



Submission in  
response to  
**A Path Forward:  
Developing the Western  
Australian Government's  
Aboriginal Empowerment  
Strategy**

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## 1.0 Introduction

The Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) is the united voice of Local Government in Western Australia. The Association is an independent, membership-based group representing and supporting the work and interests of 138 Local Governments in Western Australia.

The Association provides an essential voice for 1,222 Elected Members and approximately 15,000 Local Government employees as well as over two million constituents of Local Governments in Western Australia. The Association also provides professional advice and offers services that provide financial benefits to the Local Governments and the communities they serve.

The Association acknowledges the place of Aboriginal people as valued staff members, community members, residents and ratepayers of Local Government in Western Australia.

WALGA is committed to advancing the vision for Local Government in Western Australia where:

- a. Local Governments will be built on good governance, autonomy, local leadership, democracy, community engagement and diversity;
- b. Local Governments will have the capacity to provide economically, socially and environmentally sustainable services and infrastructure that meets the needs of their communities.

The 2017 State – Local Government Partnership Agreement seeks to strengthen the partnership between the State and Local Government sectors for the benefit of local communities, and recognises the commitment of the sectors to work together to improve communication, consultation and good governance.

## 2.0 General Comments

The Association appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Discussion Paper '*A Path Forward: Developing the Western Australian Government's Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy*', and further has valued the opportunity for our members to engage in discussion with, and provide feedback directly to, the Department of Premier and Cabinet at an Info-session held on 21 January 2020 at WALGA.

The Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy aims to deliver a strategic foundation that enables the State Government to work more coherently as a whole, and allow it to work better with Aboriginal people, communities and organisations, Commonwealth and Local Governments,

the private and philanthropic sectors and broader society. The whole-of-government strategy also aims to ensure transparency and accountability to the Western Australian community.

This Submission is informed by the Associations' Policy Positions on relevant matters, feedback garnered from our members at the Info-session on 21 January 2020, and written feedback received from three Local Governments.

The Association and its Local Government members are generally supportive of the content and direction of the Discussion Paper and the proposed Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy.

### **WALGA's Policy Positions**

Many of the goals, elements and principles outlined in the Discussion Paper align with Association Policy Positions. These include:

1. The Association supports the efforts of the Local Government sector to recognise and respect Aboriginal cultural practices and places of meaning, through the development of Reconciliation Action Plans. The Association recognises that many Aboriginal places and objects remain significant in the lives of Aboriginal people today and contribute to an understanding by the whole community of our place and history. Reconciliation is about building better relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider Australian community for the benefit of all Australians (Position Statement 3.1.2 Reconciliation).
2. The Association is supportive of conserving and protecting the State's Aboriginal heritage. The Association supports the conservation and protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage in Western Australia and acknowledges the importance to Aboriginal people of their cultural heritage and the central role that cultural heritage and access to country plays in their health and wellbeing. As land managers and land use planning decision-makers, Local Government plays an important role in many activities that have the potential to protect and impact Aboriginal cultural heritage (Position Statement 3.1.3 Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 and South West Native Title Settlement).
3. The Association is supportive of efforts to improve the living conditions and governance in remote Aboriginal communities that currently receive municipal and essential services such as power and water, to a level that is similar to other Australians, living in towns and cities. There are approximately 280 discrete Aboriginal Communities in Western Australia accommodating approximately 17,000 Indigenous people across 26 Local Governments (Position Statement 3.1.1 Service Delivery to Aboriginal Communities).
4. The Association acknowledges Noongar people as the traditional owners of the South West Region (Position Statement 3.1.3 Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 and South West Native Title Settlement).

5. The Association supports improving health outcomes for all Western Australians through the investment in and provision of infrastructure and delivery of services in partnership with health professionals, and through public health planning in accordance with the Public Health Act (2016). Local Governments make a significant contribution to improving, promoting and protecting the health of communities. Through evidence based policy development and planning Local Government can create supportive environments that can help prevent a range of chronic diseases and influence the health and wellbeing of communities (Policy Position 3.2 Health).
6. Local Government supports Aboriginal people, families and communities being empowered to live fulfilling lives and choose their own futures from a secure foundation.

### **Member Feedback at Info-session on 21 January 2020**

On 21 January 2020, WALGA held an Info-session and webinar which was attended by 40 representatives from 22 metropolitan, regional and remote Local Governments. This provided an opportunity for a diverse group of Local Government staff, CEO's and Elected Members from across Western Australia to provide feedback on the Discussion Paper and Strategy, and more broadly on the State Government's Aboriginal Affairs policies. This included a number of Aboriginal Local Government staff.

Key themes that emerged during the Info-session were:

- The importance of improving education, employment, health and housing outcomes for Aboriginal people as a matter of urgency. The important role that Local Government plays in supporting and facilitating improved outcomes in these areas, was highlighted.
- Key principles that should underpin the Strategy are: addressing and responding to the intergenerational trauma and shame that Aboriginal people have experienced as a result of historical governmental policies and dispossession of land, supporting young Aboriginal people to have positive aspirations for their future, and acknowledging the need for healing.
- The Strategy should explicitly recognise the central role of truth telling as a means of both educating broader society and assisting with the healing of past hurts and trauma.
- Actions that encourage the sharing of cultural understanding and respect, for example engaging Aboriginal Advisory Groups, cultural awareness training, and opportunities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to interact, play a key role in building positive relationships between communities. Positive change often happens at a local level but is not adequately recognised or supported by State, and sometimes Local, Government, due to funding and administrative constraints. The implementation plans that are developed pursuant to the Strategy need to be innovative and responsive to the local context. The State Government needs to commit to support the initiatives put in place by local communities.

- The Strategy should recognise the important role that reconciliation champions and allies play in supporting Aboriginal people through partnerships and advocacy, which is something that many Local Governments excel at.
- Increased resourcing and improvements to grant and funding processes that provide stronger support to community organisations would result in better outcomes for Aboriginal and wider communities.
- Through education at primary, secondary and tertiary level much can be done by the State and Commonwealth Governments to ensure that students are educated about Aboriginal culture and history. Teachers need additional support to become culturally sensitive and aware and to improve their skills in teaching Aboriginal children.
- The Strategy needs to include a mechanism to ensure that Aboriginal people and culture are at the centre of decision making, because often Aboriginal people's own ideas and solutions have been overlooked.
- Local Government were interested to understand more about how the Strategy will be implemented, funded and resourced at the regional and local level, what role District Leadership Groups may play, and how they can be involved in the discussions around that implementation framework.
- Many Local Governments have partnerships with many Aboriginal communities, and some Local Governments (for example, the Shire of Halls Creek) are akin to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations as they have primarily Aboriginal populations including decision makers (Elected Members) and residents.

### 3.0 Recommendations

1. **The Association supports the inclusion of principles that specifically recognise the central importance of:**
  - **Acknowledging the impact of intergenerational trauma and shame and supporting Aboriginal peoples healing and wellbeing.**
  - **Fostering young Aboriginal peoples' positive aspirations for their future.**
  - **Education about Aboriginal culture for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.**
  - **Truth telling.**
2. **Local Government should be involved in the design, development and implementation of State, regional and local action and implementation plans under the Strategy, recognising that the capacity, resources, staff levels and strategic priorities of all Local Governments are different.**

3. **The roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders, including Local Government, should be clearly articulated in the State, regional and local action and implementation plans.**
4. **The State Government consider aligning the measurement and evaluation of the outcomes of the Strategy to a recognised outcomes measurement framework**
5. **Aligning the Strategy with the developing State Reconciliation Action Planning Framework that will support Local Governments to deliver outcomes that empower Aboriginal people.**

## 4.0 Response to Specific Questions

The Discussion Paper requested feedback to a set of specific questions. The Association provides the following in response.

1. **Are the main ideas right? Do you agree with the description of the overall goal, principles, strategic elements and framework? Would you change or add anything?**

The Association agrees that the main ideas are right and with the description of the overall goal, principles, strategic elements and framework.

The Association supports the inclusion of **principles** that specifically recognise the central importance of the following in empowering Aboriginal people:

- Acknowledging the impact of intergenerational trauma and shame and supporting Aboriginal peoples healing and wellbeing;
- Fostering young Aboriginal peoples' positive aspirations for their future;
- Education about Aboriginal culture for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people; and
- Truth telling.

Responses from the Local Government sector further provided:

- Consider including under 'Principles – Culture and Country' that the role of the Government is also to recognise and acknowledge the dynamics, geographical sensitivities and conflicts between Aboriginal peoples and groups and with non-Aboriginal people, to support effective communication and assist stakeholders to work together to create good lives.
- Examining the framework of the strategy through a gender lens would be a meaningful addition given the additional hardship and disadvantage that Aboriginal women and girls face. Questions in relation to gender that the Strategy could address include 'How will the identified disadvantages be addressed at a gender level within the Strategy?', 'How are Aboriginal women and girls going to be empowered in engagement and



decision-making to ensure disadvantage is not a barrier to inclusion in the Strategy and its implementation?’ and ‘How will the separation of women’s and men’s business within Aboriginal culture be considered and/or acknowledged within the Strategy and its implementation?’

## **2. Are we using the right words?**

The Association is supportive of the Strategy using specific words and language that are supported by the Aboriginal community.

Responses from the Local Government sector further provided:

- ‘Key elements’ and ‘Key Ideas’ are ambiguous, ‘Recommendations’ may be preferable.
- Additional terms that may enhance the ‘Empowerment: Foundations and Futures’ tree diagram include Justice and Equity, collaboration and partnerships, civic participation and a sense of place and belonging.

## **3. What else should we be thinking about?**

Many Local Governments have Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) which provide a framework for promoting and facilitating respect, trust and positive relationships between the community and Aboriginal people. Ensuring that the Strategy aligns with the principles of RAPs will support and facilitate Local Government to seek outcomes that align with both. Involving Reconciliation Australia and Reconciliation WA in the development of the Strategy would assist in this process.

City Deals and Regional Deals provide a powerful mechanism to deliver place based initiatives through partnership between Commonwealth, State and Local Government. The [Barkly Regional Deal](#), entered into in the Northern Territory in 2019, is the first regional deal in Australia and aims to improve the productivity and liveability of the Barkly region by stimulating economic growth and improving social outcomes. Key components include 28 economic, social and cultural initiatives to be implemented in the region, a 10 year time frame and community governance framework.

[OCHRE: NSW Government Plan for Aboriginal affairs: education, employment and accountability](#), is developed around a core belief in fostering aspirations, identifying opportunities and promoting responsibilities, emphasises a number of key factors including partnerships over paternalism, local solutions over ‘one size fits all’, and recognises the importance of healing. The major initiatives under OCHRE address linking education and employment, teaching of Aboriginal culture and language, local decision making (including working together through partnerships and networks), and accountability. The 2018 Five Year Review of OCHRE found that to deliver what the Aboriginal community wants, better resourcing and ongoing community engagement and control were necessary in the mid to long term. The OCHRE framework and approach provides a useful case study in a

methodology for developing and delivering partnerships between Government and Aboriginal peoples.

Responses from the Local Government sector provided:

- Early and continuous engagement with Local Government about the development of the Strategy will provide tangible benefits to Aboriginal people because Local Governments work directly with community at the grassroots level, driving change and implementing actions that align with State Government priorities.
- Reference in the Strategy to the Uluru Statement from the Heart would articulate the State Government's commitment to empowering Aboriginal people.
- With respect to *Key Element 3 – Enabling Aboriginal led solutions through improved service commissioning and grant-making*, and discussion on page 24 about the Framework, consideration should be given to aligning the approach to the WA Council of Social Services (WACOSS) [Outcomes Measurement Framework](#). This provides a hierarchy of outcomes and indicators which provide the architecture for a whole-of-government and a whole-of-sector approach to service delivery, with a focus on outcomes and people rather than outputs and programs.
- With respect to *Key Element 3 – Enabling Aboriginal led solutions through improved service commissioning and grant-making*, and discussion on page 24 about the Framework, consideration should be given to aligning the approach with the [State Public Health Plan](#) Objective 3 'Improving Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing', which underpins relevant Local Government public health planning.
- Developing supporting tools and resources under the Strategy for Local Government will assist them to pursue opportunities to empower Aboriginal people that align with the Strategy.

## 5.0 Conclusion

The Association has valued being consulted about the development of the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy and welcomes opportunities for further engagement and collaboration.

The Association supports Aboriginal people, families and communities being empowered to live fulfilling lives and aspire to futures of their own choosing from a secure foundation. Local Government is in a unique position, as the level of government closest to the community, to support the empowerment of Aboriginal people.

## 6.0 Appendix

Shire of Gingin Brief Comments, 7 January 2020

City of Subiaco Consultation Submission, 20 January 2020

City of Wanneroo Submission, 22 January 2020