

Submission

A Path Forward: Developing the Western Australian Government's Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy

27 March 2020

The Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia (AHCWA) and its member Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) welcome the opportunity to provide feedback to the Department of Premier and Cabinet's (DPC) Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy discussion paper (the paper). AHCWA strongly supports a whole-of-government approach to Aboriginal Affairs and looks forward to working closely with DPC as the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy (the Strategy) is developed.

AHCWA is the peak body for 23 ACCHS in Western Australia. AHCWA exists to support and act on behalf of our member services, actively representing and responding to their individual and collective needs. WA ACCHS are located across geographically diverse metropolitan, regional, remote and very remote locations. They respond to complex health issues, including prevention, early intervention, and social and emotional wellbeing, across the life course. ACCHS deliver the most effective model of comprehensive primary health care for Aboriginal people¹, and are in a unique position to identify and respond to the local cultural and health issues of Aboriginal people and their communities across WA.

The principal vision of AHCWA is for Aboriginal people in Western Australia to enjoy the same level of health and wellbeing as all Western Australians. AHCWA asserts that Aboriginal **self-determination, leadership, and respect for cultural diversity** are central to achieving this objective and supports the development of a strategy that will promote these elements.

Self-determination, leadership, and respect for cultural diversity are also central to the work currently being done to establish a National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The Priority Action Areas agreed by the Joint Council on Closing the Gap reflect the values of AHCWA and its Member ACCHS, and must underpin the final whole-of-government strategy. Self-determination is central to enhancing opportunities and closing outcome gaps for Aboriginal people, and must be a key objective of the Strategy and how it is implemented.

This submission aims to respond to the questions in the discussion paper and identify key areas for further consideration.

Are the main ideas right?

Broadly, AHCWA supports the principles and strategic elements of the Strategy. AHCWA and its Member ACCHS welcome the move by Government to place culture at the centre of the Strategy,

¹ Throughout this submission, AHCWA uses the term 'Aboriginal' to respectfully refer to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Western Australia.

and its commitment to supporting Aboriginal people to define, in their own terms, what constitutes a good and successful life.

The Principles

- **Empowerment and Self-determination**

AHCWA believes that full self-determination of Aboriginal affairs by Aboriginal people must underpin the Strategy and any resulting policies or plans. Aboriginal people and their communities must have access to the levers that allow them to be self-determining. The paper states that 'Government systems, structures, policies and programs should *contribute to* Aboriginal people's empowerment and self-determination'. AHCWA supports the Government's position, however, is concerned that the principle stops short of promoting and supporting full self-determination.

- **Culture and Country**

AHCWA strongly supports Culture and Country as key principles underpinning the Strategy. As detailed in the paper, Culture and Country are central to the lives and identities of Aboriginal people and their communities, and the same elements are also integral to the Model of Care used by ACCHS to deliver comprehensive primary health care services. The Model of Care necessarily locates Aboriginal people within the context of eight essential determinants of health; family, community, culture, language, country, physical wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing, and emotional wellbeing.

- **Diversity of People and Places**

AHCWA supports this principle as a genuine understanding of the diversity of Aboriginal people and cultures will be foundational to enabling place-based, local action under the Strategy. This recognition of diversity also assists in curtailing the assumption that all Aboriginal communities face the same issues and challenges, or have the same strengths and opportunities.

- **Services**

While the paper states that 'Aboriginal people *must be involved in* designing and improving systems and initiatives that primarily, or especially, affect Aboriginal people', AHCWA asserts that Aboriginal people must lead those systems and initiatives; involvement alone is inadequate.

- **Evidence**

AHCWA supports that evidence must underpin the Strategy to ensure that activities and programs with impacts for Aboriginal people are evidence-informed, but also to ensure that agencies and services are accountable for delivering outcomes they are contracted and funded to deliver. Further, data used to inform or evaluate the Strategy must be meaningful to and approved by Aboriginal people and their communities.

AHCWA also welcomes the paper's position that innovation and flexibility in developing solutions is integral to success. Aboriginal people, their communities and ACCOs consistently deliver innovative, culturally secure, evidence-informed practices with good outcomes. While methods for the way ACCHS work with Aboriginal people may be different to mainstream services, it doesn't mean these methods are any less legitimate or reliable. AHCWA's Member Services have used the phrase

“analysis paralysis” to describe the arduous standard of evidence required of ACCHS to gain funding or resources for Aboriginal-led initiatives. The Government’s over-reliance on data and evidence leads to stagnation in innovative service delivery, and perpetuates the ownership and control of Aboriginal affairs by Government.

Strategic Elements

While further work is required to refine the Strategy and develop its implementation plan, AHCWA understands that to adhere to their responsibilities under the Strategy, WA Government agencies will be responsible for aligning with the six strategic elements outlined in the paper. AHCWA supports the strategic elements noting the following comments.

- **Putting culture at the centre**

Given the critical importance of culture for the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people and their communities, AHCWA strongly supports ‘Putting Culture at the Centre’ of the Strategy.

AHCWA understands that DPC has received feedback on the important role of truth-telling and healing in underpinning the Strategy. To support cultural identity, continuity and authority, AHCWA agrees that the Strategy must strongly acknowledge the true experience of Aboriginal people and their communities who have been dispossessed of culture and country by Governments and Australian society over time.

Through truth-telling, Aboriginal people can choose to share culture, language and knowledge which, in turn can enhance healing and unity with the broader Australian community². As the success of the WA Government’s Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy will rely on collaboration and support from across government and non-government sectors, the promotion and acceptance of truth-telling and healing will be fundamental.

- **Bringing decisions closer to communities through empowered engagement and agreement-making**

AHCWA recommends that the wording of this strategic element be amended to strengthen the Government’s commitment to genuinely working with Aboriginal people and their communities, and to better align with the Priority Reforms currently being negotiated in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

In particular, Priority Reform One calls for Governments to ‘develop and strengthen structures to ensure the full involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in *shared decision making* at the national, state and local or regional level and embedding their ownership, responsibility and expertise to close the gap’. As currently worded, this strategic element refers to ‘agreement-making’ between Aboriginal people and Government partners while the broader policy landscape is moving towards greater power for Aboriginal people through ‘shared decision making’.

AHCWA supports the local and regional approach proposed in the paper and for the Strategy to be implemented via place-based action plans. To achieve this, Government agencies must genuinely

² Commonwealth of Australia, 2018, Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: Final Report, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Former_Committees/Constitutional_Recognition_2018/ConstRe/cognition/Final_Report/section?id=committees%2freportjnt%2f024213%2f26675, accessed 14 February 2020

engage with Aboriginal people at community, local or regional levels, to determine what types of services and programs should be developed and delivered, and how and where the funding for such action plans should be directed.

The current experience of ACCHS is that they often hear how Governments want to work with them at the local level, and that they are keen to explore community initiatives. However, despite demonstrating to Governments that particular Aboriginal Community Controlled initiatives deliver results, ACCHS are often frustrated by the Government's reluctance to commit adequate and secure funding for these programs. In their feedback to this discussion paper, WA ACCHS want to know how this strategy will spur the Government to "take its blinkers off", and commit to supporting local solutions that work.

- **Enabling Aboriginal-led solutions through improved service commissioning and grant making**

AHCWA strongly supports the focus of the Strategy on the delivery of services by Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Evidence shows that ACCOs deliver high quality, flexible, culturally secure services to Aboriginal people, especially preventative and early-intervention services and programs which the Strategy identifies as a key focus. This strategic element also aligns with the second Priority Reform of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap which calls for the development of formal ACCO sectors as a high priority. It also reflects Recommendation 3 in WA Health's Sustainable Health Review which prioritises the recognition and strengthening of ACCHS as leaders in the delivery of primary health care for Aboriginal people.

AHCWA recommends that ACCHS should be the primary providers of any health and wellbeing services delivered under the Strategy. They are embedded in and trusted by Aboriginal communities and are best-placed to facilitate the social, health, economic and cultural empowerment the Strategy is striving to achieve. The WA ACCHS sector is strong and intends to work in unity to apply pressure to Commonwealth and State Government agencies to support optimal health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal people and their communities.

- **Boosting economic opportunities across all areas of Government activity**

AHCWA and its Member Services support a whole-of-government commitment to establishing programs that drive opportunity, innovation and economic development in Aboriginal communities. Previous cuts to important Government initiatives, including Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP), have simultaneously eroded self-determination in Aboriginal communities and resulted in poorer health, wellbeing and social outcomes for Aboriginal people.

AHCWA supports the ideas in the paper which propose improving service-commissioning and grant-making processes to better enable ACCOs to engage in the commissioning process. The ACCHS sector calls on the Government to activate opportunities for capacity building in Aboriginal communities, prioritise community and workforce development, and preference Aboriginal businesses in the tender process for WA Government contracts (for example, for maintenance projects on Aboriginal social housing).

- **Building cultural understanding and respect**

Further to the preceding comments on truth-telling and healing under the principle of 'Culture and Country', 'building cultural understanding and respect' necessarily requires that institutional racism

across the service system be acknowledged, confronted and acted upon. This is fundamental to truth-telling and healing and, while racism is mentioned in the paper, the pervasive and detrimental impacts of institutional racism on the life outcomes of Aboriginal people and their communities must be a key focus of action for the Strategy.

Cultural change is required within all parts of the Government; in agencies, systems, leadership and staff. Tokenistic acknowledgement of institutional racism and superficial commitments to cultural competence is insufficient; government agencies must commit to and be accountable to Priority Reform Three under Closing the Gap which requires them to undertake systemic and structural transformation in the way they work with Aboriginal people and their communities. The ACCHS sector reports that systemic and structural reform is particularly necessary at the Local Government level, and AHCWA supports strong ongoing advocacy and negotiation by DPC with local governments across the State on this matter.

- **Investing more in preventative initiatives**

AHCWA and its Member ACCHS strongly support the paper's prioritisation of prevention and early intervention as key strategic elements under the strategy. Prevention underpins the philosophy of comprehensive primary health care delivered by ACCHS.

AHCWA and its national affiliate, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), consistently advocate for State and Commonwealth Governments to direct funding into 'upstream' ACCHS preventative health initiatives to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal people and their communities. Prevention activities require a long-term perspective; quick wins will not solve the issues faced by Aboriginal people and their communities. The ACCHS sector, therefore, supports the paper's proposal that there should be a shift in the balance of expenditure between acute and preventative service delivery. This includes support for a sustained increase in funding for prevention services to commence as soon as possible.

AHCWA notes that actions to prevent poor health outcomes for Aboriginal people and their communities are usually not the responsibility of one ACCO, ACCHS or government agency alone. For example, responding to the health and wellbeing threats posed by poor housing in remote communities must include joint action on behalf of the Department of Communities, the WA Country Health Service and ACCHS among others. The Strategy must hold all organisations to account in working collaboratively to improve housing, and therefore health and wellbeing outcomes, for Aboriginal people and their communities.

Accountability

Foundations for 'Leading a Good Life' through the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy will require cross-government agency buy-in, co-operation and accountability. It is AHCWA and its Member Services' concern that there will be insufficient requirements for government departments to adhere to the strategic elements of the Strategy.

AHCWA also understands that the Strategy will need to span multiple generations to ensure sustainability and achieve real and lasting change. This raises concern in the ACCHS sector that, while currently being championed by the McGowan Government, the Strategy may not be upheld if the Opposition gains power. It is therefore imperative that bipartisan support is gained to ensure that the Strategy can withstand a change in government.

AHCWA welcomes the Government's intention to establish a statutory office of accountability and advocacy in Aboriginal Affairs, and looks forward to more information being available about this. Specific responsibilities and mechanisms must be put in place to hold the government accountable for rolling-out the strategy at the state, regional and local levels. It is AHCWA's recommendation that ACCOs have a central place in this statutory accountability body.

Implementation

AHCWA appreciates the need for the Strategy to be a high-level framework, allowing for nuanced and place-based strategies to be implemented at the regional and local level. However, it is important that the Government does not lose focus on 'how' the Strategy will progress through to the implementation phase. The true utility of the Strategy will be in its implementation.

While AHCWA welcomes the commitment to genuine and meaningful engagement with Aboriginal people and their communities in the development of implementation plans, the Government must be aware of the risk of 'consultation fatigue'. AHCWA supports the intention for any engagements on the Strategy to be planned to coincide with regional forums to consult on the 'Voice to Parliament'.

Evaluation

AHCWA recommends that any evaluations of the Strategy are planned by or with Aboriginal people and their communities. As described by the paper, Closing the Gap indicators and targets will have an important role in any evaluation, however, as place-based approaches to Aboriginal affairs are an overarching guiding principle of the Strategy, goals and targets determined by communities themselves are essential.

Governance and Oversight

AHCWA supports the role of the Western Australian Aboriginal Advisory Council (WAAAC) in overseeing and guiding the implementation and evaluation of the Strategy. The WAAAC must have a central role in the development of regional and local level action plans, and act as a bridge between ACCOs and the Government in the design of region-specific strategies. AHCWA views the role of the WAAAC as being key to holding Government agencies, and in particular their leadership, to account in realising the vision of this Strategy.

Are we using the right words?

AHCWA welcomes DPC's acknowledgement that 'language matters', and its commitment to ensuring the language in the Strategy supports the self-determination and optimal outcomes for Aboriginal people.

AHCWA acknowledges that the paper primarily uses strength-based language throughout, however, is concerned that on more than one occasion the paper refers to 'Aboriginal people, families and communities solving their own problems' which reflects an assumption that the challenges faced by Aboriginal people are of their own making. It is important that the final Strategy avoids the use of deficit-focussed language such as this.

As previously stated, the central themes of 'empowerment and self-determination' are supported, however, AHCWA's Member Services have advised that the Strategy must be careful in its use of the terms.

Self-determination is a complex concept; it involves an understanding of where power sits, and a commitment to a transfer of power. Self-determination is active, involves autonomy in decision making, and implies the transference of levers of control to Aboriginal people and their communities. Self-determination for Aboriginal people and communities must be defined by Aboriginal people on their own terms, nor infringed upon by Governments.

Empowerment, while well intentioned, can be interpreted as a passive term which implies the 'enablement' of Aboriginal autonomy and decision making by others. The theme of the Strategy must be about Aboriginal people and their communities being empowered by their own culture, identity, and strength, rather than by the Government and its policies.

What else should we be thinking about?

AHCWA understands the intention of the Strategy is to take a 'whole-of-Government' approach to work with Aboriginal people and their communities to achieve better outcomes. One concern raised by AHCWA's Member Services is the lack of information about the role of Local Governments in the Strategy. ACCHS have had mixed experiences with the level of co-operation and genuine collaboration by Local Governments in their areas, so greater information about how Local Governments will be accountable under the Strategy is essential.

Conclusion

The development of a whole-of-government strategy to guide the achievement of optimal outcomes for Aboriginal people across their lives and their life course is broadly supported by AHCWA and its Member Services. The Principles and Strategic Elements have the right focus, and are considerate of the main issues and opportunities that will determine the success of the Strategy.

In this submission, AHCWA has demonstrated some further points for consideration, particularly around the need for a clear and collaborative pathway to implementation, the importance of accountability for all government agencies under the Strategy, the need for sensitivity and understanding in the use of language within the Strategy, and the importance of genuine autonomy for decision making and self-determination.

AHCWA and its Member Services commit to working further with DPC as work to finalise the Strategy and Implementation Plans continues.