

Shelter SA Aboriginal Housing Summit: 'Our Grannies are Our Strength'*

Sean Sheehy, Research Assistant, Amanda Taylor, Stakeholder Engagement Manager and Alice Clark, Executive Director, Shelter SA

Aboriginal housing and homelessness are priority areas for the systems and policy advocacy undertaken by Shelter SA, the peak body for housing. We conducted an Aboriginal Housing Summit to engage the community in creating our election platform leading up to the South Australian election in 2014 and the same issues are relevant now. Shelter SA called upon all political parties to address the issues raised at the Summit. A copy of the full report is available online [1](#) and this paper summarises the methods we used for the Summit and the key themes to emerge from analysis of the data.

Summit participants were invited to take part in the following five step process:

- Step 1. Work in small groups of two or three people to share positive stories about their lives and used prompts to encourage discussion, to report back to the large group.
- Step 2. Contribute a word or short phrase to describe the main positive message emanating from their stories.
- Step 3. Use their positive messages to formulate statements, questions and advice.
- Step 4. An Affinity activity allowed participants to sort the statements and advice into groupings without interference from facilitators and decide on headings for the groupings.
- Step 5. Participants were then asked to vote on the statements and questions that were the most important to them.

Key Theme 1 — Recognising Human Rights

This theme was placed above all of the other categories as an overarching heading by participants. It is important to note that participants did not want the title 'Aboriginal rights', as they believed this created a distinction between human rights and Aboriginal rights. It was established by the participants that without recognising their basic human rights in a way that goes beyond just reconciliation and 'Sorry Day', none of the other themes will ever be addressed. Shelter SA describes housing as a basic human right. For Aboriginal people, who are overrepresented in homelessness statistics, this theme speaks to the heart of issues around aspiring to better health, education, employment and housing outcomes.

Key Theme 2 — Cultural Integrity, Safety and Practice 'Our Grannies are our strength'

Culture was a prevalent issue voiced by the participants and formed the heading for the most densely populated grouping of advice in the Affinity activity. The advice was centred on the lack of community awareness of housing policies that work to disadvantage Aboriginal families and create rules that impede their ability to share their homes with extended family. A loss of culture was also feared by the group through the lack of safe, secure, appropriate and affordable housing.

Those who have carried the traditions are now ageing and young people are not being taught 'muda stories' or 'lores' to provide cultural identity and morality. The mainstreaming of housing policy has created a sense of cultural insensitivity. Some messages stated, 'how will you make sure your government will remain culturally sensitive', and a call for 'cultural awareness at [a] grass roots level'.

One person simply stated that 'policies don't reflect community needs'. Despite the promises in policy shift within Housing SA Blueprint 2013–018 — Connecting People to Place, participants said that culture is being neglected in the mainstreaming process and this theme highlights how culture is an untapped resource available to policy-makers should they aim to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal people.

Shelter SA has commented publicly about the mainstreaming of public housing and homelessness policies and service delivery on several occasions, calling for an Aboriginal-led community housing organisation to be established in South Australia. In the meantime, making cultural advice available to community housing providers could also assist them to better understand the context of tenant issues so they could be more effective when working with Aboriginal tenants about their rights and responsibilities and tenancy issues.

Female Aboriginal Elders were noted by participants as a particular source of family and cultural strength many of whom are grandmothers raising their grandchildren, and participants referred to them as 'our Grannies' who show great perseverance and strength.

Key Theme 3 — Effective and Real Engagement

Participants at the Shelter SA Summit strongly emphasised that Aboriginal voices need to be heard in decision-making processes. Much of the advice centred on the idea that Aboriginal people know what Aboriginal people need, but are not being included or heard. One participant's advice paper asked the decision makers to 'listen to your constituents for once', whilst another simply asked for 'respect for all'.

The dynamic nature of Aboriginal families was mentioned as something that is overlooked as a result of mainstreaming, and calls were made to reconnect young people with elders. This theme calls on decision-makers to effectively and legitimately engage with Aboriginal people rather than enforcing their ideas upon other cultures. Shelter SA has repeatedly made recommendations to state and local governments about the necessity to include Aboriginal people in community responses to homelessness.

Key Theme 4 — Tenant Knowledge and Empowerment

This theme was directed at procedural and policy issues related to public housing and housing affordability. It was expressed that the housing system is 'not customer friendly' and that a lack of accountability exists within the system. Many Aboriginal people feel disadvantaged because of negative stigma and some staff in regional areas not upholding key cultural values.

The participants also believed that tenants are unaware of their rights and need to be given introduction and information packages, as knowledge can lead to empowerment. This theme calls for a reassessment of the system and the reinstatement of an Aboriginal Housing Authority to address the lack of tenant knowledge and culturally appropriate services.

Key Theme 5 — Increase Aboriginal employment targets especially at decision making levels

Participants called for an increase in Aboriginal employment targets within the public service, especially at the decision-making level, to ensure higher levels of empathy and understanding as a practical way to assist Aboriginal people to access the mainstream system and to create more culturally appropriate policy and service provision. Participants agreed that despite culture being seen as a strength of Aboriginal people, it is not recognised or included in policy development or implementation. One participant said, 'this [the current situation of Aboriginal people] is a result of

mainstreaming and a lack of Aboriginal workers in the field'. Another participant stated a need for at least one 'Aboriginal person at every region'.

Policies and workers who deal with housing issues for Aboriginal people must understand and respect Aboriginal culture as a basic skill set and continue to learn and reflect upon their knowledge.

Key Theme 6 — Community Funding and Resource

Participants highlighted that there needs to be financial investment in Aboriginal housing for progress to be made. One piece of advice from this group was that there needs to be 'more funding for individuals with mental health issues going to people who need it'. This theme identifies the lack of affordable housing options for Aboriginal people, especially those experiencing mental health issues.

Key Theme 7 — 'We are not overcrowded!!'

A safe, affordable home is key to family and culture. Participants stressed that they are not crowded or overcrowded — they live in extended family groups. Culturally appropriate housing to accommodate families larger than traditional nuclear families would see people living with adequate space, privacy and storage room. An increase in the supply of affordable housing would likewise act to increase the options available to people who wish to move on from staying with family especially when tensions arise due to living in accommodation that is too small for large families.

Conclusion

The product of the anecdotes and subsequent messages was to create a platform for the participants to identify their affinity to key messages. Participants were asked to mark, with a heart-shaped sticker, which statements and questions they felt were the most important, again without inference from facilitators. The results of this activity showed clear affinity towards human rights (58 per cent). It is interesting to note that this heading was not originally placed on the wall, but was recommended by the group during the open group discussion. Because the advice was delivered as a group, it is understandable that the majority of participants would then show a collective affinity to it. The exercise

does indicate that recognising human rights, as opposed to the opposed notion of 'Aboriginal rights', is the starting point for change from the perspective of participants.

The two other messages that received priority represented themes that had been prevalent throughout the Shelter SA Summit. The importance of understanding and using culture as a means of developing appropriate housing policy, and the need to engage and educate tenants represent two practical ways changes could be made, highlighting areas with the biggest need for change. The importance of culture was demonstrated again when the advice centring on muda-stories and lores was given a priority during the voting process.

The message board centred on advice derived from positive stories from Aboriginal people and presents the most important ways to improve policy from their perspective. Participants said that the starting point must be recognition of the human rights of our Nation's First Peoples and the ongoing theme of the advice was the importance of culture.

* Shelter SA acknowledges the Mercy Foundation who generously assisted in making the Summit possible
www.mercyfoundation.com.au

Endnote

1. Via the Shelter SA website at
<http://www.sheltersa.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/Shelter-SA-Our-Grannies-Are-Our-Strength.pdf>