

One home for four indigenous generations: Hope Vale loses some hope



Claytana with her great-great grandparents Ella and Francis Woibo, who have shared their home at Hope Vale, on Cape York, with four generations. Picture: Lyndon Mechielsen

The Australian
12 February 2018
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A three-bedroom home full of her extended family is all three-year-old Claytana has ever known. Her great-great-grandparents, Francis and Ella Woibo, keep their low-set Besser-brick home neat and tidy, providing a welcoming environment for the family members who come and go.

Until recently, 12 people from four generations lived in the house in Hope Vale, north of Cooktown. Mrs Woibo is not unhappy about sharing her home with her extended family but admits “it’s not easy ... I have a lot of grandchildren and they need a home to move in to.”

The issue of overcrowding is endemic to Australia’s remote indigenous communities, where the high cost of building homes is out of reach of low-income earners. State ministers and mayors descended on Canberra recently to lobby Malcolm Turnbull and Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion to continue a program — set to be scrapped in June — that has seen more than \$5.4 billion invested in indigenous housing since 2008. The lobbying coincides with the Prime Minister’s release of the 10th annual Closing the Gap report today, which will evaluate the government’s effectiveness in meeting targets to bridge the divide between indigenous and non-indigenous

Australians on child mortality rates, early childhood education, school attendance, literacy, employment and life expectancy.

Some measures, particularly on education, are positive but the scheme is judged to be in dire need of reform.

State housing ministers in Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory — all partners in the federal government's National Remote Housing Strategy — say the program is crucial to complementing Closing the Gap commitments, with safe housing a key determinant of health outcomes. But they have been told the funding will no longer be available after June 30.

The federal government, which is looking for savings to fund its corporate tax cuts, is concerned the current funding arrangement, co-ordinated through state and local governments, is inefficient, with much wasted in administration.

The Australian yesterday travelled to Hope Vale with Queensland Housing Minister Mick de Brenni to see the progress that has been made and the job that still needs to be done. In Hope Vale, which Mr de Brenni says is better off than many other remote communities, some homes squeeze in four generations of family members simply because there is nowhere else to go.

A report commissioned by Senator Scullion last year recommended the program continue for at least another decade to build a further 5000 houses nationwide. It also suggested increased funding for maintenance and a 50 per cent contribution from states.

In Queensland, the commonwealth has contributed \$1.1 billion towards indigenous housing since 2008 through the program. In the same time, the state has paid \$660m towards buying land, maintaining homes, upgrades, capital building costs in indigenous communities not covered in the scheme, and administration.

Mr de Brenni said the state would be open to discussing contributing directly to the scheme but, during a recent trip to Canberra, negotiating was not an option. "Malcolm Turnbull is the only one who can overturn it at this stage," he said.

Former Labor prime minister Kevin Rudd yesterday said it would be the first time in half a century the federal government didn't play a role in indigenous housing.

In Hope Vale, at least 37 of 250 homes are overcrowded and 31.2 per cent of households have more than one family living in them. There is a waiting list of 60 people looking for a new home.

In this remote part of the world, building houses is not cheap. Regular truckloads of tools, material and supplies are delivered 400km north from Cairns but the freight adds considerably to the cost of building a home. A basic two-bedroom house costs more than \$300,000 to build.

New low-set homes mix in with older styles. About 90 per cent of the homes have been built by the council since 1967, mostly through federal funding.

The economy in north Queensland has also built up around the scheme, which provides employment for 515 indigenous men and women learning a trade as they

build. “A 10-year commitment means tradesmen can put on an apprentice or make investment decisions with some certainty,” Mr de Brenni said.

Four-term Hope Vale mayor Greg McLean said families want to be able to live by themselves: “They want to be a family rather than an extended family.”

Lenny Casey finished his trade as a carpenter three weeks ago after spending most of his apprenticeship building new homes in Hope Vale. Casey, who knows first-hand how in some houses the bathroom and washing machine are in constant use and three or four people share a room, does not know if he will be able to work in Hope Vale for much longer if the housing scheme is discontinued.

Queensland Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk said Mr Turnbull must recommit to indigenous housing. “It has been a role Liberal and Labor prime ministers have been willing to accept over the last 50 years.”

WA Aboriginal Affairs Minister Ben Wyatt called Senator Scullion’s backflip on housing funding “diabolical”.

Peter Yu, who runs Broome-based indigenous housing company Nyamba Buru Yawuru, said “housing is directly related to the safety and security of vulnerable children; it’s about tackling overcrowding and domestic violence.”