

## MENTAL HEALTH COMMISSION FEEDBACK TO THE ABORIGINAL EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY DISCUSSION PAPER

The Mental Health Commission (MHC) has reviewed the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy (the Strategy) Discussion Paper and provides the following feedback against the three guiding questions.

### 1. ARE THE MAIN IDEAS RIGHT?

#### Overall Goal

While the MHC agrees with the overall goal, we believe the language used is too general. Aboriginal people are not coming from a secure foundation, therefore the MHC suggests the goal should be revised to “Building a secure foundation so that Aboriginal people, families and communities are empowered to live good lives and choose their own futures”.

The MHC believes, the Empowerment: Foundations and Futures diagram (page 9) captures the foundation and future components of the Strategy well, but suggests it could be further strengthened by:

- Including ‘Truth-telling’ in brackets on the History branch. A true history needs to be shared to have a genuine understanding of the continuing impacts of colonisation;
- Including mental health and wellbeing. Positive mental health and wellbeing is an important aspect not only in creating a good foundation but also in creating a good future. It should be noted that mental health and wellbeing is regularly incorporated within the term ‘social and emotional wellbeing’, which is often a preferred term for Aboriginal peoples and represents a more holistic view of mental health;
- Recognising kinship (not just family), particularly as the Strategy speaks to the importance of recognising and valuing Aboriginal culture and connection to each other and the land;
- Altering the ‘Respect and inclusion in broader society’ branch to read ‘Respect and inclusion in decision making’; and
- Including positive relationships with the broader community as a separate branch.

#### Principles

The MHC supports the proposed Principles, however suggests an additional principle around transparency and trust should be included.

We suggest there also needs to be mindfulness about how evidence is understood, and what kind of evidence is considered valid. For example, government conceptions of evidence are often based on quantifying and recording human experience and outcomes, which may not always be appropriate and tell enough of a story. New ways of evaluation and evidence, i.e. determining what does and does not work for Aboriginal people, need to be welcomed in order to promote empowerment through valuing Aboriginal knowledges and experiences. The most powerful statements in the principles relating to evidence are “Aboriginal people’s own experiences, interpreted in an Aboriginal cultural context” and “innovation and flexibility are critical to success” (page 10).

#### Strategic Elements

MHC considers Strategic Element 1 is a crucial element, and suggests it should be the foundation of the Strategy. The MHC agrees with the key ideas of Strategic Element 1 and suggests the addition of:

- increasing avenues for Aboriginal Elders and youth to be engaged across all sectors of government;
- increasing funding and opportunities for Aboriginal peoples and communities to develop cultural enterprises; and

- the government taking the lead in showing connection to Aboriginal peoples i.e. less policies and frameworks and more action. This could include more visits to communities by senior government officials which would practically show that Aboriginal peoples are important and worthwhile.

The MHC notes Strategic Element 2 is fundamental, and agrees with the key ideas and recognition that appropriate supports and processes are required to support meaningful participation. The need for regional and remote community governance mechanisms/structures are essential, and may be a useful tool for Australian Government decision-making as well.

The MHC supports Strategic Element 3, specifically the involvement of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and their capacity to deliver services to their communities. We suggest this Strategic Element could be strengthened by increasing support and guidance for Aboriginal providers in grant and contract writing processes. This could include: education around what is required in the application; more ongoing support during the contract period to ensure any issues are identified early and rectified so the contract stays on track; and on completion of the contract, support to complete acquittals and reports. As some Aboriginal people choose to use mainstream services, there is also an ongoing need to ensure that mainstream service providers are delivering quality, culturally responsive services to Aboriginal clients.

In respect to Strategic Element 4, inclusion of further investment into mental health promotion approaches is supported by the MHC, noting that investment in preventive health measures alone is only one component of wellbeing. In addition to robust evaluation, we suggest there should also be identified expectations or outcomes, prior to the investment i.e. identify in detail what changes may occur from the initiative, including what will help communities. To empower communities, we note the importance of ensuring preventative and early-intervention initiatives are localised.

The MHC is agreeable with Strategic Element 5 and believes recruitment, retention and support for Aboriginal people across the government sector should be a high priority. To inform the Strategy, the MHC suggests successful businesses/organisations that are run by Aboriginal people/corporations/organisations should be assessed to identify why and how they are working.

The MHC is agreeable with Strategic Element 6, noting the media plays a large role in the negative impacts of racism. The MHC would welcome the sharing of positive narratives apart from sporting examples, and increased localised training opportunities i.e. community members teaching local organisations about their local culture. To support the monitoring data on experiences of racism, we note the importance of having mechanisms in place that allow these experiences to be reviewed and options to address them explored.

Overall, it is encouraging to see actions and key ideas throughout a number of the Strategic Elements relating to increased recruitment, retention, training and opportunities for Aboriginal people. It is especially encouraging to see the acknowledgment of the need for Aboriginal people to be supported and provided with opportunities to take up more senior and strategic roles. The MHC notes the importance of government agencies further developing their recruitment processes to ensure that Aboriginal people are employed at all levels of government across all directorates.

### Framework

The MHC supports the proposed Framework elements for governance, the role of the newly appointed Aboriginal Advisory Council of Western Australia, the proposed approach for implementation and the establishment of a statutory office of accountability and advocacy in Aboriginal affairs.

The MHC notes it would be appropriate for the statutory office to be staffed by Aboriginal people, and accountability of the implementation should track the government's progress in implementing in Strategy and, more importantly, who the Strategy is impacting on the ground. We also suggest that it would be useful for mechanisms to be put in place to improve communication, so the Strategy is effectively implemented across Western Australia, whether it is by government organisations or ACCOs.

While the paper sets out a whole of government approach, the MHC notes strong leadership is required to ensure that there is a shared vision and accountability for outcomes. The content is broad and there are a range of stakeholders involved, so there is a risk that activity may become disjointed. The implementation phase will be key in this regard.

Overall, a high level of coordination will be required to ensure effective implementation of the Strategy and to ensure there is both accountability for the implementation of the Strategic Elements across government, and a strong emphasis on evaluation of the outcomes.

## **2. ARE WE USING THE RIGHT WORDS?**

The MHC believes the words used in the Strategy are appropriate, and prefers the term 'Aboriginal people' to other terms such as 'First Nations'.

## **3. WHAT ELSE SHOULD WE BE THINKING ABOUT?**

The MHC notes the key purpose of the Discussion Paper is to provide feedback from all members of the community, however we believe the Discussion Paper itself is dense and the language is not as accessible as it could be. This is contrary to the statement in Strategic Element 2, where "appropriate supports or processes to accommodate language or cultural barriers to participation" (p. 15) is identified as important. We believe there is a risk the Discussion Paper, in its current form, may prevent meaningful feedback and ability to influence the nature and content of the Strategy.

The MHC suggests a companion document could be provided to the people who contributed to the consultation. This would be particularly important for Aboriginal people in regional Western Australia who mainly speak language and Aboriginal Australian.

As highlighted in the Discussion Paper, Aboriginal people across Australia have been over consulted. The Strategy could advocate for paid participation policies for Aboriginal people in Western Australia. Such policies would recognise the significant contribution and time that Aboriginal people make to continually participate in consultation and engagement processes, despite their challenging position of entering into discussions with government/decision makers, where there is a history of dispossession, mistrust and trauma.

Regional Aboriginal people, in particular, are deeply cynical about government policies and have been exhausted by consultation processes that do not lead to any change. Other than providing feedback to people who participated in the consultation, the MHC believes the broader release of the document should be delayed until such time as there is an action plan for implementation and some funding attached to it.