fixed, there is no support for this process.’

Key points

- *Over half of tenants reported that they have had a housing inspection.*
- *Inspection frequency and understanding varies significantly between communities.*

Chapter 5

Broader communication and operation of NPARIH and PTM reforms

This chapter explores communication and tenants' understanding of the initial notification of housing works, the role of HRGs and the importance of managing expectations.

Key reform area:

The effectiveness of communication tools and ensuring local input to housing decisions.

Research question:

What is the level of awareness of the PTM reforms in remote communities in terms of rights and obligations and support?

Survey section:

Section 2: Communication. This section of the survey asked tenants about how they found out about the works that were undertaken on their house, and whether tenants were asked about their views on these works.

5.1 Notification of housing works

Communication about a complex program such as the NPARIH PTM reforms is challenging, especially within a context of a wide range of new programs and reforms affecting Indigenous people in the Northern Territory. The delivery of technical and legal information to an audience for whom English can be a second, third or fourth language is particularly difficult, even when interpreters are used. There is a risk in these circumstances that messages will be misunderstood. There is also a risk that messages will be oversimplified. The information provided to residents of remote Indigenous communities about government initiatives forms the basis upon which those residents make decisions that may have far-reaching implications. Testing that messages have not only been delivered, but understood, can assist to reduce misunderstandings, confusion and frustration. In the long-term, there is also a risk that such misunderstandings will have an impact on the level of trust between governments and Indigenous people.

Territory Housing's factsheet on the NPARIH outlines that government would engage with communities about a range of things, including housing design, priorities and options.

Survey question:

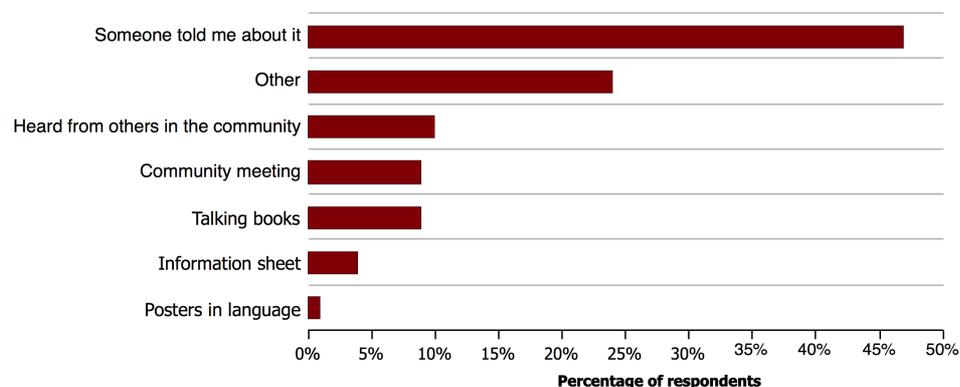
How did you find out about the works that were done on your house?

Section 2 of the survey conducted with tenants explored the communication of the housing reforms to tenants. The results show that just under half (47 per cent) of tenants were told individually about the upcoming housing works and reforms. Of these, almost all tenants reported that a representative from Territory Housing or Territory Alliance notified them.

As Figure 5.1 shows, other reported methods of communication of the works by survey respondents included hearing from others in community (10 per cent) and community meetings (9 per cent). Those tenants who had heard from others in the community commonly noted that they had been away from the community when a formal community meeting had been held. A small number of tenants received a number of different methods of communication — in addition to someone coming and speaking to the tenant they were also given an information sheet and posters were put up around the community.

Figure 5.1

METHOD OF COMMUNICATION OF WORKS TO TENANTS, N=100



Source: Allen Consulting Group analysis of tenant survey data 2012

The second most common answer by tenants was 'other', with 24 per cent of tenants choosing this response. Analysis of the 'other' responses shows that the most common reasons given include:

- no memory of any notification at all;
- a representative from Territory Housing spoke to another family member in the house but not directly to the tenant interviewed; and
- the tenant put in an application for the house and approached the housing representatives themselves.

As this response category suggests, the response to this question needs to be considered in the context of the transient nature of the population in remote communities. It is likely that some tenants may have been out of the community when notification occurred. For example, one tenant noted:

'I moved in after the refurbishments had been completed. I was away when they did them.'

The distribution of responses is similar across the seven communities surveyed. However, in only three communities did tenants respond that a community meeting had been held as a method of communicating the upcoming housing works.

Key points

- *Just under half of tenants interviewed remember being individually notified about the works that were to be done in their community.*
- *A significant number of tenants had no memory of any notification, however, this result may be influenced by the transient nature of remote community population.*
- *A small number of the communities reported that a community meeting had been held as part of notification of the works.*
- *A small number of tenants received more than one method of communication.*

5.2 Preferred methods of communication

Tenants were also asked whether they were satisfied with the way in which they were notified. This question allowed for further investigation into the method of communication and also tenants' understanding of the communication.

Survey question:

Was this a good way of talking to you about the works?

The majority of tenants (over 60 per cent) were not satisfied with the way in which they were notified, however, over a third of tenants indicated they were happy with the process. These tenants were either notified by someone coming and talking to them individually, or through a community meeting.

The tenants were asked to expand on their answer to outline what was their preferred method of communication and if they were dissatisfied, why they were dissatisfied.

Nearly all the tenants surveyed said that their preferred method of communication is when someone comes and talks to them individually, face-to-face. Some tenants suggested that the combination of a community meeting and individual consultation was best. As one tenant described:

'[It is] best to talk the information over so [we] can ask questions. Sit down and go through the information with someone is the best way.'

Only a very small number of tenants indicated that paper information was sufficient.

Tenants were asked if they were able to talk about the changes that they wanted to their house (also see section 5.3). The majority of tenants, including nearly all of those who received refurbishments only to their house (rather than a new or rebuilt house), emphasised that they would have liked more input into the changes.

In reviewing tenants' comments, it is apparent that the main dissatisfaction with the way in which the housing works and reforms were communicated was the perception of a lack of genuine consultation or community input into the works. Most tenants indicated that they were 'told rather than asked'. Examples of tenants' responses include:

'Should be asking people properly. What we want should be coming from the people, not housing.'

'Should have asked me what I wanted. I would have liked some plants for outside, for shade and more cupboards.'

Where tenants had someone come and talk to them individually, a preferred method of communication, many expressed dissatisfaction about the outcomes:

'There was enough information but they didn't do it properly. They did not listen to what we wanted. Things were not properly repaired/fixed.'

This apparent confusion of preferred method of communication, expectations and outcomes is explored further below.

Key points

- *Over 60 per cent of tenants were dissatisfied with the way in which they were notified about the works.*
- *The main reason for tenant dissatisfaction is that they were unable to have input into the changes.*
- *Tenants preferred method of communication is when someone comes and talks to them individually, face-to-face.*

5.3 Managing expectations

In June 2012, the Commonwealth Ombudsman released its report on the *Remote Housing Reforms in the Northern Territory*. The Ombudsman report noted that the complaints received by its Office have highlighted the need for improved communication during the housing reform processes. The reform announcements have often led to heightened expectations about the extent of the work to be carried out in remote communities. The report also notes:

'...the initial SIHIP announcements were made in broad terms and did not make clear how much money would be allocated to each community. Nor did they provide realistic guidance on what the money could achieve. Only after detailed discussions at the community level have residents come to understand that the costs of administration and temporary residential facilities for the SIHIP workers would be drawn from the allocation, or that SIHIP work would include demolishing some existing houses. Even then, some people have remained confused about what can be achieved within each SIHIP allocation and have been disappointed with the quantity and quality of SIHIP work.'

Commonwealth Ombudsman 2012.

Territory Housing's factsheet on the NPARIH outlines that the Government would engage with communities about a range of things, including housing design, priorities and options. The Ombudsman report also notes that although some communities were able to negotiate a reprioritisation of some items, the Office has received complaints in relation to both new and refurbished houses from people concerned that some key work necessary for their house had not been done (Commonwealth Ombudsman 2012).

Survey question:

Were you able to talk about the changes that you wanted to your house?

The importance and impact of managing expectations was prevalent in all communities visited and was a key area of dissatisfaction.

Tenants were specifically asked whether they were able to talk about the changes they wanted to the house. The majority (70 per cent) of tenants reported 'no'.

A small number of tenants did not think they needed to be asked; these respondents were those who were receiving new houses and considered it less of a priority. However, this response was not universal amongst new house recipients.

Of the one quarter of participants who indicated that they had been asked about the changes, a significant proportion reported that their views were not necessarily taken up. For example, one tenant noted:

'If they came and asked me and then followed through with what I asked that would be good.'

The respondents' preferred method of communication is having someone ask them about what they would like to be done to the house. However, respondents also expressed desire for their requests to be followed through or to communicate where requests are not possible.

Tenants' responses illustrate that people expected to be able to influence the scope of construction and refurbishment work to a greater extent than was possible. Further, respondents' report being surprised to learn that the refurbishment work was limited to making houses safe and ensuring that wet areas were functional while other areas of the house remained in disrepair.

A number of service providers consulted also highlighted the negative impact of insufficiently managing community expectations on tenants' perceptions of the quality of work. A few service providers also noted that they did not think the consultation process was conducted properly. For example, one service provider noted:

'We were told that a Liaison Officer was going to come to the community to talk to people about the works. Territory Alliance visited twice more for 'scoping' but there was no Liaison Officer. We didn't see the Liaison Officer for the first time until the works were three quarters done. It was too late then.'

The findings of the Commonwealth Ombudsman report (2012) supported this view.

There are some commonalities in the areas respondents would have liked changed, or of dissatisfaction with new designs.

- Many older houses have had their existing kitchen cupboards replaced with minimal closed cupboard space and open metal shelving. This may make it difficult to keep dangerous items away from children or protect food items from insects and vermin.
- Many houses do not have fencing, moreover this is not part of NPARIH works. No fencing or fencing in a state of disrepair may make it difficult for residents to manage their property and limit the movements of their own and community animals. This may be a particular problem where new tenancy agreements include rules surrounding pets and maintaining the yard.

It was apparent from respondents' feedback that another impact on satisfaction with communication of the work, and particularly of the work actually done, was consistency between communities. All communities visited that had housing refurbishments only were generally more dissatisfied than other communities that had received new houses.

The appliances and design of houses, for both refurbishments and new houses, was also a point of contention. Community residents were commonly aware of the works that had been undertaken in another community.

As discussed previously, the presence or absence of air conditioning was a particular point of discussion. In some communities visited residents had received air conditioners and others were told this was something the tenants would have to purchase themselves. Tenants, particularly those in communities where air conditioners were not supplied, were aware of the inconsistency. This has created some confusion — some tenants are still expecting to receive an air conditioner — but also dissatisfaction with the works that have been done. This level of dissatisfaction was reported to be even influencing renegotiation of the 40 year lease in one community.

Key points

- *Managing expectations remains a critical area for future engagement with community. Tenants surveyed were unhappy with the level of consultation and input into the housing works. The inconsistency in works between communities has created confusion and dissatisfaction.*
- *The majority of tenants surveyed reported that they were unable to have any input into the housing works undertaken. If this level of engagement in the provision of public housing is not realistic, then expectations and any resultant dissatisfaction will need to be managed to ensure a balance between appropriate and sustainable public housing programs.*

5.4 Housing Reference Groups

HRGs are another critical element in government engagement and consultation with Indigenous communities during implementation of the housing reforms. Awareness and operation of HRGs varies greatly between communities and largely depends on the strengths, availability and input of individual members.

HRGs comprise local community residents who are representative of the various cultural and family groups in a community. The HRG Operational Guidelines specify that HRGs provide advice and recommendations to Territory Housing on remote public housing issues. HRGs do not have any decision-making powers. Territory Housing, acting on the HRG's advice, makes decisions relating to the allocation of vacant houses and the priority order of the housing waiting list. Further information about the role and operation of HRGs is outlined in Box 5.1.

Box 5.1

ROLE AND OPERATION OF HOUSING REFERENCE GROUPS IN COMMUNITIES AND TOWN CAMPS**Overview**

As part of the Remote Public Housing Management Framework, the Northern Territory Government Territory Housing is required to establish advisory and reference groups, called HRGs, in remote communities and town camps. The purpose of establishing HRGs is to ensure community and cultural issues, and the needs and requirements of residents are taken into account when making decisions regarding houses.

HRGs provide the Department with a primary engagement point for all public housing related activity in communities and town camps.

Membership

The Department is to work closely with Land Councils, remote communities and town camps to appoint HRG members who:

- ensure broad representation of traditional, family, social or special interest groups in the community or town camp; and
- have a mix of skills, including people with social and cultural responsibilities.

HRGs can consist of no less than four members. HRG membership is voluntary, with initial appointment of members for 12 months.

Role of the HRG

HRGs can:

- facilitate communications and discuss issues related to the permitted use, social and cultural issues, and other issues arising in relation to public housing services in the community;
- provide direct advice and recommendations to the Department on a range of housing issues to inform future program and policy development; and
- be consulted by Alliance Partners for specific engagement activities related to SIHIP.

HRGs cannot, however, make decisions on housing issues — this authority resides with the Department, which will consider recommendations from the HRG prior to making a final decision. The effectiveness and the membership of the HRG can be reviewed as and when required, but no later than every 12 months.

Topics for HRG input

HRG's are consulted on issues specific to their community or town camp. HRG's may also be consulted on broader regional, Territory or national issues related to housing. Below is a non-exclusive list of remote housing issues where the advice and/or recommendations of HRGs may be sought.

- *Community / Town Camp Living Arrangements* — provide advice on traditional family or social group living arrangements that may affect remote public housing related activities.
- *Housing Design* — provide advice to inform future planning, new house design and refurbishments/rebuilds to existing houses in the community/town camp.
- *SIHIP* — provide advice and feedback to SIHIP staff, Alliance Partners or other consultants as required.
- *Housing Applications/Wait Lists* — consider housing applications for their community/town camp and advise if they are supported for inclusion on the housing wait list.
- *Housing Allocations* — when public housing becomes available (i.e. new house built, existing house vacated), HRG's will be consulted and asked to make recommendations on allocation. This will be undertaken in consideration of the community wait list and community, social or cultural considerations that may impact on the success of the tenancy.

- *Tenant Support* — identify locally available service providers to support the Department's tenant support programs. HRG's may also be asked to consider individual cases (e.g. where a tenant is having difficulties in meeting responsibilities under a tenancy agreement) and make recommendations on a community-based solution. These are solutions that could also inform future remote housing operational policy.
- *Overcrowding, Visitors and Antisocial Behaviour* — provide feedback and advice to the Department on strategies to reduce or manage overcrowding; manage visitors; and reduce antisocial behaviour.
- *Employment and Workforce Development* — offer advice to assist the Department to meet Indigenous employment and training objectives during the construction and ongoing management of remote housing.
- *Engagement and Communication* — provide input to assist the Department to develop appropriate strategies that effectively inform and engage with residents on remote public housing related issues.
- *Policy Development* — provide advice and/or recommendations on issues that can affect the development of remote housing policies.
- *Program Management and Delivery* — comment on the effectiveness of the Department's remote housing programs and provide recommendations for improvement or suggestions for change.

Role of the Territory Housing

The role of the Territory Housing in relation to HRGs is to:

- take the lead role in establishing, facilitating and maintaining HRGs;
- provide a Secretariat role for the HRG and cover the establishment and ongoing costs associated with HRG meetings;
- assist HRG members to develop working arrangements for meetings, including Terms of Reference; and
- take into account the views, concerns, recommendations and advice from HRG members on housing and housing related matters.

Regional staff are also to advise HRGs of decisions made by Territory Housing that affects housing in their community/town camp. Where decisions differ from recommendations previously made by the HRG, the regional team is to provide feedback to the HRG on why this occurred.

Territory Housing will develop communication materials/strategies to ensure the community/town camp is informed of the role of the HRG, including the level of decision making authority (i.e. that the HRG is an advisory and reference group only, and is not responsible for making decisions on housing). Territory Housing's regional staff will also inform residents/tenants of Territory Housing decisions that affect them. Regional staff are to ensure that when communicating these decisions, it is made clear that Territory Housing is responsible for final decisions regarding remote housing activities.

Source: Housing Reference Groups: Operational Policy (DHLGRS 2009a); Housing Reference Groups: Operational Guidelines (DHLGRS 2009b).

Survey questions:

Do you know of the HRG in your community?

If yes, what does the HRG do?

If yes, does the HRG ask for your views?

Tenant awareness of HRG existence in community

Tenants were first asked whether they had heard of the HRG in their community. Interviewers also used local terms such as 'the committee' and 'the community housing committee' where it had been indicated that this was the way in which the HRG was known in that community.

In response to this question, there was a fairly even split between those residents who did and did not know of the HRG in their community. Just over half did know of the HRG and the remainder did not.

In two communities the limited awareness of the HRG was particularly pronounced. In one of these communities, the HRG had held less than two meetings in the last 18 months and there are currently three members.

It was common for those who did know of the HRG to have a direct or indirect association with the Group through family members.

Tenant knowledge of HRG purpose

Tenants were then asked to outline what the HRG does. In all communities survey respondents had a very limited understanding of what the HRG does. Common responses included 'not sure really' and 'don't know'.

Of those who did respond, common responses were '.... decision making as to who gets the house...' or '...supposed to ask community about views and help us with housing issues...'.

The operation of HRGs was noted as an area of difficulty by a number of service providers. Local housing representatives noted it had been difficult to maintain membership and get a quorum in meetings. This impacts on tenants' awareness of the group and its operation.

Community input to HRG

The lack of a strong HRG can undermine community confidence in government consultation and the overall transparency of decision making.

Tenants were also questioned as to whether the HRG asked for their views. The majority of respondents (approximately 70 per cent) reported that their views were not sought. HRG members responding to the survey were of the opinion that the HRG did seek the views of tenants.

Tenants responding to the survey made a number of comments about the functioning of the HRG, particularly in relation to what they perceived as decision making about housing allocations.

Residents of remote communities can place their name on a housing waiting list, which is considered by the HRG when a house becomes available for allocation. The HRG, with support from Territory Housing, may use a housing allocation matrix in order to provide recommendations on housing allocation (DHLGRS 2009b). This matrix is based on priority needs criteria used in the allocation of housing, including:

- homelessness;
- overcrowding;
- frail aged and people with a disability and their carers;
- domestic and family violence;
- local employment; and
- other criteria identified through the HRG which Territory Housing can include when assessing applications (DHLGRS 2010).

When a house becomes available, the family group that has scored the highest points is given priority and allocated the house, provided it is suitable for that family group.

Many tenants raised issue with the process of allocation of housing; in particular, there was discussion about preferential treatment of some members of the community and disregard for the proper rules of the waiting list. However, it was also clear that some respondents did not have full knowledge of the prioritisation process and this may be an area requiring greater education. Comments made by tenants included:

‘They just argue in meetings. The HRG does not work at all. There has not been a fair delegation of the housing.’

‘People on the committee are weak, need strong people. The committee is supposed to be helping out in the community.’

‘I am a member. Don't like how it works at the moment. Other members and some housing people change the rules. People who have been putting in applications have not been getting houses, this is making them upset — why do they have to fill in a form if nothing happens? Other members favour their own family.’

‘People are on it for themselves. Participants are only there to help themselves not the community. If you do not have a family member on the group you get nothing. That is why I left the group.’

A number of respondents were of the view that the HRG communication, such as regarding housing outcomes and seeking peoples' views, was effective for members' families and friends, but not for the wider community. Respondents also highlighted that it was important to ensure that members of the HRG were actually living in the community, and not elsewhere.

Some respondents indicated they were looking to become members of the HRG so they could better ensure they had input into the decision making process.

The issue with HRG functionality and operation was common across communities, but particularly pronounced in communities where many clan groups live. Concern about the representativeness of the HRG was also commonly raised in these communities. There were exceptions, however, such as the following comment from one respondent:

‘They hold a community meeting to let everyone know what's happening. HRG represents seven clans in the community. Each take information back to own clan. Let people who really need it get houses first — sick, old, big families’.

Respondents also maintained that it was important to have a mechanism such as an HRG to ensure some community input into the process.

The need to build capacity of HRGs through ongoing support, coaching and training has been recognised in the HRG Operational Guidelines, which require the production and implementation of a training and development plan for each HRG. By building the capacity of members, agencies can strengthen the performance of HRGs.

Key points

- *HRGs are a critical element in government engagement and consultation with Indigenous communities during implementation of the housing reforms. HRGs need ongoing support, coaching and training to strengthen their performance.*
- *Awareness and operation of HRGs varies greatly between communities and largely depends on the strengths, availability and input of individual members.*
- *There was limited understanding among survey respondents of the role of the HRG.*
- *Transparency of HRG decision-making was a reported concern for a number of respondents.*

Chapter 6

Perceived broader impacts of the reforms

This chapter discusses the broader impacts of changes to housing and the impact of the reforms — such as their impact on health and wellbeing, employment and education — as perceived by tenants and community service providers.

Key reform area:

Ensuring houses are well maintained, providing a safe and healthy living environment and improving the lifecycle of housing.

Research question:

What are the perceived broader impacts of the reforms on remote Indigenous health, education, employment and general wellbeing?

Survey section:

Section 5: Outcomes. This last section of the survey asked tenants about whether improvements to their house have helped them and their family with aspects of their life. For example, making it easier for their children to go to school or making it easier for them to get a job.

6.1 Overarching impacts

The literature presented in Chapter 1 discusses the impact that well maintained, quality housing can have on people's overall wellbeing, employment prospects, health and school attendance.

Survey question:

What is it like living in your house now? Is it better than before? What are some of the things that are better?

In interviewing tenants about their experiences with PTM reforms, tenants were asked about what it was like living in their house now and whether it is better than before. Tenants identified a number of changes that had impacted positively on their wellbeing, particularly for those tenants who received a new or rebuilt house.

Noticeably, the positive impacts on wellbeing, family health, employment and school attendance described by tenants centred around reduced numbers of people living in their house and an improved ability to keep their house clean and tidy. These impacts are discussed in further detail below.

Differences between new and rebuilt houses and refurbishments

Most respondents (close to 70 per cent) reported that they were happier living in their house than before. Generally, this applied to respondents in new or rebuilt houses. In contrast, many of those tenants who received refurbishments did not identify a significant change in their wellbeing or happiness. Some identified that their house was not better than before and that not much had changed.

Commonly, respondents indicated that this was because there was no change to the total number of people living in their overcrowded house. Tenants commented that larger numbers of people in their house meant that new kitchens and bathrooms were immediately put under pressure due to high usage, and that repairs were more often needed.

In communities that received refurbishments only (no new or rebuilt houses), differences in the broader impacts of housing works and PTM reforms were observed. Tenants interviewed in these communities indicated that they were frustrated by a lack of new houses. Service providers highlighted that tenants did not understand why they were expected to pay rent for refurbished houses when there were still so many people living in each house.

Comments from tenants who received refurbished houses about the impact of the changes on their lives included:

“Not much different. I like my room better than before, but some things are unfinished. Got new benches, tiles and bathroom. That is good”.

“The house is unsafe. They didn’t do the work properly. There are issues with the plumbing; the water is getting into the electrics. They pulled up the floor tiles and now the floor is harder to clean. I get allergies from the dust on the floor. I’m going to buy floor tiles myself to put back on the floor”.

“Yes, I like it better than before. The kitchen and the tiles were fixed and we got new cupboards. We got rails in the shower and toilet for a disabled family member”.

“It is better than before. The kitchen is nice — the bench cupboards, floor and bathroom. I am happy with the work they did but there are no cupboards in the kitchen. This is bad for the kids.”

Tenants who received new or rebuilt houses described some of the impacts of improved housing:

“It has made my life better. I don’t get woken up by rats anymore and there is no more blocked toilets, and I now have separate shower and toilet”.

“Yes better now. Some changes did happen and it helped me. I have to look after my own family better in the new house. There are less people and less work to do. I don’t have to spend as much money on shopping and can buy other things as well”.

“Yes it is good living in a house. There is no problem now if it’s raining. The kids love the house as well. The soil is good so we can plant things”.

Reduced number of people living in houses

Those tenants who received new or rebuilt houses commented frequently on the benefits of having a reduced number of people living in their house. In some communities, these benefits also flowed to people who received refurbishments where some of the people in their house previously, had been allocated a new house.

Comments from tenants regarding the impact of a reduced number of people in their house included:

"Better in terms of the number of people in the house, we used to have 20, now we have 14. We got a new sink, cabinet, separate toilet and shower"

"...because we were crowded before. Where we were before there were too many arguments and too many drunks".

"...because we were too crowded before at my brother's house. Plus we don't have my mother and father with us anymore. It's better when I have my own house for my family".

"...living on our own makes it easier to have enough food. When I lived at my mums it was hard to share food for the whole family. It's hard to make food for so many people".

"Everything is better in this new house. People don't hassle to come and stay because they have their own place".

As identified above, tenants who received a refurbished house identified that no change in the number of people living in the house was one of the reasons that refurbishments to their house had not made a difference to their lives.

Reduced overcrowding was a key factor in many of the improvements described by tenants in relation to their family's health, making it easier to work or look for work and school attendance for their children, discussed in further detail below.

Keeping houses clean and tidy

About one third of respondents identified that their house was better than before works were undertaken because it was now easier to keep it clean and tidy. Tenants were also conscious of the importance of keeping their houses clean and tidy and the potential impacts on their health. Tenants described that:

"Cleaning and washing is much easier and the yard is cleaner".

It is better because "it is easier to clean, especially the bathroom".

"I like cleaning. The kitchen is good".

"Need to keep the house clean for my grandson and baby".

"The house has made it easier for my family to be clean".

"Our family does not get sick as often anymore. The place is easier to keep clean and we can get more sleep".

Similar to having a reduced number of people living in the house, the ease of being able to keep houses clean and tidy was another key factor in many of the improvements, such as the health of families, described by respondents, which are also discussed in further detail below.

Increased pride

In communities that had received new and rebuilt houses, both tenants and service providers commented on the pride of tenants in having a new home and yard for their family. One tenant commented:

"People are more house proud now. They want to have nice yards now they have grass and are trying to get flowers in. It's cooler. I am just really happy to have this new home"

One school staff member also described a noticeable change in the pride of students regarding their new houses, with students commenting on how great it was having a yard that they could play in.

The health centre in another community had encouraged the local store to stock flowers and plants for members of the community to buy for their gardens. Anecdotally, this had encouraged a number of people within the community to take up gardening.

Having a fence around their house and yard was important for many people across a number of communities. Some tenants identified that this was for safety and security reasons, whilst others described having an outdoor space for the first time that was truly their own. Members of one HRG identified that without fences, people walk through other people's yards and that people need to know the boundary of their land. Members identified that fences helped to 'beautify' the community and increase tenants' pride in their yard and family. Where fences had not been built or completed, this was a priority for many communities through their local shire.

Improved safety

A small number of respondents, predominantly women, identified that they felt much safer living in their new house. Tenants described:

"It is better in the new house. I have space for myself and can stay at home and feel safe".

"Feels like this new house is more secure, used to be too many people".

Service providers supporting outcomes

Through interviews with service providers in each community, it was noted that for those communities who had strong, active service providers who collaborated well, additional programs were present that were influencing how tenants live in their house, and in particular the health of their family. Such events and programs included:

- a healthy lifestyle week involving the whole community;
- a healthy babies program focused on healthy eating and hygiene;
- a backyard blitz garden competition with whitegoods as prizes; and
- community gardens.

Some service providers also influenced other providers in the community. For example, one health centre requested that the local store stock specific types of foods to align with their healthy eating program for young mothers.

There is perhaps greater potential to leverage off programs currently being run in the community to further support tenants in living in and maintaining their houses.

Key points:

- *Approximately three quarters of respondents thought that their house was better to live in than before.*
- *There are significant differences in general wellbeing and other outcomes for those who received refurbished houses compared to those who received new or rebuilt houses. Tenants of refurbished houses and service providers identified that this is primarily due to no change in overcrowding, as refurbishments did not allow for additional bedrooms.*
- *In communities where there was an active network of service providers, an increased positive impact of housing changes on outcomes was observed.*

6.2 Health outcomes*Survey question:**Has living in this house helped your family to be healthy?*

Of those tenants interviewed, almost two thirds identified that living in their new, rebuilt or refurbished house had helped their family to be healthier, although most tenants who identified this improvement were living in a new house.

Tenants' comments about the health of their families included:

"When there are no visitors staying you can get good sleep".

"There is more space even though it is still overcrowded. More space in bedrooms. We work hard to keep it clean. The cleaning job is smaller in this house. The house has tiles so we can mop".

"The old house was bad for kids health. It was all rusty. My grandson was getting it in his body. But now new and brick I can keep it clean. It's unusual to have a bad sore, only if you fall over....much less sickness. It's less stressful to live in. In the old house the sink was falling off. Everything was falling down. It's really good now".

"Yes we are more healthy. Before all crowded. It's much better than before when we living at my niece's house. So many dogs used to come in the house. Now just two outside. We are definitely less sick".

"...has helped me to get healthy food for my kids. Now I help other young mothers about healthy food for their kids".

Some respondents also highlighted that they were less stressed than they used to be because there were less people living in their house.

A number of tenants commented on the need for air conditioners in their houses and how this affects the health of their family. This was predominantly in relation to their family being able to get a good night's sleep.

Health centre staff in some communities, but not all, identified that sores, scabies and gastro problems were still an issue for many in the community, and that to date, improvements to housing had not had a significant impact on these health issues. There was a correlation observed between those communities who only received refurbishments and health problems, such as scabies. Health centre staff in most communities highlighted a crucial need for life skills training to support tenants in living in their house and caring for their family.

Service providers generally identified that people who have a new house feel better about themselves. A story was told about a woman who recently stood up at a community gathering and gave a testimonial that her husband who suffered from severe chronic depression had improved since they had their new house and he was able to work in the garden. However, health staff indicated that it was still too early to tell what impact new housing might have on health outcomes in the longer term. This observation reinforces the long term view of reform implementation to realise the full potential of improved housing on tenant outcomes.

Key points

- *Respondents were most easily able to identify improvements to their family's health and their general happiness in relation to housing.*
- *The majority of reported improvements in health were due to a reduced number of people living in their house and being able to keep the house clean and tidy.*

6.3 Employment outcomes

Survey question:

Since living in this house, has it made it easier to have a job or to look for work?

Approximately two thirds of respondents identified that living in their house (new, refurbished or rebuilt) had made it easier for them to have a job or to look for work.

Similar to improvements in family health, some of the common reasons tenants highlighted that made it easier for them to have a job or look for work included:

- a reduced number of people in the house leading to a better night's sleep; and
- the house being easier to clean, making it easier to manage whilst working.

Some tenants described that it was easier to work or look for a job because:

“Nicer house to come home to at the end of the day”

“Peace and quiet. Unlike where my family lives and where we were before”.

“As soon as I moved in I started to look for a job. Moving into this house made me want to get a job. Too boring cleaning and washing the house all day. I work at the playgroup. We are waiting for proper playgroup to be set up, but we are running activities in the mean time.”

“Since I had a baby I can only work part time. Its easier for my partner as he gets more sleep”

Some tenants reported that they were establishing businesses of their own within their communities. One tenant loved gardening and was trying to set up a nursery at her new home to provide plants to other new houses. Another couple were starting up their own tourism business in the local area. These respondents identified that living in a new house had made it easier or motivated them to start working.

A number of respondents talked about the distance of their home from work in relation to whether living in their house had made it easier to have a job. Many indicated that their new house was closer to work.

Some respondents, who identified that living in their house had made it easier to have or look for a job, had trouble identifying why this was easier.

Key points:

- *Having a nicer place to live, getting a better night's sleep and being able to easily clean and tidy the home, were key factors in enabling tenants to work or look for work.*

6.4 School attendance outcomes

Survey question:

Has living in this house helped your family to be healthy?

Tenants were asked whether living in their new, rebuilt or refurbished house had made it easier for their children to go to school. Of all tenants interviewed, around 40 per cent identified that living in the house had made it easier for their kids to go to school.

The primary reasons tenants identified as making it easier for their children to go to school are summarised below. Not all of these reasons related to housing.

- Less kids in the house, meaning that kids are less likely to be persuaded by other kids not to go to school.
- The house is closer to the school than before.
- Kids are able to get a better night's sleep.
- The school bus makes it easier for the kids to get to school.

Many tenants described how the school bus comes to collect their children each morning for school, making it easier for them to go to school. In some cases respondents identified that their new house was further from the school which they thought impacted negatively on their child's school attendance, particularly where there was no school bus. In these instances, schools also identified what they thought to be a negative impact on attendance due to new subdivisions being built a long way from the school. Some schools had implemented strategies to combat this, including driving around to pick up individual children when they are identified as absent.

Other comments from tenants regarding school attendance included:

“Kids sleep better so easier for them to go to school”.

“My kids have got their own rooms so they sleep well and aren’t disturbed. The kids catch the bus to school...”.

“Yes the new house is much closer to the school. The kids feel proud they have a new house to talk about at school with their friends. The new houses are the talk of the town”.

“My sister’s children come here after school to watch movies and get away from the drinking”

Some respondents considered there had been no change as their children have always attended school each day:

“The kids have to go to school whether houses fixed or not”.

“My kids are always good at getting to school and getting good grades”

“There is no problem in getting the kids to go to school, neither was there a problem before”.

Some of the respondents who did not identify that living in their house had impacted on their children’s school attendance commented that:

“There is no difference. Play games all night. I have to wake them up in the morning”.

“No not really. It’s hard to get them up for school”

One tenant commented that it was easier to get her children to school now that there were not as many people in her house because her children were able to access the bathroom and have a proper shower in the morning before school.

Two tenants identified that in the past when their house has been overcrowded other, older, children negatively influenced their children:

“Other children can be a bad influence on my kids and make them not go to school”.

School staff in one community identified that some children within the community did not have a ‘nuclear family’ that they lived with — instead moving between different houses in the community. These houses may already be overcrowded. This often meant that their school attendance was poor as they were unable to get a good night’s sleep.

Key points:

- *The number of people living in the house and how close the house was to school are key factors identified by respondents as influencing their child’s school attendance.*
- *Other attendance strategies, such as providing a school bus and absentee follow up, are particularly important in ensuring school attendance in some communities.*

Chapter 7

Findings and conclusions

This chapter summarises the findings and conclusions of the research.

7.1 Findings against key elements of PTM reforms

The findings of surveys conducted with tenants and interviews conducted with government stakeholders and service providers are considered within the context of key elements of PTM reforms. The elements include:

- the involvement of community people so decisions are appropriate for each community and their social, economic and cultural needs;
- an improved process for repairs and maintenance keeping houses safe, secure and extending their life expectancy;
- formalised tenancy agreement so both landlord and tenant understand their rights and responsibilities;
- allocation of housing based on need and determined collaboratively by communities and government;
- a fair rent system for tenants;
- support services for tenants on how to maintain successful tenancies; and
- sustainable local employment and training opportunities (DHLGRS 2012).

Findings are detailed against each of the elements in the sections below, excluding sustainable local employment and training opportunities, which were not part of the research.

The involvement of community people so decisions are appropriate for each community and their social, economic and cultural needs

As reported in Chapter 5, there was a clear need for decisions related to housing to be better communicated to both individual tenants and the broader community. Understanding of processes and the reasons behind decisions influenced tenant and community expectations in relation to housing.

Respondents identified that the best form of communication with them regarding housing issues was providing information face-to-face. Service providers and other members of the community highlighted the importance of providing repeated and consistent information to people in the community regarding housing decisions and processes.

An improved process for repairs and maintenance keeping houses safe, secure and extending their life expectancy

The survey of tenants identified that, for those tenants interviewed, repairs and maintenance were generally completed within the response timeframes defined by Territory Housing. However, tenants did not necessarily understand the categories of repairs and maintenance work (detailed in Chapter 4) nor were they aware of the timeframes defined by Territory Housing.

Over 80 per cent of respondents had made a complaint about something not being fixed. Further, there was not a clear sense from respondents that there was a systematic link between the cycle of inspections and follow up on repairs and maintenance.

Service providers within the communities highlighted that capacity and workforce availability (particularly for licensed trades such as plumbing and electrical) impacted the more remote communities in relation to timely repairs and maintenance.

There is a need for more consistent information and processes to be put in place regarding repairs and maintenance, and to continue to educate tenants about these processes. Communication of processes may also assist in managing tenants' expectations regarding repairs and maintenance. Of particular importance in this process is feedback provided to tenants regarding reasons for delays in repairs/maintenance being undertaken. Communication about wait times has potential to help manage tenant expectations.

Formalised tenancy agreement so both landlord and tenant understand their rights and responsibilities

Tenancy agreements have created an awareness and framework for the communication and understanding of rights and responsibilities in relation to housing. However, feedback from tenants surveyed suggests that entering into an agreement does not necessarily equate to understanding the agreement or having the skills to meet obligations under the agreement.

A more considered preparatory process for entering into the agreement and follow up could better underpin the agreement and segue into take up of support programs, to enable better understanding of rights and compliance with responsibilities.

Allocation of housing based on need and determined collaboratively by communities and government

As described in Chapter 5, HRGs are a critical element in government engagement and consultation with Indigenous communities during implementation of housing reforms. HRGs need ongoing support, coaching and training to strengthen their performance — governance training being delivered to members in some communities is supporting HRGs.

The survey found that awareness and operation of HRGs varies greatly between communities and largely depends on the strengths, availability and input of individual community members.

Concerns were raised among survey respondents about decisions made by HRGs in relation to the allocation of houses. Concerns included: whether the HRG member lives in the community; transparency of needs assessment; and possible mixed messages in denying applications from young families who are working and supporting their children to attend school.

Whilst those tenants who are aware of the HRG and their role perceive the HRG as important in relation to the allocation of houses, additional transparency of HRG decision making may benefit the broader community.

A fair rent system for tenants

Tenants identified that between one and six people contributed to paying rent. In over one third of households, two people contribute to paying rent, followed by three people paying rent in just under a quarter of households. In approximately 14 per cent of households, tenants identified that only one person contributed to rental payments.

There is a direct relationship between the respondents' awareness of the rent they pay and how it is calculated. A high proportion of tenants identified that they did not know how much rent they paid and would like more information about this.

Feedback from respondents and service providers suggests that some tenants considered their payments too high in some instances. For example, because they benefited less from the works (e.g. refurbishments in comparison to new houses), they were elderly or compared to rent paid by other tenants in the household.

The overwhelming majority of rental payments were automatically deducted from either tenants' payroll or their Centrelink benefit. Feedback from the survey indicates that problems only arose where the tenant stopped the payments, or a tenant's circumstances changed, such as incarceration, and the deductions continued.

The majority of respondents reported having no difficulty in paying rent, however this may be more of a reflection on the process of payment (automatic deduction) rather than budgeting for rent.

Support services for tenants on how to maintain successful tenancies

Approximately one third of respondents indicated that information, in addition to the tenancy agreement, had been provided to them to explain their responsibilities as a tenant. Tenants mostly indicated that this was in the form of a booklet. A small number of tenants identified that someone from Territory Housing had come to speak with them to provide them with more information.

An overwhelming number of service providers, and some tenants themselves, emphasised the need for life skills training in communities and the need for repetition of information on tenants' rights and responsibilities to facilitate change in behaviour.

Support services for tenants are identified as a key area in which PTM reforms still need to be implemented. As outlined by the literature in Chapter 2, tenant support programs are a critical element in ensuring the sustainability of housing infrastructure, along with achieving key outcomes including:

- reduction in rent arrears and tenant liabilities;
- improvement in property conditions and reduction in charges relating to property damage;
- fewer reports of disruptive behaviour;
- increased linkage to services and improved access to counselling services, referrals to mental health and drug and alcohol services and financial counsellors;
- capacity building among clients; and
- increased self-esteem, confidence and trust resulting in a greater capacity of tenants to engage with local community support services and participate in community activities (AHURI 2009).

7.2 Findings of the broader impact of reforms

As discussed in Chapter 6, respondents and service providers identified a number of broader impacts from housing works and PTM reforms undertaken in communities. These impacts are consistent with the literature presented in Chapter 2 and are summarised as follows.

- Most tenants' identified that their house is better than before, primarily due to having less people living in the house and the house being easier to keep clean and tidy.
- The impact on wellbeing was greater for those who received new/rebuilt housing, than for those who received refurbishments. Tenants who received refurbished housing considered this was because there had been no change to the number of people in their household and the crowded arrangements.
- Interagency collaboration influenced the level of impact of reforms, including gardening, cooking, caring for babies and learning environments for children.

- Tenants identified improvements to their health and wellbeing due to improvements to housing. This was because tenants were happier in their new house, got more sleep and had more control of the state of their house.
- Some tenants identified that going to work or looking for work was easier due to being able to sleep better at night time and their house being easier to manage, keep clean and tidy.
- Improved housing was also conducive to improved school attendance due to reduced peer pressure (because of less people and other children living in the house), being able to get a better night's sleep and being located closer to the school.

7.3 Conclusions

PTM reforms and wider changes to the remote rental framework in the Northern Territory provide tenants with significant information and support in developing an understanding of their rights and responsibilities under new tenancy agreements. As described, these supports include the ITS program provided upon signing the tenancy agreement, information posters and booklets, local housing staff, and quarterly housing inspections.

Whilst tenants surveyed for this project have a relatively good understanding of their responsibilities in a number of tenancy areas, such as keeping their house clean and tidy and the requirement to pay rent, there are still areas of uncertainty for tenants, which could benefit from attention.

Key areas for additional focus and support identified by tenants and other stakeholders include the following.

- **Ongoing support:** There is evidence that where ongoing support and information is provided to tenants over the longer term, tenants have a greater ability to both understand and meet their rights and responsibilities. For example, this was evident in one community who had clear knowledge of how much rent each person in their household paid due to ongoing and consistent information provided by local housing officers. In this same community, tenants also had clearer expectations regarding housing inspections.
- **Life skills:** In addition to the ITS program, the provision of follow up life skills training to tenants is considered critical by Territory Housing staff and community service providers. Consideration could be given to the development of partnerships with existing community service providers to provide this support and build on programs already established in the community (for example Mums and Bubs nutrition programs).
- **Community engagement:** Managing expectations remains a critical area for future engagement with communities. Respondents identified that they were unhappy with the level of consultation and input into the housing works and associated PTM reforms.

- **HRG:** Respondents identified the importance of the HRG in representing the views of the community, particularly in communities where the HRG was working effectively. There is potential, however, to strengthen the role of the HRG in each community, including its governance and the transparency of decision making.
- **Repairs, maintenance and inspections:** Whilst tenants were aware of processes for repairs and maintenance and the occurrence of housing inspections, there was not a clear sense from respondents that there was a systematic link between the cycle of inspections and repairs and maintenance. A more integrated process may be considered whereby regular and ongoing housing inspections support tenants to meet their responsibilities, and identify or follow up on repair and maintenance issues early before they become problematic.
- **Visitor management:** Tenants understood rules regarding visitor management, however there were tensions raised by many regarding how these rules aligned with cultural practices. Some tenants were happy to tell visitors they could only stay a short time, whilst others were happy to let visitors stay for ceremony. However, some tenants described that it was not appropriate for them to ask visitors not to stay, nor did they want to. It is important to consider these perspectives in relation to visitor management. There may be opportunities for local housing staff to work more closely with communities, HRGs and individual tenants to continue to improve visitor management with a culturally appropriate framework.

Most tenants surveyed highlighted the positive changes that improved housing had made to their lives, particularly in relation to the overall health and wellbeing of tenants and their families. In order to ensure sustainable change and improved outcomes for communities, there are a number of areas outlined in this report that present potential opportunities for further developing program response and tenant capacity.

Appendix A

Survey interview questionnaire

A.1 Final questionnaire

Tenants' experiences of Property and Tenancy Management Reforms in the Northern Territory: tenant interview

Instructions for interviewers:

Before beginning the interview, explain the project information sheet to the potential interviewee. If they are happy to participate, read out and explain the consent form, and ask them to sign it. These interview questions are for households who have a tenancy agreement in place. To ensure that tenants have a tenancy agreement, show them a sample copy of a tenancy agreement.

Interviews should take no longer than 45 minutes. Once the interview has been completed, talk through the answers with the interviewee and show them what you have written down.

Introduction for tenants: (interviewer script)

Hello, my name is [name of interviewer]. I am from the Allen Consulting Group/Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation.

We are visiting you today because the government wants us to ask you about your experiences of changes and improvements to housing in your community, and what information was provided to you about living in your house.

The things you tell us will be used to help improve housing policy and help the government to work better with communities. What you tell us will be used to write our report. Your name will be kept secret and you will not be identified in the report. If you are not happy with something that is said during the survey, you can come and speak with one of us at a later time whilst we are visiting your community.

It will take about 30 minutes to ask you all the questions and there are five groups of questions. Are you happy to sit and talk with us and answer these questions?

<p>Office use only For completion by the interviewer: (to be completed before interview)</p> <p>Survey form number (Community code and Lot no. e.g. M65) _____</p> <p>Type of work undertaken:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Refurbished house</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Rebuilt house</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> New house</p> <p>Timeframe of housing works (Financial year completed): _____</p>	<p>Date Tenancy Agreement signed (m/yr): _____</p> <p>Date of interview (d/m/yr): _____</p> <p>Time of interview: _____</p> <p>Name of interviewer(s): _____</p> <p>Respondent(s):</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Individual respondent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Multiple respondents</p> <p>Total number of respondents: _____</p> <p>Number of female respondents: _____</p> <p>Number of male respondents: _____</p>
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Section 1: Introductory questions

The first group of questions asks you about your house and the family and people that live with you.

Q1

How long have you been in your house (approximately)?

- less than 6 months (since Christmas)
- less than 1 year (since dry season last year)
- 1-2 years
- 3+ years

Q2

How many bedrooms are there in your house?

Number:

Tenant comment:

Q3

How many people currently live in your house?

Interviewer note: Show picture of three different house lay outs, ask interviewees to identify which lay out is most like their house. Then ask interviewees to identify people who sleep in each room of the house. Record numbers of people below. Note that children are defined as under 16 years of age.

Adults _____
Male _____
Female _____
Children _____
Visitors _____
Total _____

Tenant comment:

Section 2: Communication

The second group of questions asks about how you found out about the works that were undertaken on your house, and whether you were asked about your views on these works.

Q4 – Works undertaken on the house

How did you find out about the works that were done on your house?

Interviewer note: How were they told about the works that were done? Did they receive enough information? Who came and spoke to the tenant?

- Someone came and talked to me about it
- Information sheet
- Talking books
- Community meeting(s)
- Heard from others in the community
- Posters in language around the community
- Other (please detail below)

Tenant response:

Q4a

Were you able to talk about the changes that you wanted to your house?

Tenant response:

Q4b

Was this a good way of talking to you about the works?

Tenant response:

Q5 – Signing the Tenancy Agreement

When the works were finished, what were you told about the new tenancy agreement you needed to sign?

Tenant description:

Q6

Was there anything that was hard to understand from this information?

Interviewer note: How well did the tenant understand this information? Were the implications of the new tenancy agreement clear to the tenant?

Tenant response:

Q7 – Support provided to live in your house

After you signed the Tenancy Agreement, what information were you given about living in your house? For example, how to clean your house, where to put rubbish or looking after your yard.

Tenant response:

Q8

Do you know of the Housing Reference Group in your community?

Interviewer note: Refer to earlier interview with Housing Reference Group in community for the way in which community usually identify the Housing Reference Group.

- Yes (go to Q8a, Q8b)
- No (go to Q9)

Q8a

If yes, what does the Housing Reference Group do?

Interviewer note: What is the role of the Housing Reference Group in the community?

Tenant description:

Q8b

If yes, does the Housing Reference Group ask for your views?

Interviewer note: Does the tenant feel that the Housing Reference Group is representative of their views? Please add comment if required.

- Yes
- No

Tenant response:

Section 3: Understanding of tenancy

The third set of questions asks you about your responsibilities as a tenant.

Q9

How many people in your house help pay rent? How do you pay your rent?

Interviewer note: Please indicate number of people if possible. Some tenants may have their rent deducted automatically from their Centrelink payments or payroll.

Number of people:

Tenant description:

Q10

Do you always have enough money to pay rent?

Interviewer note: What other things impact on the tenant's ability to pay rent?

Tenant response:

Q11

If you did have trouble paying your rent, who would you talk to?

Tenant description:

Q12

Would you like extra information about the rent you pay?

Interviewer note: What sort of additional information would the tenant(s) like?

Tenant response:

Q13

As a tenant, do you:

Interviewer note: Explain that you are going to ask some questions about what the participant does as a tenant, in relation to their responsibilities.

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Let someone know if you are going away? | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Keep your house tidy? | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Keep your yard tidy? | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Ask for repairs and maintenance? | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

Q13a

Are any of these (tasks listed above) hard for you to do?

Tenant response:

Q13b

Are you better able to manage visitors since being in your new/improved house?

Interviewer note: Is visitor management an issue? Have tenants received help in managing visitors? Does the Tenancy Agreement help them manage visitors?

Tenant description:

Section 4: Tenancy support, house inspections and maintenance

This section asks you about housing inspections, how you look after your house and whether you have had any help.

Q14

When something needs fixing in your house, who do you tell or where do you go to ask?

Tenant response:

Q14a

Once you told them something was broken, did they come and fix it?

Interviewer note: 'Them' —person contacted from Q14 above)

Tenant response:

(If someone came to fix the issue, go to Q14b)

Q14b

How long did it take for them to come and fix it?

Interviewer note: Qualitative response. Please indicate the number of days/weeks/months where possible.

Days: _____

Weeks: _____

Months: _____

Tenant description:

Q15

Does someone come to inspect/look at your house?

Interviewer note: Who comes to inspect the tenant's house? In some cases this will be the housing officer.

Northern Territory Government housing officers either live in the community or visit the community on a regular basis. Housing officers may be an employee of the Shire. They may also be known as housing or asset manager.

Tenant response: (If yes, go to Q15a)

Q15a

When was the last time they came to look at your house?

Interviewer note: Prompt time periods — since Christmas, since the dry season last year etc.

Tenant comment:

Q15b

What did they do to your house? For example, did they organise for something to be fixed?

Tenant description:

Q16

Have you ever made a complaint about things not being fixed in your house?

Yes (go to Q16a)

No (go to Q16b)

Q16a

If yes, who did you complain to?

Interviewer note: Qualitative response. Did the tenant make a complaint through 'official channels' (one of those listed below), or informally to someone in the community? Sometimes tenants may let any 'white fella' know in the community, however this person may not be a housing officer, in which case nothing will happen.

- Housing officer
- Shire officer
- 1800 government phone number (Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services)
- A legal advocate visiting the community
- The Ombudsman
- Other (please describe)

Tenant description (if required):

Q16b

If no, do you know how to make a complaint about things not being fixed in your house?

Interviewer note: Qualitative response. How would the tenant go about making a complaint? Does the tenant know how to make a complaint through 'official' channels? Official channels include, through the housing officer, shire officer, 1800 government phone number, a legal advocate visiting the community, or the Ombudsman.

Tenant description:

Section 5: Outcomes

During this survey we have talked about: your house and the family and people that live with you; how you found about the works done on your house; your responsibilities as a tenant; and house inspections and maintenance.

This last set of questions asks you about whether improvements to your house have helped you and your family with things in your life. For example, making it easier for your children to go to school or making it easier for you to get a job.

Q17

What is it like living in your house now? Is it better than before? What are some of the things that are better?

Tenant description:

Q18

Since living in this house has it made it easier to have a job or to look for work?

Interviewer note: If yes, was sort of job does the tenant have? How has living in their house made it easier to have a job or look for work?

- Yes
- No

Tenant response:

Q19

Has living in this house helped your family to be healthy?

Interviewer note: For example, get sick less, stay warmer in winter, sleep better at night time.

Tenant response:

Q20

Has living in this house made it easier for your kids to go to school?

Tenant response:

Q21

Do you have any other comments about your house or housing in your community?

Tenant response:

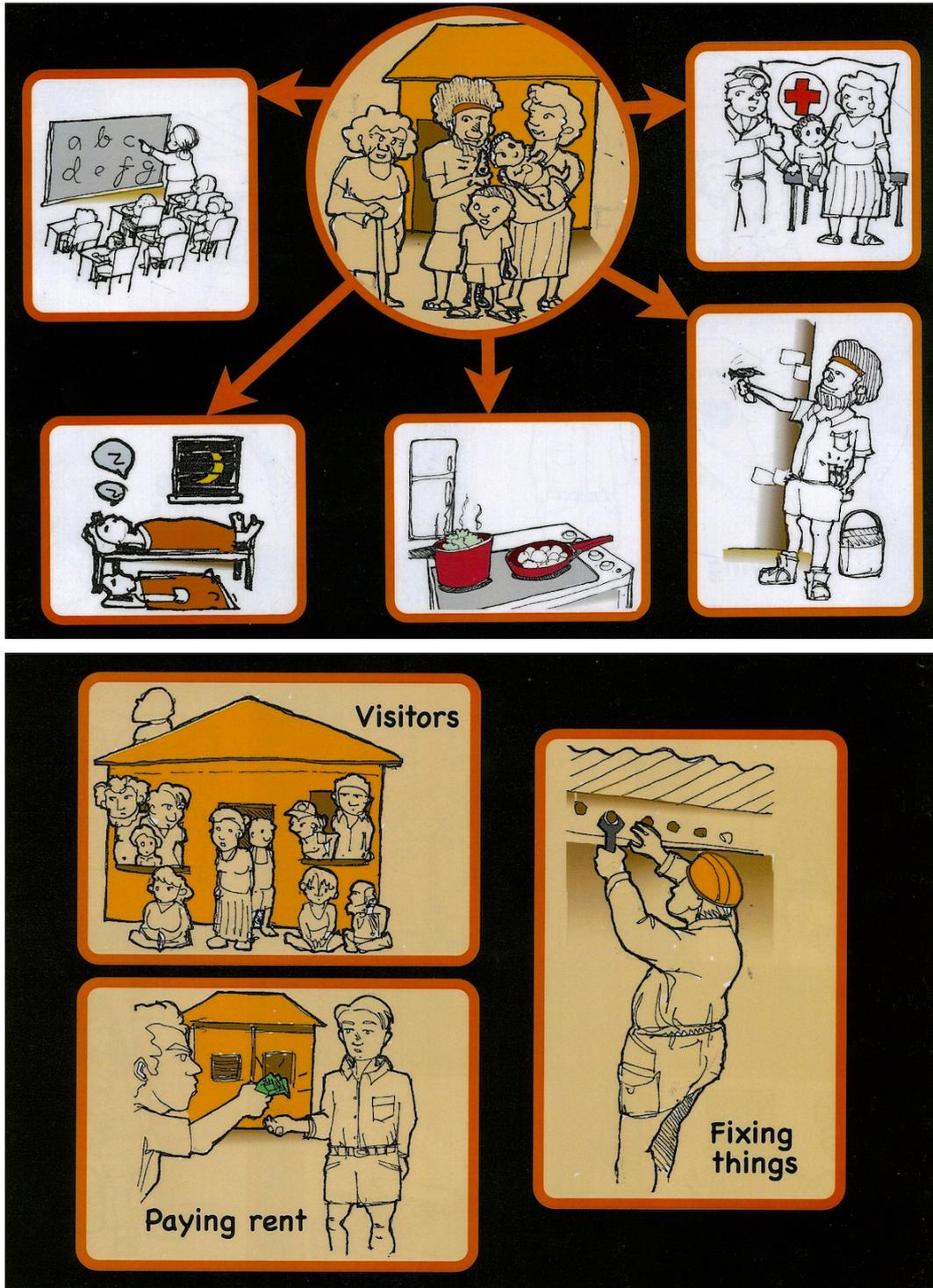
Thank you for your participation in this survey. Your participation is important to making sure that Tenant Agreements work well.

Appendix B

Picture prompts used in undertaking the survey with tenants

Figure B.1

EXAMPLES OF PICTURE PROMPTS USED IN UNDERTAKING THE SURVEY



Appendix C

Service provider discussion guide

C.1 Discussion guide

The project

The Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (the Department) has engaged the services of the Allen Consulting Group and Larrakia National Aboriginal Corporation to assess tenant experiences of housing improvements implemented under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH), Property and Tenancy Management (PTM) reforms in the Northern Territory. The project is being implemented in conjunction with the Northern Territory Government.

The project is aligned to the objectives of the NPARIH to reduce severe overcrowding, increase the supply of housing and improve the condition of existing housing, and to 'ensure that rental houses are well maintained and managed in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities'.

The project is expected to contribute to information about the impact of the PTM reforms from the perspective of tenants and communities by exploring early tenant experiences of the reforms. This will be undertaken through a survey of tenants with a Tenancy Agreement in place, in a sample of remote communities.

Visit to [xx] community, [Date of community visit]

Community visits will be undertaken of [xx] days to conduct an in depth survey of tenants. Successful conduct of the survey will be supported by discussions with community housing workers and representatives. The project will also obtain additional contextual information about communities from local service providers.

- **Representatives and service providers:** Government Business Managers, Indigenous Engagement Officers, Housing Reference Groups, Shire (local government) representatives, housing officers, and other service providers within the communities visited (such as health and education providers). The purpose of interviews with service providers is to gain a broader understanding of the impact of improvements to housing within the community.
- **Survey interviews:** In depth survey interviews with a sample of tenants who have Tenancy Agreements in place. The purpose of these interviews is to explore early tenant experiences of the reforms.

The responses you provide during this interview will be kept confidential. You, the service you work for and the community, will not be individually identified in any reports to government.

Questions for discussion

Questions for discussion include the following, and are provided as a guide only.

- Can you describe the key challenges for your area of service in this community?
- From the perspective of your area of service provision, have you seen/are you aware of any changes in the community since housing works were completed?
- Are there other programs or initiatives that have recently been introduced to address the challenges identified for community in your service area?
- In your view, what are the key challenges the community continues to face, for example, in relation to school attendance or employment?

Contact

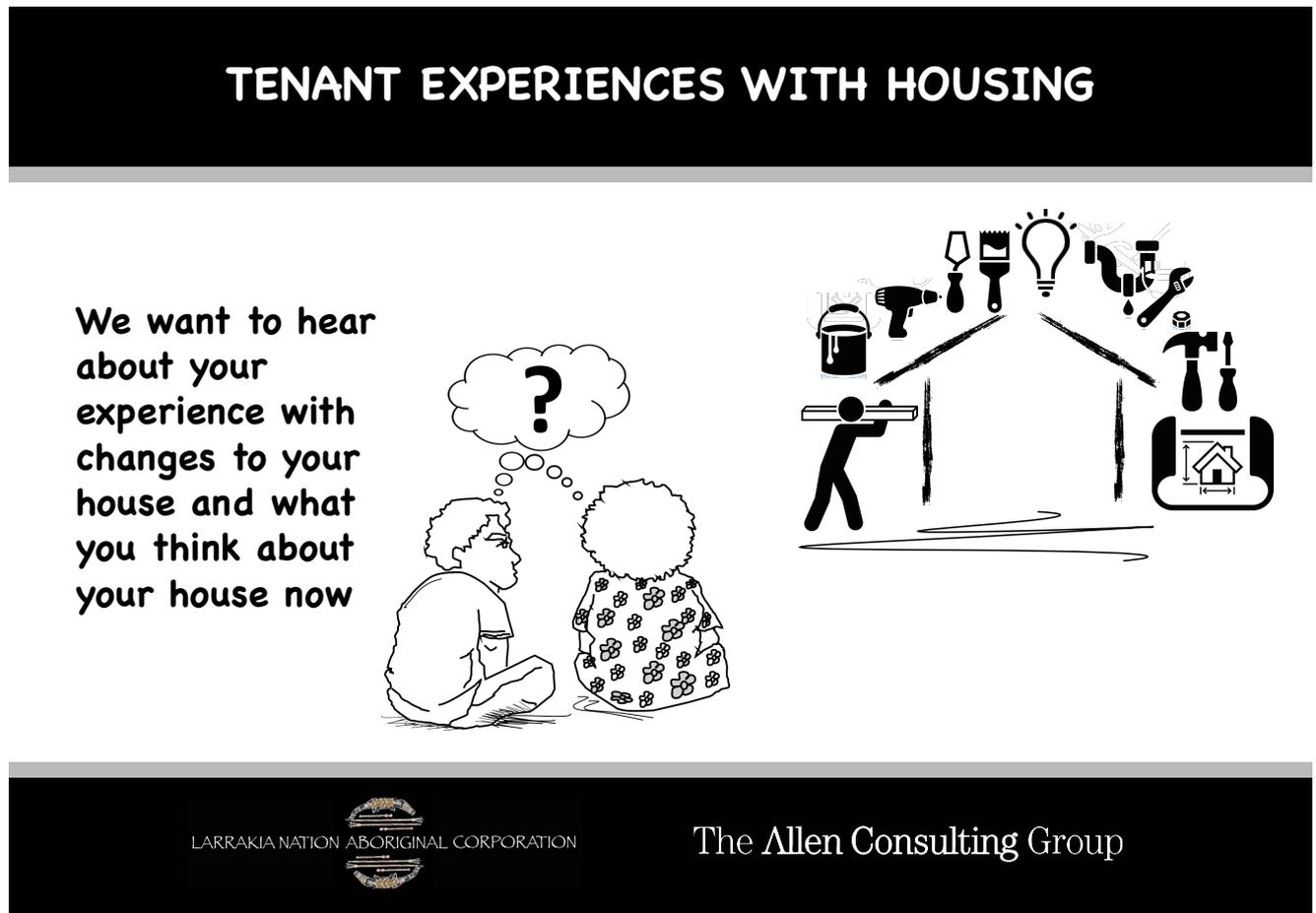
If you have any further questions about the project, please contact the project manager:

Appendix D

Poster for community visits

Figure D.1

POSTER IMAGE FOR COMMUNITY VISITS



Source: The Allen Consulting Group 2012.

Note: Dates of community visits were added to each poster.

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