



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

Based at the Telethon Kids Institute, the five-year (2016-2020) *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* (Our Children Our Heart) research project is working with the (largely) Noongar Aboriginal community of urban Perth. One of the objectives of the project is to translate the research findings regarding Aboriginal child rearing practices and early childhood development into changes to policy and practice. Three priority areas have been identified through a range of consultations with members of the Aboriginal community(s) across Perth. These priority areas are:

- The impact of child removal
- The importance of education across the early years (early childhood education and care and early schooling); and
- The lack of housing security for many Aboriginal families.

The project is working closely with stakeholders including service providers, to translate the project's research findings into culturally safe policies, practices and services. One of the unique aspects of the project is the incorporation of an Aboriginal worldview and knowledge framework that is achieved through the role of eight Aboriginal Elders who are Co-Researchers on the project.

The following submission represents the views of the eight Elders regarding "A Path Forward: Developing the Western Australian Government's Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy".

We acknowledge the work that you and your department have done in seeking to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (henceforth, respectfully referred to as Aboriginal) in your new "A Path Forward" strategy.

Question one; are the main ideas right?

The *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* project is led by the Aboriginal community of Perth through eight Elder Co-Researchers, and by a large group of over 100 local Elders we report to on an annual basis. Through this co-designed, collaborative consultation process we have been fortunate enough to hear the voices of many members of the Perth Aboriginal community. A consistent message we have received is the need to engage Elders at all levels of decision making related to Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal and Western worldviews differ starkly on the origins of authority. While authority in Western systems is given through roles and bureaucracy, authority in Aboriginal communities is based on age, cultural knowledge and relationships. In Noongar culture Elders are the Birdiyas (Bosses).

The role and status of Elders needs to be recognised in the "A Path Forward" strategy by placing Elders at the centre of the process. As one of the participants in the *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* project told us



Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort (Our Children, Our Heart) Project



“Culture is connected to learning to respect your Elders, connection to the bush, being proud of our ancestors and proud of who we were, and then rebuilding yourself for the new, contemporary way to be a Noongar.”

We note that Elders have only been mentioned once in the “A Path Forward” strategy in the context of “caring for Elders”. Involving Elders at each level the strategy, but particularly embedding Elder-led processes in the overall governance structure, will ensure that culture is truly at the centre. Failing to acknowledge the authority of Elders in the strategy will limit its reach in the community.

You have captured many areas relevant to Aboriginal empowerment in the strategy, however, from the information provided it seems as though Elders have been excluded from the governance of the strategy. The Elder Co-Researchers regard this as a significant oversight.

Question two; are we using the right words?

The consensus among the Elder Co-Researchers is that the term Aboriginal is preferred over “First Nations”.

Question three; what else should we be thinking about?

With respect to the points above, the Elder Co-Researchers of the *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* project suggest reconceptualising the role the Elders play in the “A Path Forward” strategy. Considering how Elders can be integrated into all levels, but particularly at the governance level, of the strategy is critical. In order to truly ground the strategy within a cultural framework, Elders need to be included at the centre. We advocate for moving beyond an advisory/reference group model and towards a model of equal power that grants Elders decision making capacity in the development and implementation of the strategy.

