



The Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy

Western Australia 2021-2029

Strategy Overview



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A note about language

In this document, the term Aboriginal people is used in preference to "Indigenous" or "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander" people, in recognition that Aboriginal peoples are the original inhabitants of Western Australia.

Together, Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders make up the First Nations of Australia; however, Torres Strait Islander people in Western Australia have unique cultures, identities and histories, distinct from those of Aboriginal people. On average, Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders have different socioeconomic profiles and face different challenges, despite sharing a number of common experiences, including a history of racial discrimination. Some families have both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage, and this rich diversity is acknowledged and celebrated.

This document is primarily about Aboriginal people in Western Australia (including Aboriginal people who also identify as Torres Strait Islanders). We respectfully recognise the valuable contributions of Torres Strait Islanders to Western Australia's society, economy, and communities. We acknowledge that some of the principles and strategic directions outlined in this document may also apply to Torres Strait Islanders.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Government of Western Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians throughout Western Australia and their continuing connection to the land, waters and community. We pay our respects to all members of Western Australia's Aboriginal communities and their cultures; and to Elders both past and present.



About the Strategy

Purpose of the Strategy

The Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy (the Strategy) sets out how the Western Australian Government will direct its efforts towards a future in which **all Aboriginal people, families and communities are empowered to live good lives and choose their own futures from a secure foundation.**

Developed in partnership with the Aboriginal Advisory Council of Western Australia, the Strategy also sets out the State's approach to meeting its commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

The Strategy outlines a high-level framework for future State Government policies, plans, initiatives and programs that contribute to better outcomes for Aboriginal people, built around genuine partnerships and engagement with Aboriginal people, strong accountability, and culturally responsive ways of working.

The Strategy's release marks the beginning of a journey towards Western Australia's 2029 bicentenary, an opportunity for reflection on the history and experiences of Aboriginal people in this State. A measure of the Strategy's success by 2029 will be that Aboriginal people view their relationships with the Government as genuine, effective and respectful, and that clear progress has been made towards equality and equity of social and economic opportunity.

1. Online at: <https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/departments-and-cabinet/developing-aboriginal-empowerment-strategy> Feedback on the discussion paper is available here: <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/document-collections/feedback-discussion-paper>

About this Strategy Overview document

This **Strategy Overview** document provides an overview of the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy. It offers a brief explanation of how and why the Strategy was developed, and outlines its key elements and core principles.

The Strategy Overview is designed to be read together with the **Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy: Policy Guide**, which gives a more detailed explanation of the Strategy's elements and its rationale, and important information about implementation.

How the Strategy was developed

Development of the Strategy began with a review of what the Government had already been told over many years, especially by Aboriginal people, about what is needed to achieve better outcomes. This included formal reports as well as the outcomes of a range of forums, workshops and meetings (see the Policy Guide for more information).

The Government engaged with Aboriginal organisations from across Western Australia on how to build on this foundation and shape a future strategy. A discussion paper reflecting these inputs was released in 2019 – *A Path Forward: Developing the Western Australian Government's Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy*.¹ The Government and the Aboriginal Advisory Council have worked together to review and incorporate feedback on the discussion paper in developing the final Strategy.

The Strategy also reflects the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (July 2020), in both its strategic direction and the framework for its implementation, evaluation, and accountability.

Implementing the Strategy

The concrete actions needed to put the Strategy into effect will be set out in a series of implementation plans over the life of the Strategy. These will outline investments, reforms and initiatives that address the elements of this Strategy, as well as the State's commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Closing the Gap).

The Aboriginal Advisory Council will be the Government's strategic partner in the cross-government development of implementation plans. Implementation planning will also be informed by broader engagement with Aboriginal people and organisations. The processes for engagement are likely to change over the life of the Strategy, as structural reforms relating to Aboriginal representation come into effect.

Accountability and evaluation

An accountability framework will be developed to provide the basis for transparent measurement and reporting on progress under both the Strategy and Closing the Gap. The accountability framework will address:

- the changes the Government makes in the way it works with Aboriginal people; and
- the life outcomes that Aboriginal people experience.

The framework will be refined and enhanced over time, including by incorporating regional-level data and performance measurement as it becomes available.

Reporting under the accountability framework will be aligned to Western Australia's reporting obligations under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

The evaluation of individual programs will remain the responsibility of each agency, informed by the principles outlined in this Strategy. The Strategy itself will also be reviewed periodically, according to how successfully it is being implemented and to ensure it reflects changing circumstances.



Why the Strategy is needed

The current system is not working as effectively for – or with – Aboriginal people as it should. Evidence for this can be found in a range of indicators showing that, on average, Aboriginal people have lower levels of health, economic security, social and emotional wellbeing, and educational attainment than other Western Australians.²

This unacceptable situation shows the enormous impacts that Western Australia's past continues to have on its present and future. From the earliest days of colonisation, a range of Government policies, practices and laws have damaged the foundations of Aboriginal people's independence, prosperity, and wellbeing.

Aboriginal economies, and the ecologies they relied on, were destroyed by the appropriation and clearing of land. Connection to country, and the ability to fulfil obligations to care for country, were disrupted by physical dislocation, the denial of legal control, and the destruction of cultural heritage. Aboriginal languages, spirituality, Law/Lore, and authority structures – the foundations of community life – were systematically undermined. Social and economic inclusion within broader society was blocked by segregation, labour exploitation, racism and discrimination. Families faced significant barriers to their opportunities to build economic independence and prosperity across generations.

Some of the deepest and most lasting impacts came from the policies of child removal that resulted in the Stolen Generations. The children who were taken away from their families experienced great damage – to their sense of self, their connection with family and culture, their trust in others, and later in life, their relationships with their own children and families.

A study from 2018 estimated that approximately one quarter of Aboriginal people over 50 in Western Australia had been removed from their families when they were children.³ The same study estimated that approximately one half of all Aboriginal adults in Western Australia are descendants or members of the Stolen Generations.⁴ Compared to other Aboriginal people, members of the Stolen Generations are significantly more likely to be imprisoned, have poor health, rely on government payments, feel discriminated against, and have problems accessing services. Many of their descendants also experience similar issues at higher rates than other Aboriginal people.⁵

On 28 May 1997, the Parliament of Western Australia apologised to Aboriginal people “on behalf of all Western Australians for the past policies under which Aboriginal children were removed from their families” and expressed “deep regret at the hurt and distress that this caused”.⁶ The Government of Western Australia remains committed to what was said on that day – **we are deeply sorry**.

2. Australian Government (2020) National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Baseline Data, online at: <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/data>

3. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Stolen Generations aged 50 and over, online at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/indigenous-australians/stolen-generation-aged-50-and-over/contents/table-of-contents>

4. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Stolen Generations and descendants Numbers, demographic characteristics, online at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/a6c077c3-e1af-40de-847f-e8a3e3456c44/aihw-ihw-195.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

5. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Stolen Generations and descendants Numbers, demographic characteristics, online at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/a6c077c3-e1af-40de-847f-e8a3e3456c44/aihw-ihw-195.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

6. Western Australia, Parliamentary Debates, Legislative Assembly, 28 May 1997, pp 3332-3343.

The legacies of the State's history, from colonisation to the Stolen Generations, continue to affect Aboriginal people today. Past injustices live on through intergenerational trauma and cycles of disadvantage (see opposite, *Healing*). Racial discrimination, systemic inequality and implicit bias continue to hold back progress, despite considerable improvements in recent years. Reform efforts are hampered by the long-standing marginalisation of Aboriginal people from the political process and other formal structures for decision-making.

The purpose of describing these historical and ongoing dynamics is not to create feelings of guilt or shame, but to build an understanding of how Aboriginal people's current levels of disadvantage came about, and to use this understanding to work towards future solutions.

The Strategy is premised on the recognition that the foundations of Aboriginal people's empowerment have been eroded by past policies, and must be restored to achieve better outcomes. The Government's role is to provide the necessary supports and contribute to the structural, economic, and social changes that are needed. In some cases, this means the Government must step back to create space for change; in other cases, the Government must step up and drive essential reforms. In all cases, the Government must work in partnership with Aboriginal people.



Healing

Healing is an essential part of this Strategy. Aboriginal people have said very clearly that healing and trauma must be addressed for social and economic outcomes to improve.

Healing is about addressing **trauma**. Trauma can be experienced at the individual level (such as abuse, neglect, or family separation), the household level (for example witnessing violence or self-harm), or the societal level (including dispossession and dislocation, racism, social exclusion, and the experiences of the Stolen Generations).

Without healing, trauma can be passed on to others as **intergenerational trauma**, and new traumas may be created through **cycles of disadvantage**. The healing process allows individuals, families and communities to address the effects of past and ongoing trauma, and reduce its impacts on future generations.

Healing is vital to achieving this Strategy's goal, because of the widespread impacts of previous traumas, particularly from the policies and practices that led to the Stolen Generations and the physical dislocation of people from their traditional country. Many of the Strategy's elements and principles are expected to contribute directly or indirectly to healing and the prevention of new traumas.

Goal of the Strategy

The goal of this Strategy is:

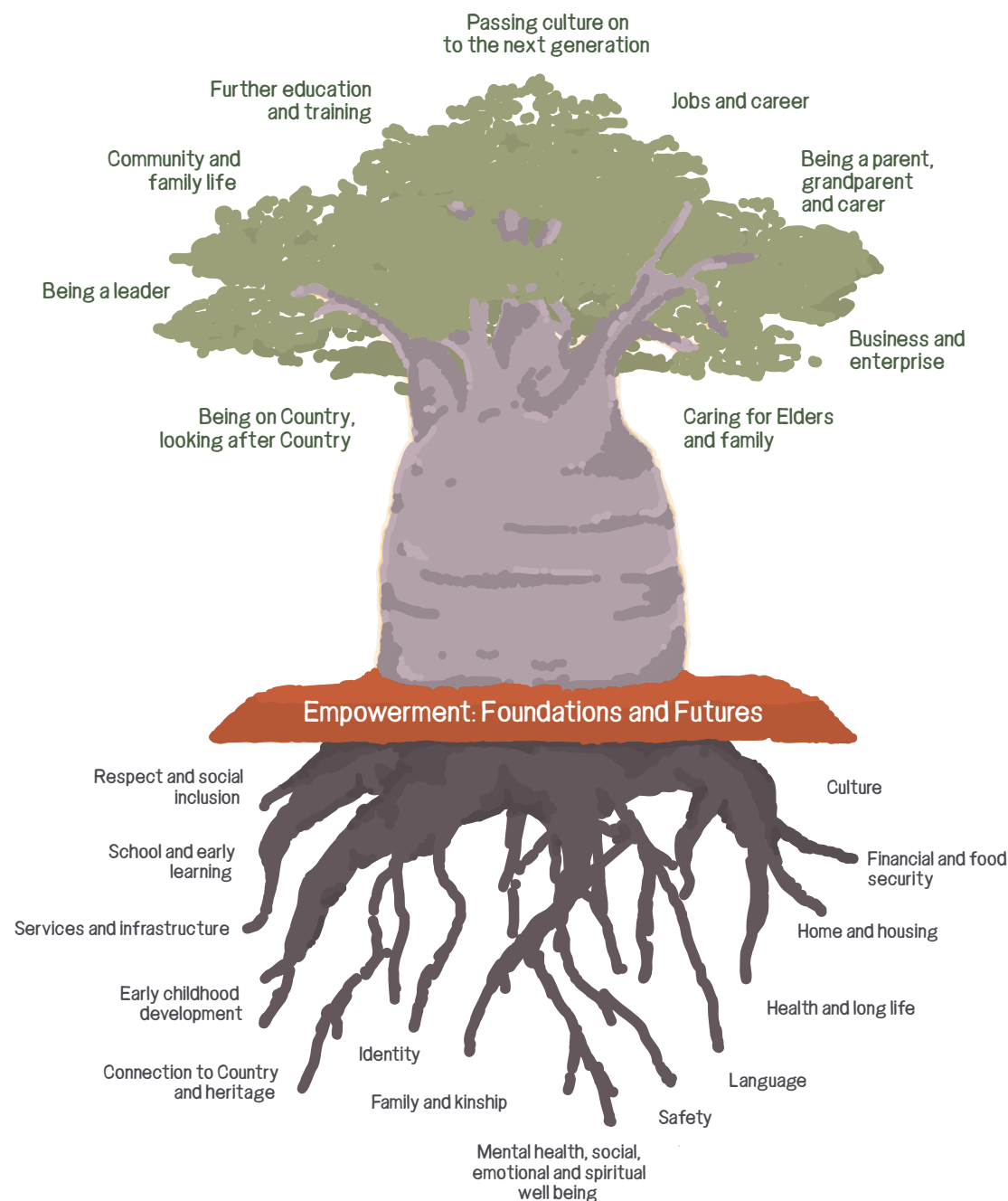
Aboriginal people, families and communities empowered to live good lives and choose their own futures from a secure foundation.

Critically, Aboriginal people – rather than the Government or anyone else – decide what makes a ‘good life’ and how to achieve it.

The Government’s efforts to support empowerment must address the fundamentals of wellbeing, such as health and mental health, housing, education and culture. Yet as vital as these things are, flourishing lives also need hopes and aspirations – a vision for the future to strive towards, to enable future social and economic inclusion and wellbeing.

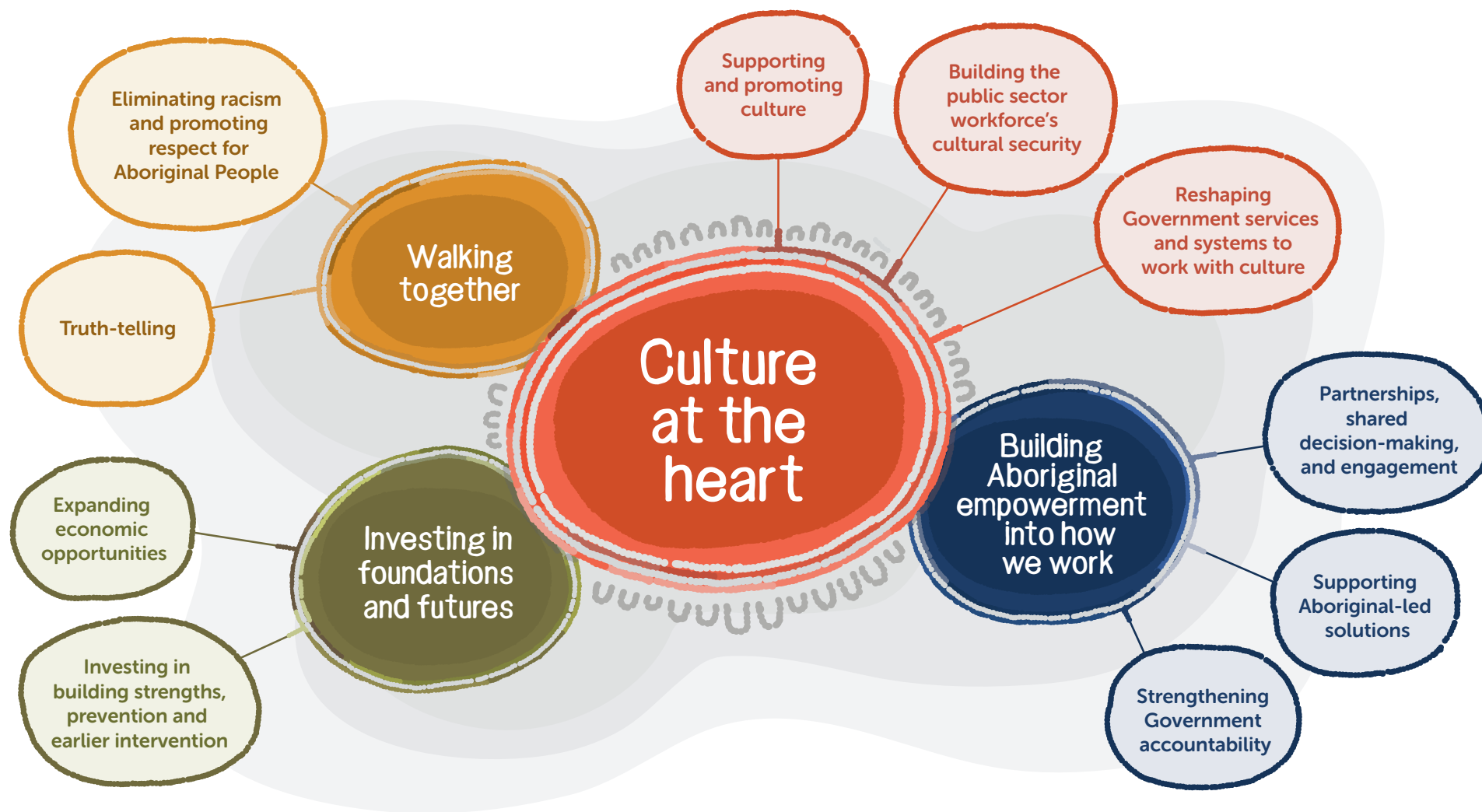
Equally, we cannot focus solely on future aspirations like jobs, businesses and community leadership. These things all depend on a safe and solid foundation. The Government and Aboriginal people need to work together to make sure that strong foundations are in place.

Over time, foundations and futures can reinforce each other to achieve generational change towards the Strategy’s goal. The tree opposite is intended to capture this idea.



The Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy

The key elements of the Strategy are shown below and outlined in more detail on the following pages. Taken together, they set the high-level direction for the State Government, its agencies and their employees to work towards the Strategy's goal.





Culture is at the heart of a secure foundation for life, and provides the landscape in which futures are imagined, chosen and pursued.

A. Supporting and promoting culture

- i) Value, recognise and celebrate Aboriginal peoples' cultures, languages, relationships to country, knowledge, and heritage
- ii) Invest in initiatives that support Aboriginal cultural identity, cultural continuity and community leadership
- iii) Use agreements with Traditional Owner groups to recognise and support Aboriginal peoples' connection to culture, country and heritage

B. Building the public sector workforce's cultural responsiveness

- i) Improve the cultural responsiveness of the public sector workforce, through strong leadership, high-quality training, and place-based inductions
- ii) Ensure Aboriginal people are well-represented and supported at all levels of the public sector – including management and executive – by recruiting, retaining and advancing Aboriginal employees and ensuring agencies are attractive places for Aboriginal people to work

C. Reshaping Government services and systems to work with culture

- i) Work in a way that recognises the importance of culture to Aboriginal people's wellbeing and resilience, and the impacts of past government actions on Aboriginal people's connection to culture and country
- ii) Review and change Government systems and services to ensure they build on – and do not undermine – Aboriginal people's cultural strengths, cultural identities, community leadership, and ways of working
- iii) Make services inclusive and accessible to Aboriginal people, taking cultural considerations into account

For more information see
pp 24-25 of the Policy Guide





Building Aboriginal empowerment into how we work

Better outcomes will not come from government-led solutions provided for, or imposed on Aboriginal people. Even though new ways of thinking are required, this is not enough – new systems, processes and behaviours are also essential. The necessary reforms are not just about better services but rather a fundamental change in the relationship between Aboriginal people and the Government.

D. Partnerships, shared decision-making, and engagement

- i) Ensure Aboriginal people have a defined and systematic role in decision-making, proportional to the potential impacts or opportunities for Aboriginal people
- ii) Support Aboriginal representation in decision-making, and build the engagement capacity of both Aboriginal and government participants
- iii) Enable more decisions within Government agencies to be made at the regional or local level, enabling greater place-based engagement

E. Supporting Aboriginal-led solutions

- i) Significantly increase the proportion of service delivery by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations in relevant sectors (defined in the Policy Guide)
- ii) Support Aboriginal organisations and the Aboriginal services sector to build capacity

F. Strengthening Government accountability

Incorporate these aspects of stronger accountability into Government agencies' ways of working:

- i) Commitments: making credible commitments about what the Government will do, including how it will engage with Aboriginal people
- ii) Monitoring and evaluation: evaluating the effectiveness of Government actions, and monitoring indicators to understand whether or not outcomes are improving
- iii) Transparency: publicly providing clear, honest, and accessible information about the Government's actions and their outcomes
- iv) Being held to account: Ensuring that opportunities exist for outside parties to engage with Government agencies about their actions and the outcomes, to ask for explanations and to seek future commitments

For more information see
pp 26-31 of the Policy Guide



Investing in foundations and futures

Because of the impacts of Western Australia's history, significant investment is required to build up the foundations needed to ensure that all Aboriginal people can pursue their own futures. Further, economic participation is critical to providing both secure foundations and rewarding futures.

G. Investing in building strengths, prevention and earlier intervention

- i) Invest in initiatives that build strengths, reduce vulnerability through prevention and early intervention, and minimise the later need for crisis responses
- ii) Improve the integration of services

H. Expanding economic opportunities

- i) Support Aboriginal people's employment and business aspirations
- ii) Connect Aboriginal people with employers and markets
- iii) Expand markets for Aboriginal employees and businesses

For more information see
pp 32-39 of the Policy Guide



Walking together

The legacy of Western Australia's history means it is essential to recognise and address the impacts of past and ongoing injustices, while also acknowledging and celebrating the enduring strength, resilience and contribution of Aboriginal people and cultures.

I. Truth-telling

Contribute to truth-telling and incorporate it into Government agencies' business.

J. Eliminating racism and promoting respect for Aboriginal people

Reduce the incidence and negative impacts of racism both within State agencies and the broader public, and to promote greater understanding of the State's history and the cultures of its First Peoples.

For more information see
pp 40-42 of the Policy Guide

Principles

These are the principles upon which the strategic elements of the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy are founded. Applying them is essential to achieving the Strategy's goal.

Empowerment and self-determination

- Aboriginal peoples are the first peoples of Western Australia. The Government has obligations to Aboriginal people both as citizens and as Traditional Owners of Western Australia.
- Empowerment and self-determination are essential for Aboriginal people's wellbeing.
- Policy decisions about Aboriginal people cannot be made without Aboriginal people.
 - For decisions with high potential impact or opportunity for Aboriginal people, this means **partnership** and/or **shared decision-making**.
 - For other decisions, it means **genuine engagement** with affected Aboriginal people at a level **proportional** to the potential impact or opportunity.
- Aboriginal people must have the opportunity to engage from an informed perspective, with clarity about process, expectations and responsibilities.

Culture, country and family

- Culture, country, heritage, language, family and kinship are central to Aboriginal people's wellbeing. Aboriginal cultures across the State have differences as well as similarities.
- Aboriginal cultures are living, vibrant, and diverse; however, many Aboriginal people have been disconnected from their country and culture by past government policies and actions.
- Relationships to country are a fundamental source of cultural and economic value to Aboriginal people.

Diversity of people and places

- The opportunities and challenges for Aboriginal people can vary between urban, regional and remote locations, and between different communities.
- Policies and programs should be developed and implemented as close to the local or regional level as possible, with the involvement of those most affected.

Integrated, culturally responsive and secure services

- Service delivery by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations can increase their effectiveness and reach, improve Aboriginal employment opportunities, and help develop and retain skills within communities.
- Services to Aboriginal people are to be:
 - culturally responsive and secure, and informed by Aboriginal concepts of wellbeing;
 - integrated, holistic, flexible and easy to navigate;
 - accessible, taking into account geographic location, cultural and language diversity, access to technology, and financial circumstances;
 - place-based and responsive to local need and circumstances;
 - family-focused, trauma-informed and directed to building strengths and reducing vulnerability;
 - responsive to gender, age, disability and sexual orientation; and
 - equitable.
- Policy development should be informed by the experiences of service users and providers.
- The integration of policy and services across policy portfolios, working to shared outcomes, allows effort and investment to be better targeted in priority areas, and allows more effective service delivery.
- The Government as a whole is responsible for delivering results through coordination between State agencies, Commonwealth and local governments, the private sector and the broader community. Flexibility should be applied to address issues that do not fit within traditional agency responsibilities.

Accountability and evaluation

- The Government is accountable for its actions under this Strategy, and must be transparent about these actions and their outcomes.
- Policies are to be informed by relevant evidence, including evaluations, research, and Aboriginal people's own lived experiences.
- Relevant data is to be made available to all participants in decision-making.
- Initiatives must be evaluated over realistic time frames; investment and services need time to show whether they are working.
- The accurate interpretation of data about Aboriginal people requires an Aboriginal cultural context and is best done in partnership with Aboriginal people.
- Innovation and flexibility are essential; evidence-informed policy does not mean doing only what has been previously proven to work.

Equity and Equality

- The Government must ensure equality of opportunity and equitable outcomes (substantive equality).
- Racism – in all its forms – is unacceptable.
- Government decisions affecting the broader community must account for impacts on and opportunities for Aboriginal people.
- The Western Australian public sector must be a culturally secure workplace, offering attractive and meaningful career paths for Aboriginal employees.

Land and negotiated agreements

Land, waters, cultural heritage, and negotiated agreements have an important place in this Strategy. Aboriginal people have consistently emphasised the crucial connection between land and wellbeing. The rich and interconnected relationship between Aboriginal people and country was directly confronted by colonisation through dispossession, displacement and conflict.

There is immense potential for land and agreement-making to contribute to this Strategy – right across Government, not just for those agencies with direct portfolio responsibility. Land tenure, native title, cultural heritage, land management, natural resources, and the regulation of land uses such as pastoral or mining, all have important implications for social policy and economic development. Rather than treating land-related activities in isolation or as a purely technical or legal matter, Government agencies are encouraged to see the connections between their land-related activities and the broader goal and elements of this Strategy.

In many parts of the State, negotiated agreements can be a powerful way for Traditional Owner groups to engage with a broad range of Government agencies and develop creative and collaborative approaches to supporting greater social and economic independence. Depending on the situation, this approach can complement other place-based partnerships between the Government and Aboriginal people.

The Government acknowledges that many Aboriginal people in Western Australia live outside their traditional country. In some cases, this is a result of past policies that led to Aboriginal people being displaced, or relocated to other areas. In other cases, it simply reflects Aboriginal people's ongoing right as citizens to move freely within the State.

In the context of land and agreement-making, this situation raises complex issues requiring sensitivity and an understanding of the circumstances of all Aboriginal people involved. The Government's approach to land and agreement-making respects both the special position of Traditional Owners and the rights that all Aboriginal people have as citizens.

Where appropriate, agreement-making processes will explore ways in which Aboriginal people who live in the agreement area – but who are not Traditional Owners – can also benefit. Where Aboriginal people, communities or organisations seek land tenure in areas for which they are not Traditional Owners, the Government will engage constructively with all parties about the most appropriate way forward.





The full Strategy is available at
wa.gov.au/AboriginalEmpowerment