

# Introduction

## About this submission

Faith Housing Alliance (FHA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the National Housing and Homelessness Plan Bill 2024 (No. 2).

## About us

Faith Housing Alliance (FHA) is the peak body supporting the faith housing sector. Many of our member organisations operate nationally, supporting communities across Australia.

Members—from Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and other faith traditions—believe in social justice, compassion, respect and integrity and are united by a common mission.

The faith housing sector includes:

- Faith-based organisations, including Community Housing Providers and Specialist Homelessness Services, many of whom have been providing support to the community over centuries
- Places of worship across all faiths who want to use their land for housing justice
- Faith leaders of all denominations and religions who see housing as a critical component of social justice
- Any individual, organisation, foundation, or program committed to housing justice, including professional support organisations.

FHA is committed to partnering with Governments to address the urgent need for more housing, especially social housing, affordable rental housing, and the vital wrap-around supports needed to sustain tenancies and break the cycle of homelessness.

## The faith housing sector has a unique and vital role to play

FHA represents a significant number of faith-based organisations operating nationally and State-based organisations providing more than 15,000 homes and support for more than 30,000 people experiencing homelessness.

Our members stand ready to help. They have an impressive track record of supplying housing and services for people in need over centuries. They have well-located land and other unique assets, including more than 40,000 volunteers nationwide to help vulnerable people integrate into their communities.

## Support for the proposed Bill

We support the Bill and its intent.

We commend Senator David Pocock and Ms Kylea Tink MP for championing a private members' Bill that recognises housing as a human right.

The recommendations in our submission to the *National Housing and Homelessness Plan* consultations concluded that to address Australia's housing emergency successfully; we must legislate a statutory basis for the Plan and establish the appropriate governance and accountability structures to support effective implementation.

We highlight critical aspects of our submission to the *National Housing and Homelessness Plan* that are in alignment with key components of the Bill, including:

- Enacting a human rights approach to housing across Australia
- Establishing governance and accountability structures
- Mandating the development and renewal of a Plan
- Including experienced Not-For-Profit Community Housing Providers, Specialist Homelessness Services and amplifying voices of lived experience, including the tenants and clients they serve
- Obligating progress reporting at regular intervals

## Foundations for an effective Plan

### Ensuring people most in need are at the centre

Housing is a precondition to living well. Without access to safe, secure and affordable housing, all other domains of life become inaccessible or are compromised. Addressing homelessness and the housing crisis is central to the security and dignity of all Australians.

Faith Housing Alliance (FHA) members call for people most in need to be placed at the centre of the Plan, for their improved outcomes to be prioritised, for first steps to correct generational structural inequalities and for policy and targeted investment to deliver secure housing options that are foundational to wellbeing.

### Radical reform requires a coordinated and nationally consistent approach

A standalone Plan is insufficient; it must sit within a strategic framework to optimise outcomes and prevent further system failure.

FHA members believe the National Plan presents an opportunity to create fundamental change. Drastic directional change and new thinking are required as current plans, systems, and mechanisms have failed to deliver.

Previous discussion papers, *National Homelessness Strategy (2000)*<sup>1</sup> and *Which Way Home? (2008)*<sup>2</sup> list similar issues for action, yet their subsequent strategies have not effected change, contributing to our current crisis.

AHURI outlines an appropriately bold Plan as being able to “shape and create the kind of housing markets we need, promote the right kind of innovation and channel resources to address pressing housing needs. This involves more than fixing market failures and filling the unprofitable gaps in the market.”<sup>3</sup>

Underpinning the success of a National Plan, FHA calls for the Government to set the Plan within the context of:



## **National alignment requires a national mission-oriented strategy and guiding principles**

Australia is one of many developed nations wrestling with the challenge of grossly inadequate housing. Housing systems worldwide are increasingly being controlled by people whose primary goal is growing and leveraging capital. The Plan must outline mission-oriented guiding principles to put human flourishing at the centre and to frame strategies within the context of internationally agreed-upon values. Anything less jeopardises Australia's human rights reputation on the global stage.

Article 11 of the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) outlines a right to housing in the right to an 'adequate standard of living'. Australia signed the ICESCR in 1973 and ratified it without reservations in 1975. The provision recognises "the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions".<sup>4</sup> Similarly, The UN's Sustainable Development Goal 11.1 outlines: "By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services..."<sup>5</sup> The link to poverty as a driver to homelessness and housing insecurity is obvious.<sup>6</sup>

Mariana Mazzucato argues that any new economic thinking and policy responses from governments must be grounded in a mission-oriented and human rights-based approach before it can then align collaborators and partnerships.<sup>7</sup>

## **Measurable success requires legislative accountability and capacity**

The Plan will guide an array of innovative partnerships, but it is still the Government's responsibility to ensure adequate housing for its citizens. This requires actively shaping the housing market and not just "tinkering around the edges".<sup>8</sup>

Legislation can establish housing as a human right, protecting the right to shelter and human dignity. Similarly, legislation could uphold the principle of homelessness prevention rather than just providing a homelessness response.

Legislation should provide for the institutions required to support the Plan and its survival beyond the current electoral cycle.

Provisions could also be made to ensure sufficient funding for contractual outcomes, the requirement for cooperation at all levels of government, and the bodies accountable for the Plan's oversight and success.

In 2017, Canada's National Housing Strategy (NHS) introduced rights-based legislation to implement the government's commitment to the progressive implementation of the right to housing; the subsequent National Housing Strategy Act was implemented in 2019, requiring all future governments to maintain an NHS.<sup>9</sup> Canada's example provides learnings for Australia's National Plan, including improving accountability through legal recourse and hearings.<sup>10</sup>

## **A national crisis requires national leadership and coordination**

The success of the Plan will hinge on the interdependence of all levels of government and on Federal departments, agencies, and regulators to be held to account. Structural reform will require broad, cross-portfolio coordination across

areas such as social services, health and aged care, education, immigration, justice, Veterans' and Indigenous affairs and treasury.

Recent precedents of whole-of-government coordination measures to manage a crisis include establishing the National Cabinet in Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>11</sup> and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in developing agreements with states and territories leading to a national rollout supported by the appointment of governance structures, reporting arrangements and monitoring.<sup>12</sup>

An international example of effective coordination is Japan's whole-of-government efforts to reduce suicide. Shifting responsibility from the Ministry of Health to the Cabinet Office, it became a shared responsibility of all Ministers. Japan saw a significant and progressive decline in its suicide rate, regularly reviewing its strategies.<sup>13</sup>

AHURI's review of international housing strategies shows that "there is a strong lesson about the importance of a dedicated housing agency for leading policy development, coordinating with relevant other agencies, and providing accountability".<sup>14</sup>

AHURI recommends that Housing Australia could perform the function of the lead agency if significantly bolstered from its current state, strengthened by legislative powers, and with increased capacity to deliver policy and with data to support monitoring. "Its roles would include policy coordination across government agencies, as well as research support to the National Housing Supply and Affordability Council, and policy delivery on home ownership products and social housing finance."<sup>15</sup>

Noting also the importance of alignment between other National Plans and strategies, including, but not limited to;

- Australia's Disability Strategy<sup>16</sup>
- Closing the Gap measures<sup>17</sup>
- National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children<sup>18</sup>
- National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan<sup>19</sup>
- National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy<sup>20</sup>
- National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People<sup>21</sup>
- National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children<sup>22</sup>
- Veteran Transition Strategy<sup>23</sup>
- National Skills Agreement<sup>24</sup>
- Aged Care reforms<sup>25</sup> and other plans as developed.

# FHA Member Organisations



If you wish to discuss this submission, please get in touch with Amanda Bailey, Head of Advocacy and Communications.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup>Australian Government. 2008. Which Way Home? A new approach to homelessness - Green Paper. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2008-05/apo-nid1913.pdf>
- <sup>3</sup>Martin, C., Lawson, J., Milligan, V., Hartley, C., Pawson, H. & Dodson, J. 2023. Towards an Australian Housing and Homelessness Strategy: understanding national approaches in contemporary policy. <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/401>
- <sup>4</sup>UN Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights> Article 11
- <sup>5</sup>United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – Goal 11. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal11>
- <sup>6</sup>ACOSS and UNSW. Poverty and inequality in Australia. <https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/>
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- <sup>9</sup>Government of Canada. National Housing Strategy. <https://www.placetocalhome.ca/>
- <sup>10</sup>Right to Housing Network, Canada. An overview of housing legislation in Canada. <https://housingrights.ca/right-to-housing-legislation-in-canada/>
- <sup>11</sup>Parliament of Australia. COVID-19 Australian Government roles and responsibilities: an overview. [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/rp/rp1920/COVID19AustralianGovernmentRoles](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1920/COVID19AustralianGovernmentRoles)
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- <sup>25</sup>Department of Health and Aged Care. Aged Care reforms. <https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/aged-care-reforms/what-were-doing?language=en>