



Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Communities**

Aboriginal Cultural Framework 2024–2034





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Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Communities acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands throughout Western Australia (WA) and pay respect to, and recognise the contribution from, all Elders past and present. We recognise the diversity and the significant importance of cultural heritage, values and beliefs of Aboriginal people and their continuing connection to land, sea and community.

We extend this respect to Aboriginal employees across the Department of Communities, valuing and recognising the skills, experience and contributions they bring to support the people of WA.

The Aboriginal Cultural Framework was developed on the lands of the Whadjuk people, the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the Perth region, with significant involvement from Aboriginal people and community across WA.

Special thanks

The Department of Communities acknowledges the significant contribution of Kambarang Services in leading state-wide engagement and working in partnership with the Department of Communities on this important work. The Department of Communities would also like to acknowledge and express our deepest gratitude and appreciation to the Aboriginal community members, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and Department of Communities employees who generously shared their stories and experiences which have guided and informed the development of this Aboriginal Cultural Framework.

Artist acknowledgement

The artwork in this document is taken from a piece created by Justin Martin of Djurandi Dreaming and Department of Communities staff, during 2019 NAIDOC Week celebrations.



Leadership message

The Department of Communities is deeply committed to supporting cultural reform to improve whole-of-life outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and communities across WA. This Aboriginal Cultural Framework (Framework), our first, is an important milestone towards new ways of working at the Department of Communities as we strengthen the cultural competency and capability of our staff, systems and policies across the agency. In implementing this Framework, we commit to playing our part in contributing to a brighter future where all Aboriginal people can thrive, be immersed in their culture, and enjoy the same rights and freedoms as all other Western Australians.

The Framework was informed through extensive engagement with more than 800 Aboriginal stakeholders across WA and highlights the need for change in how we work and interact with Aboriginal people who provide or access services.

The development of the Framework is aligned with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, with a particular focus on Priority Reform 3: Transforming government organisations. Priority Reform 3 addresses the improvement of mainstream institutions to ensure governments, their organisations and their institutions are accountable for Closing the Gap and are culturally safe and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal people, including through the services they fund.

On a local scale, the Framework complements the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy – Western Australia 2021–2029 delivered by the State Government and supports our response to the recent Agency Capability Review to provide better outcomes and ways of working across the Department of Communities.

I thank everyone who shared their knowledge and experiences to help develop the Framework. Your participation is valuable to help create a better future for the many Aboriginal people this will support.

Implementing the Framework is the responsibility of all Department of Communities employees to help ensure better outcomes for Aboriginal people across WA. With your support we can walk together in our continuing journey towards reconciliation.

Mike Rowe
Director General
Department of Communities



Statement of intent: a shared commitment

The Department of Communities (the Department) recognises the enormous impact that WA'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. The Department acknowledges its own role in contributing to this trauma through the administration of past policies and programs that have adversely impacted Aboriginal people and continue to do so.

The Framework will support the Department and its vision through the Strategic Direction Statement of 'Better lives together, through people, place and home'. Aligned with trauma-informed practice principles, the Framework will allow the Department to become more culturally competent to ensure we provide culturally safe services to Aboriginal people and to embed a 'culture at the heart' approach, which seeks to empower Aboriginal individuals, families and communities across the state. In doing so, the Department will be a culturally safe environment to attract, retain and support a high-performing Aboriginal workforce, and support the empowerment of Aboriginal leadership at all levels.

Definitions

The intention of this document is to use language that is clear and inclusive, however it is acknowledged that there is not always consensus on meaning, especially with language associated with this subject matter.

To ensure a clear understanding of key concepts discussed within the Framework, some key definitions and their intended meaning have been provided below. Additional terminology used in this document is contained in the Glossary on page 29.

Aboriginal

The term 'Aboriginal' is used in preference to 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' people, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of WA. Use of the word 'Aboriginal' throughout this document refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Cultural competency

The term 'cultural competency' refers to a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.¹

This definition recognises that cultural competency can be applied at the individual level and at the organisational level and sees the development of cultural competency as a continuous and dynamic process requiring ongoing self-assessment and continuous learning. It can be measured on a continuum to assess an individual's or organisation's cultural competency and measure progress.²

Cultural safety

For the purposes of this document, the term 'cultural safety' refers to overcoming the power imbalances of places, people and policies that occur between the majority non-Aboriginal position and the minority Aboriginal person so that there is no assault, challenge or denial of the Aboriginal person's identity, of who they are and what they need. Cultural safety is met through actions from the majority position which recognise, respect and nurture the unique cultural identity of Aboriginal people. Only the Aboriginal person who is a recipient of a service or interaction can determine whether it is culturally safe.³

Trauma

Trauma occurs when our ability to cope is overwhelmed. Trauma can have a significant effect on your physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing. The impacts of trauma, whether resolved or acknowledged, may surface at any time, particularly when survivors tell or repeat their experiences, or when they encounter similar experiences are shared by others. Trauma looks different for people depending on their experience of trauma and other factors such as exposure to previous traumatic events, access to support and mental health status.⁴

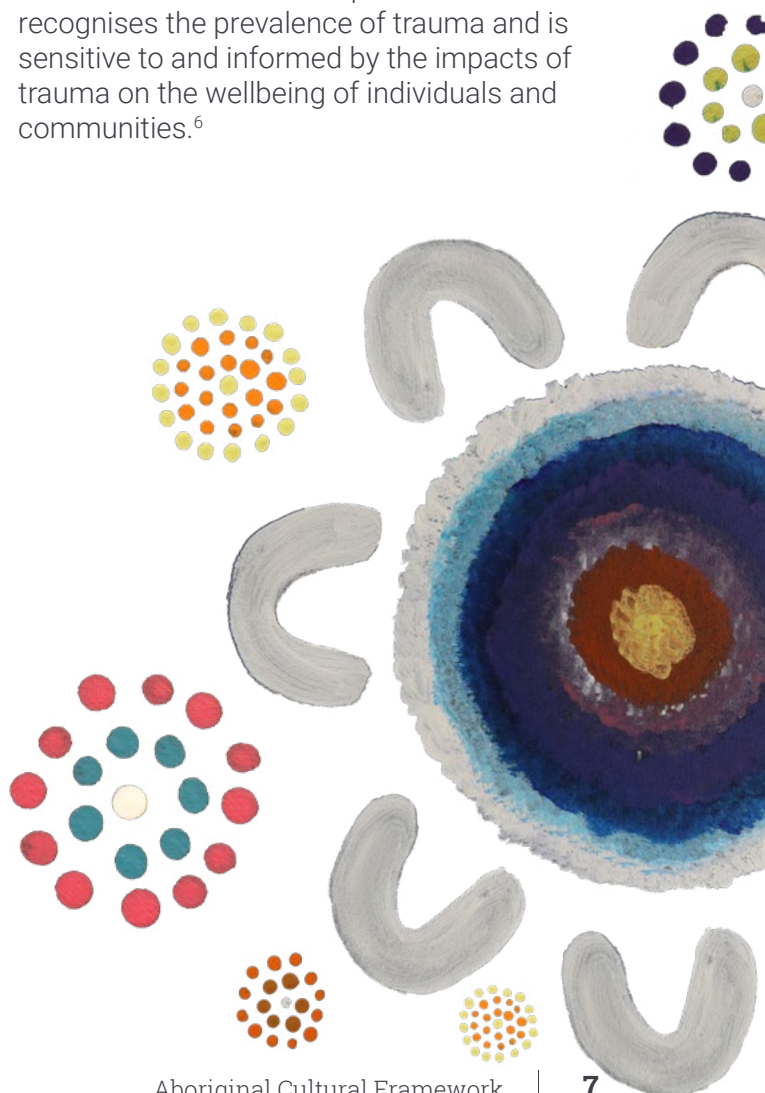
Intergenerational trauma

If people do not have the opportunity to heal from trauma, they may unknowingly pass it onto others through their behaviour. Their children may experience difficulties with attachment, disconnection from their extended families and culture, and high levels of stress from family and community members who are dealing with the impacts of trauma. This can create developmental issues for children, who are particularly susceptible to distress at a young age. This creates a cycle of trauma, where the

impact is passed from one generation to the next. In Australia, intergenerational trauma predominantly affects the children, grandchildren and future generations of the Stolen Generations. Stolen Generations survivors might also pass on the impacts of institutionalisation, finding it difficult to know how to nurture their children because they were denied the opportunity to be nurtured themselves.⁵

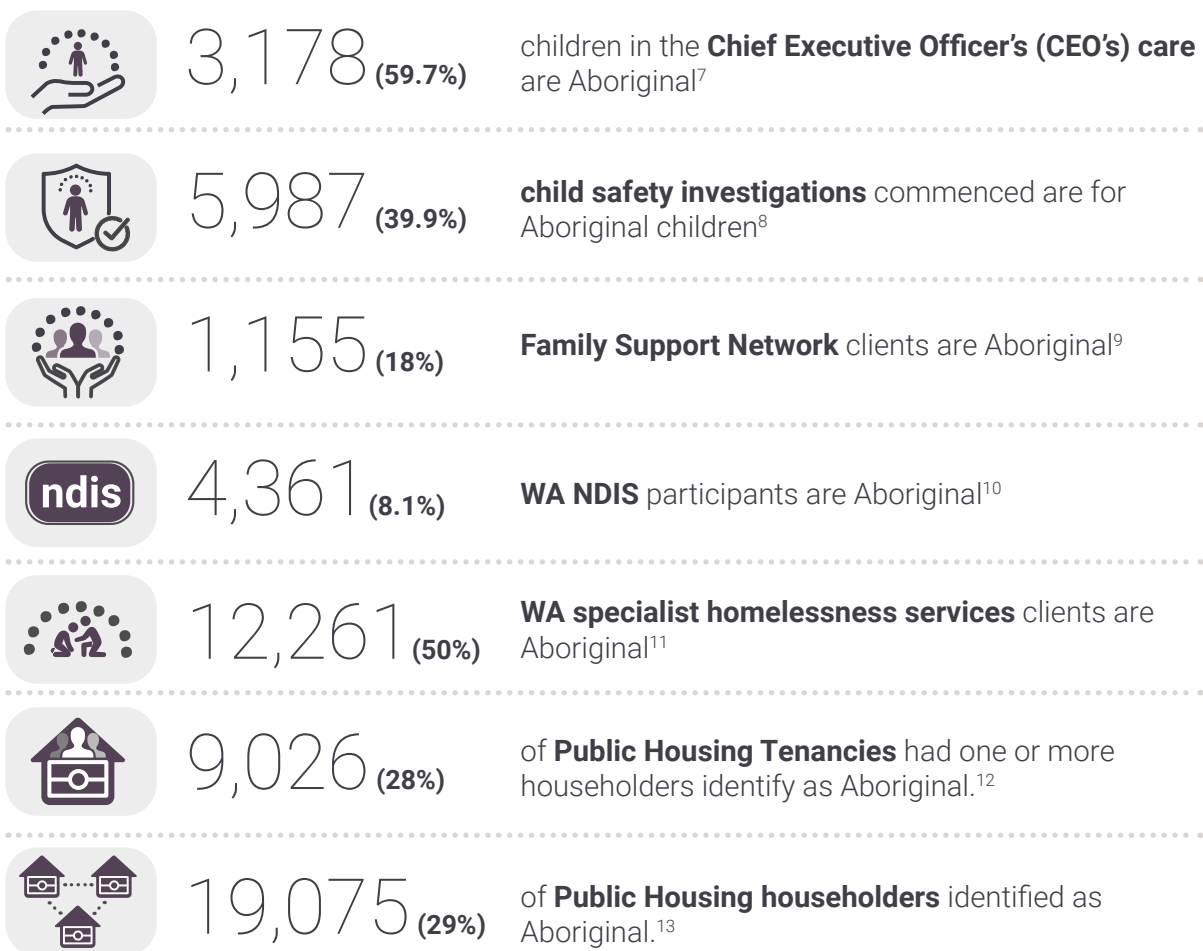
Trauma-informed

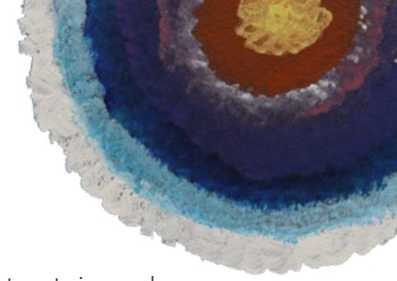
Trauma aware and informed practice is a strengths-based approach to healing that is based on an understanding of, and responsiveness to, the impacts of trauma. It emphasises physical, psychological and emotional safety for people seeking help and for the helpers. It also creates opportunities for people affected by trauma to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment. It recognises the prevalence of trauma and is sensitive to and informed by the impacts of trauma on the wellbeing of individuals and communities.⁶



Why the Aboriginal Cultural Framework is needed

The Department of Communities brings together vital services and functions that enable individual, family and community wellbeing. Poverty, intergenerational trauma, systemic discrimination, colonisation and forced child removals have all contributed to the over-representation of Aboriginal people as users of services provided by the Department. Despite only representing 3.3 per cent of the WA population:





Not only are Aboriginal people overrepresented as users of services provided by the Department, but there are also many Aboriginal people who find it challenging to access the Department's services, or who are unwilling or unable to access them at all. Aboriginal people are geographically dispersed throughout the state, with many people living in regional and remote areas of WA, and many need to travel significant distances to access services. The ability and willingness of Aboriginal people to access services may also be impacted by:

- past and present experiences of discrimination
- limited awareness of existing services and supports available
- negative perceptions of employee cultural competency
- limited number of Aboriginal employees providing services
- concerns about confidentiality and privacy.

During the consultations that informed the development of the Framework, some Aboriginal people reported poor experiences when accessing the Department's services and shared that at times they felt misunderstood, disempowered, disrespected and judged. Some Aboriginal people shared their view that the Department's services were not culturally appropriate or that employees lacked sufficient cultural competency. For Aboriginal people, their first interactions with the system and employees are crucial and can 'make or break' their willingness to access services in the future. Further, Aboriginal people often 'vote with their feet' and openly share their experiences of services with their family, friends and community. These experiences and feelings can lead to disengagement from services and animosity towards employees.

Cultural competency is critical not only for engagement with the people and communities who access the Department's services, but also to ensure that the

Department is able to attract, retain and support a high-performing Aboriginal workforce and a broader culturally competent workforce.

Many Aboriginal employees across Australia experience racism, culturally unsafe workplaces and unfair treatment while at work¹⁴, with significant implications for both the individuals themselves and their workplaces. Poor cultural safety in the workplace can impact on employees' wellbeing, job satisfaction and retention. The Gari Yala (Speak the Truth)¹⁵ report found that Aboriginal people are two and a half times less likely to be satisfied with their job compared to those who rarely or never experienced unfair racist treatment and are two times as likely to be looking for a new employer in the next year. Additionally, many workplaces have insufficient processes, structures and supports for Aboriginal people who experience discrimination.

The Department is the second largest employer of Aboriginal people in the Western Australian public sector and is focused on ensuring Aboriginal people are proportionately represented in leadership roles across the sector. The Department, in line with the Public Sector Commission Leadership Expectations Framework¹⁶, is committed to attracting, retaining and empowering Aboriginal leadership at all levels, benefiting from the unique perspectives, talents and strengths of Aboriginal employees, and ensuring that the workforce reflects the people accessing the Department's services.

The Department recognises that in order to achieve its purpose of One Communities – One Team to provide responsive services that build safe, inclusive and empowered communities for all Western Australians, it is important to ensure that the organisation is inclusive and culturally safe for all employees, and that programs, policies and services are culturally responsive and delivered by culturally competent employees.

Cultural competency

Within the context of this Framework, Aboriginal cultural competency refers to the ability to understand, respect, appreciate and interact with Aboriginal people and communities by:

- knowing and understanding history, culture, customs, beliefs and local practices
- acting and behaving in culturally appropriate ways
- having personal awareness of own values, biases and their impact on others
- having integrity, respect and openness in interactions.

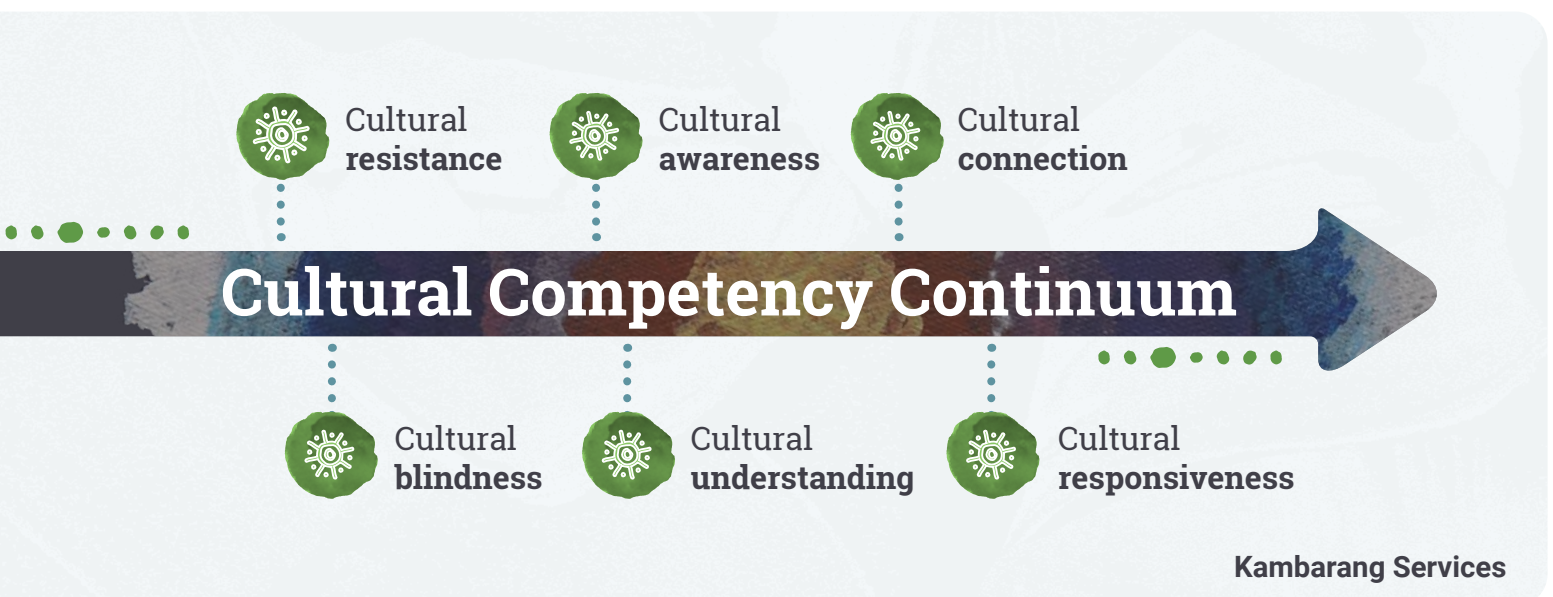
People vary in their level and maturity of cultural competency, which can be influenced by a range of factors within and outside a person's control, including their:


- upbringing
- life experiences
- level of exposure to different cultures
- self-awareness
- social environments.

Developing cultural competency is a dynamic process with an ongoing journey of continuous learning for the employee and ongoing review and improvements in services, policies, programs and systems for the Department.

Figure 1 below shows cultural competency as a continuous concept and outlines six levels of cultural competency from cultural resistance to cultural responsiveness.

Figure 1 | Cultural Competency Continuum





There are varying levels of cultural competency within the Department, and employees may not be aware of their own level of competence. The Cultural Competency Matrix (Appendix 1) includes six levels of cultural competency and can be used to assess and measure cultural competency. It is possible for individuals to move up and down the Cultural Competency Continuum depending on their role, position and location. Maturing along the continuum requires resources, effort and training and will be supported by the Aboriginal Cultural Learning Strategy and other strategies and initiatives already in place or introduced as part of the Framework's implementation plan. Progress through the matrix requires commitment from the individual and willingness to change. The Department and its employees should strive to move up the spectrum towards 'Cultural responsiveness' – in doing so, the Department will provide more culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal people, families and communities.

Strategic alignment overview

The Framework is a key deliverable of the Aboriginal Cultural Capability Reform Program (ACCRP), which was established in response to a number of internal and external reviews highlighting a critical need for the Department to increase its cultural capability and responsiveness to meet the needs of Aboriginal people and communities.

Transformational change is required to ensure services are culturally safe and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal people. The work of the ACCRP is strongly aligned to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement), Priority Reform Area 3: Transforming Government Organisations, which commits Government organisations to the following transformation elements:

1. Identify and eliminate racism.
2. Embed and practice meaningful cultural safety.
3. Deliver services in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, communities and people.
4. Increase accountability through transparent funding allocations.
5. Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.
6. Improve engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Framework will support the Department's cultural reform journey, working in partnership across divisions to integrate actions that focus on service and operational improvements to build the cultural competence of employees and the cultural capability of the Department.

Alignment with national and state reports

Existing state and national reports document in detail how governments will work in partnership with Aboriginal people to reduce inequality and enable better whole-of-life outcomes for Aboriginal people, families and communities. The development of the Framework has been informed by these key reports and seeks to build on their principles and intent.

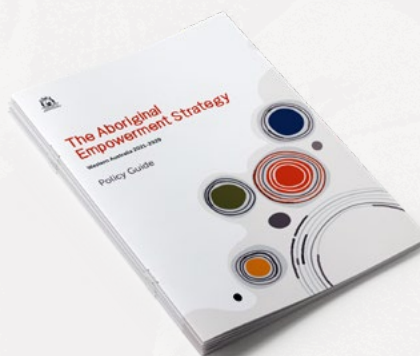
There are numerous strategies and initiatives in place across the Department, but the Framework particularly draws on and is aligned to the following reports outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2 | Relevant national and state strategies and reports

● National Agreement on Closing the Gap



● The Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy – Western Australia 2021–2029



● Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) Strategy 2022–2032



● Public Sector Workforce Diversification and Inclusion Strategy 2020–2025



The second WA Closing the Gap Jurisdictional Implementation Plan, released in October 2023, sets out actions the WA Government will undertake to drive progress towards the socioeconomic outcomes and priority reforms as outlined in the National Agreement.

Summary of engagement

The Framework has been developed by working in partnership with Aboriginal people, communities and organisations and with input from the Department's employees and Communities Leadership Team.

The Framework has been informed by extensive community and employee engagement across regional and metropolitan WA. Approximately 800 participants, comprising Aboriginal community members, Departmental employees and ACCO representatives, were consulted between November 2022 and January 2023 across 16 workshops held in Perth metropolitan and regional locations.



Consultation

Number of participants

ACCO Representatives	15
Communities Leadership Team	7
Aboriginal Outcomes Division	30
Aboriginal Employee Network	158
Mid-West – Geraldton	65
Pilbara – Port Hedland (2 workshops – staff and community members)	65
Kimberley – Broome	15
Kimberley – Kununurra	12
Wheatbelt – Northam	45
Southwest – Bunbury	65
South Metro – Kwinana	160
South Metro – Armadale	45
North Metro – Balga	65
Goldfields – Kalgoorlie	25
Great Southern – Albany	55



Total workshops = 16



Total participants = 827

Aboriginal Cultural Framework

The Framework will foster a culturally responsive environment for Aboriginal people using the Department's services as well as for the Aboriginal people it employs.

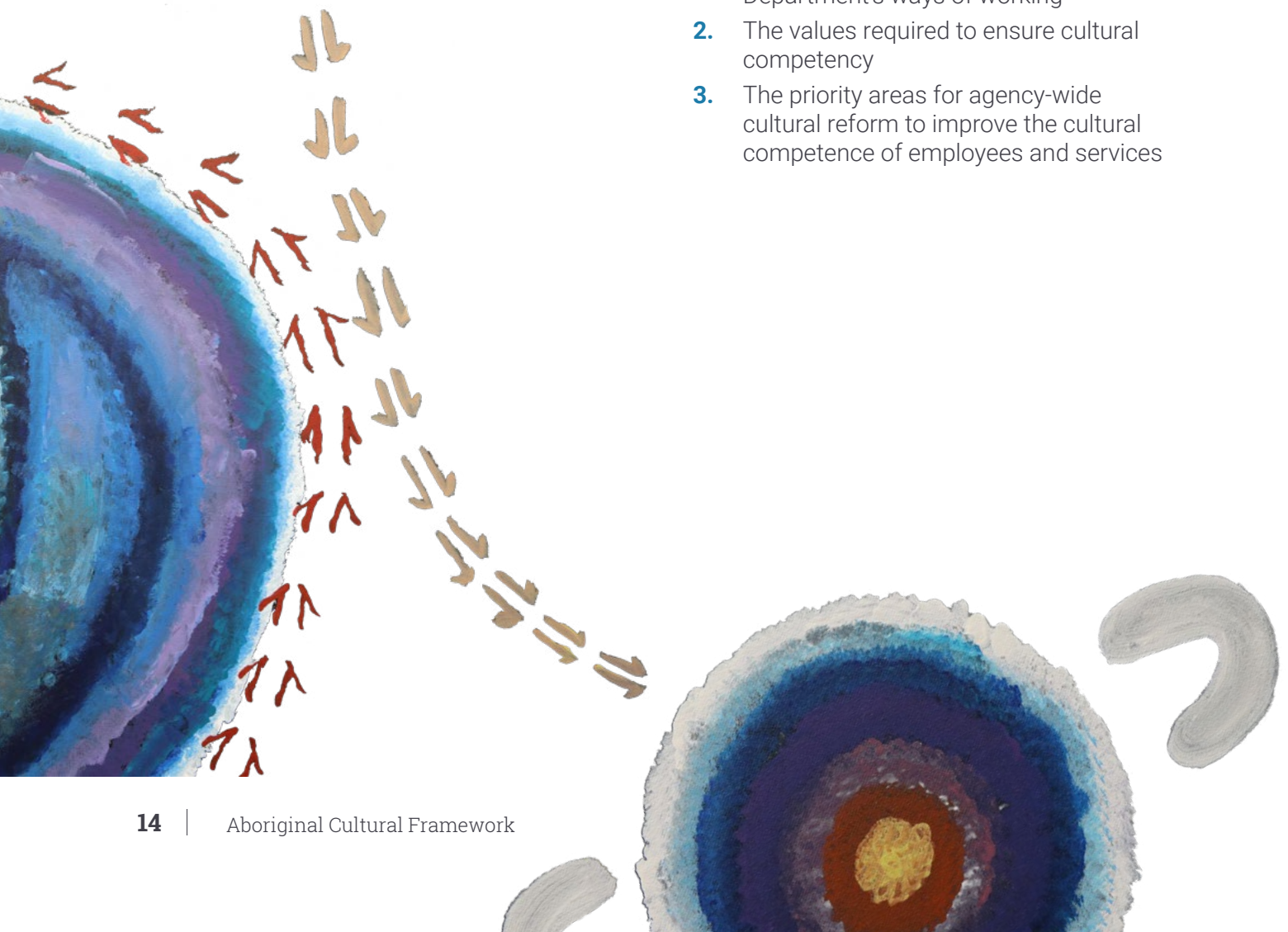
Reflecting on the Department's commitment to Aboriginal cultural safety, the Department has developed the Framework to strengthen organisational cultural competency.¹⁷ The Framework provides a whole-of-agency approach to promoting cultural safety, competence and learning and sets out the actions that will be taken to improve the cultural competency of employees and ensure that services better meet the needs of Aboriginal children, individuals, families and communities.

Importantly, the Framework promotes the development of a culturally competent workforce, who have an in-depth understanding of Aboriginal cultures, traditions and protocols, and can use this knowledge to ensure the delivery of culturally safe and responsive services to Aboriginal people who access and engage with the Department's services throughout WA.

The Framework is supported by an Aboriginal Cultural Learning Strategy that supports employees in all regions and in all roles at every level across the Department to enhance their cultural competency.

The Framework comprises three key elements:

1. The guiding principles that underpin the Department's ways of working
2. The values required to ensure cultural competency
3. The priority areas for agency-wide cultural reform to improve the cultural competence of employees and services



Aboriginal Cultural Framework

– at a glance

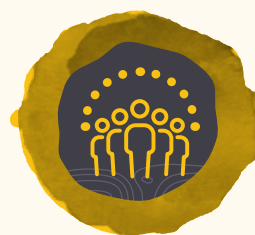
Guiding principles



**Culture
at the heart**



**Aboriginal
empowerment**



**Recognition,
reform, repair**

Cultural capability and reform priorities

1

Valuing culture

The Department respects, embraces and celebrates Aboriginal people, knowledge and their continuing connection to Country, culture and kin.

2

Engagement and partnerships

The Department works in partnership with Aboriginal people, organisations and communities towards shared goals.

3

Aboriginal workforce development

The Department is known as an inclusive workplace, free from racism and where Aboriginal people can have lasting, successful and fulfilling careers.

4

Workforce cultural capability

Staff at all levels build and maintain an appropriate level of cultural competence relevant to their roles.

5

Culturally responsive systems and services

Systems and services are trauma-informed, culturally safe and are accessible to all people.

6

Leadership and accountability

The Department responds to the needs of Aboriginal people, families and communities, demonstrating cultural capability.

Values

Trust

Integrity

Honesty

Transparency

Self-determination

Empowerment

Respect

Partnerships

Guiding principles



Culture at the heart



Aboriginal empowerment



Recognition, reform, repair

The three guiding principles above underpin the Framework and how the Department works with Aboriginal people, and are reflective of the principles that form the basis of the WA Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy. The guiding principles are core to the Framework and apply to each of the six cultural capability and reform priorities. It must be acknowledged that the guiding principles are not a one-size-fits-all approach to developing cultural competency in all locations but are the foundations upon which cultural competency can be developed and measured.



Culture at the heart

Culture is at the core of an Aboriginal person's identity and is the foundation upon which Aboriginal people live their life. Culture is complex and can refer to a person's connection to Country, language, customs, belief systems, history, values and family. There are many Aboriginal people across WA and Australia, each with their own interpretation and meanings of culture. The Department recognises:

- that there is not one single Aboriginal culture
- Aboriginal people are incredibly diverse and have a range of different experiences and values
- Aboriginal culture is not static, instead it changes over time and is responsive to changing environments and impacts
- Aboriginal culture is holistic and encompasses family, community and Country.

To ensure that the Department's workplaces and services are culturally safe and responsive, the Department will apply the 'culture at the heart' principle to all six cultural capability and reform priorities.



Aboriginal empowerment

To improve outcomes for Aboriginal people, families and communities, and to build cultural competency of employees, Aboriginal people need to be empowered to define their journey and contribute to system reform. This includes Aboriginal employees and Aboriginal people accessing the Department's services. To improve outcomes and empower whole communities, Aboriginal people need to be empowered at the individual level. This includes:

- supporting Aboriginal people to have a voice in how they receive and interact with services provided by the Department
- increasing the self-determination of Aboriginal people by educating and empowering them while they are accessing services
- creating opportunities for Aboriginal employees and Aboriginal people accessing the Department's services to provide feedback in a culturally safe and confidential way.

Aboriginal people are empowered to contribute to system reform and improve the cultural safety of services. The Department will support this through:

- meaningfully involving Aboriginal people, families and communities in decision-making, beyond tokenistic engagement
- ensuring Aboriginal employees are represented in leadership positions at all levels but more importantly in positions with decision-making power within the Department
- supporting Aboriginal people and families to make decisions as a community at a local and regional level.

As a principle of the Framework, Aboriginal empowerment shifts decision-making to Aboriginal people and allows them to shape their experience, services and future.



Recognition, reform, repair

Recognition, reform and repair refers to recognising the past; reforming current policies, attitudes and services; and repairing what Aboriginal people have lost. Aboriginal people have been deeply impacted by the effects and history of colonisation; past laws, practices and policies; and the forced removal of their children. The Department recognises that the first step in becoming more culturally competent is to acknowledge the truth about Australian history and its ongoing impact for Aboriginal people. Understanding the past will form a key part of the Aboriginal Cultural Learning Strategy, which will outline:

- Aboriginal traditional culture and history including details of Aboriginal life prior to colonisation
- the history between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people, including the impacts of colonisation and the Stolen Generation
- the transition to recovery, including current issues and the residual impacts of colonisation.

Reform is a key theme in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which outlines the changes required to reduce the inequity in outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The principal of reform is embedded in the Framework inherently as it seeks to improve the cultural safety and responsiveness of the Department and the services that it provides. Further, the Framework has been structured to include six cultural capability and reform priorities that are specific to the Department.

It is not sufficient to only acknowledge the past and to reform government policies, procedures and services – action needs to be taken to repair and reconcile the impacts of colonisation and the systemic discrimination of Aboriginal people. The six cultural capability and reform priorities of the Framework seek opportunities to repair past damage.



Values

Trust

"I feel safe to tell the Department things about myself and my life without fear or judgement."

Integrity

"The staff care about me, and do the right thing for me and my children."

Honesty

"The staff tell me the truth and don't tell lies."

Transparency

"Staff tell me what is happening, and they enable me to understand what I need to know."

Self-determination

"I can make decisions about my life and the things that affect me."

Empowerment

"My family, community and culture are strong."

Respect

"The staff care about me, my family and Aboriginal culture."

Partnerships

"I like that the Department meaningfully supports Aboriginal people and organisations."

During the development of the Framework, Aboriginal employees and community members across WA expressed that culturally competent people shared the same values. That is, when a person is culturally competent and responsive, they reflect a distinct set of values. The above values were identified by Aboriginal people as preconditions to cultural competency. For each value, an example phrase has been used to indicate how an Aboriginal person might feel when interacting with a Departmental employee who demonstrates these values.

Cultural capability and reform priorities

1

Valuing culture

The Department respects, embraces and celebrates Aboriginal people, knowledge and their continuing connection to Country, culture and kin.

2

Engagement and partnerships

The Department works in partnership with Aboriginal people, organisations and communities towards shared goals.

3

Aboriginal workforce development

The Department is known as an inclusive workplace, free from racism and where Aboriginal people can have lasting, successful and fulfilling careers.

4

Workforce cultural capability

Staff at all levels build and maintain an appropriate level of cultural competence relevant to their roles.

5

Culturally responsive systems and services

Systems and services are trauma-informed, culturally safe and are accessible to all people.

6

Leadership and accountability

The Department responds to the needs of Aboriginal people, families and communities, demonstrating cultural capability.

The six cultural capability and reform priorities provide a structured approach to improving the cultural competency of the Department and its employees, ultimately improving services and outcomes for Aboriginal people in WA. These cultural capability and reform priorities were validated by the Aboriginal people, communities and ACCOs engaged with as part of the Framework's developmental process.

The cultural capability and reform priorities align the Department and its Strategic Direction Statement with state and national strategic frameworks and articulate the key elements requiring focus and attention. The cultural capability and reform priorities will promote a culturally safe and responsive environment for Aboriginal employees, people, communities and organisations. The six cultural capability and reform priorities are detailed on the following pages.



Valuing culture

The Department respects, embraces and celebrates Aboriginal people, knowledge and their continuing connection to Country, culture and kin.

Why is this important?

Culture is central to the identity of Aboriginal people. Understanding the differences between cultures is an important input into becoming culturally competent and can only be developed if employees have an awareness of the origins of Aboriginal culture, understand the importance of connection to Country and feel confident to talk about it. The Department can create a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal employees and Aboriginal people accessing the Department's services, by recognising the trauma of the past, ensuring culture is valued, celebrating and recognising the resilience and achievements of Aboriginal people, and incorporating culture into processes, policies and services.

What will we do?

- Understand, value and celebrate Aboriginal cultures, languages, relationships to Country, knowledge and heritage, and the diversity of Aboriginal cultures across WA.
- Acknowledge the trauma of the past and commit to truth-telling, reconciliation and ongoing healing.
- Seek, respect and adhere to local cultural protocols in daily work.
- Celebrate and recognise significant cultural events and dates.
- Undertake formal and informal place-based cultural learning.
- Create a welcoming environment for Aboriginal people (Aboriginal artwork, Acknowledgement plaques, flags and use of spoken and written local language).
- Recognise the cultural authority, knowledge and experience of Aboriginal people.
- Seek Aboriginal community input and guidance in the development of policies, programs and initiatives.
- Create a culturally safe, respectful and supportive work environment.



Engagement and partnerships

The Department works in partnership with Aboriginal people, organisations and communities towards shared goals.

Why is this important?

Engagement with Aboriginal communities is critical to understanding the needs of Aboriginal people and how to best foster a culturally competent environment. All Aboriginal people should feel comfortable to express their needs and raise their concerns in a culturally safe and appropriate environment.

Partnering with and procuring from ACCOs empowers Aboriginal people and strengthens Aboriginal culture. Given the high proportion of Aboriginal people that access the Department's services, ACCOs are best placed to engage with members of community, assess needs and design programs that incorporate Aboriginal ways of working including the nuance of kinship structures and family dynamics.

What will we do?

- Build trust and maintain genuine relationships with open, respectful and ongoing communication.
- Engage with Aboriginal people, communities and ACCOs in all stages of service planning, design and evaluation.
- Be transparent around the purpose, roles and outcomes of any engagement undertaken and close the loop.
- Ensure engagement methods are culturally responsive, respectful and adhere to local cultural protocols.
- Develop greater cooperation and communication across teams and divisions to avoid repetition of engagements and consultations.
- Listen, engage and liaise with Aboriginal Advisory Groups, Peak Bodies, Aboriginal organisations, Traditional Owners and Aboriginal community.
- Establish formal partnerships with Aboriginal communities and ACCOs.¹⁸
- Work towards shared goals with shared decision-making.
- Build and develop the capability and capacity of the ACCO sector in WA.
- Procure from ACCOs to deliver frontline services to Aboriginal communities where possible.
- Seek feedback from Aboriginal service users in a culturally safe way to inform best practice and ways of working.



Aboriginal workforce development

The Department is known as an inclusive workplace, free from racism and where Aboriginal people can have lasting, successful and fulfilling careers.

Why is this important?

A larger, integrated and empowered Aboriginal workforce is core to achieving the other five cultural capability and reform priorities and will enable deeper connections between the Department and Aboriginal people, families and communities. A greater Aboriginal workforce will improve the cultural sensitivity of systems and processes and improve the Department's ability to engage with Aboriginal people and communities accessing the Department's services.

Aboriginal cultural safety is fundamental to retaining the skills, knowledge and experience of Aboriginal employees, and creating a workplace where Aboriginal employees can be their best.

What will we do?

- Deliver culturally responsive place-based recruitment and selection.
- Develop alternative entry pathways to increase employment opportunities within the Department.
- Recognise the lived experience and knowledge Aboriginal employees bring to the Department.
- Increase representation and retention of Aboriginal people at all levels of the workforce.
- Create a welcoming, place-based and culturally safe onboarding and induction process for new Aboriginal employees.
- Develop and promote culturally appropriate formal and informal support programs.
- Provide opportunities for mentoring, connection, networking and peer support between Aboriginal employees.
- Engage Aboriginal employees for feedback on their experiences working at the Department and to determine culturally safe work practices.
- Support flexible career development pathways to build skills and experience.
- Invest in professional and leadership development programs to support progression into senior management and executive roles.
- Ensure managers and leaders enable cultural safety, support professional development, and understand the cultural needs and responsibilities of Aboriginal employees.
- Create a culturally safe, inclusive, respectful and supportive environment.



Workforce cultural capability

Employees at all levels build, maintain and demonstrate an appropriate level of cultural competence relevant to their roles.

Why is this important?

All Department employees have a role to play in ensuring that services are culturally safe and responsive for Aboriginal people and their needs.

Whole-of-department initiatives will increase the cultural safety and responsiveness of the Department's programs and cultural competency of all employees. It is particularly important to develop and support non-Aboriginal employees to understand, value and respect Aboriginal perspectives and that this is reflected in their day-to-day interactions with Aboriginal people, both as colleagues and as service users.

Investing in developing the cultural competency of the Department's employees will lead to positive outcomes for all employees, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, as well as for Aboriginal people accessing the Department's services.

What will we do?

- Develop and implement an Aboriginal Cultural Learning Strategy to build cultural competency across the Department.
- Ensure all employees complete mandatory cultural learning training courses.
- Provide a range of ongoing targeted and place-based learning opportunities to build cultural competency through continuous learning.
- Develop a self-assessment tool of personal values and cultural biases and their impact on ways of working with Aboriginal colleagues and Aboriginal service users.
- Share knowledge, listen to others, understand, and respect Aboriginal world views.
- Incorporate cultural competency discussions (e.g. identifying training needs or sharing ways of working) into team meetings, supervision and/or performance frameworks.
- Demonstrate genuine respect for culture in all interactions and model inclusive behaviours.
- Challenge and respond to racism, discrimination and unconscious bias towards Aboriginal employees or Aboriginal service users.
- Obtain feedback from Aboriginal services users on the cultural competency of the Department's systems, policies and procedures, to identify and implement improvements.



Culturally responsive systems and services

Systems and services are place-based, trauma-informed, culturally safe and are accessible to all people.

Why is this important?

Systems and practices form the foundation of the Department's provision of services. It is essential they are developed in partnership with Aboriginal people to ensure they are culturally safe and that trauma-informed principles are at the forefront of these partnerships. This will support Aboriginal people to be able to access culturally responsive services and improve service outcomes.

At the foundation of the partnership with Aboriginal people is the shared access to data and information at a regional level. Having access to this information will enable Aboriginal communities and organisations to make informed decisions on policies and programs for their communities and to ensure current services are responsive and accountable.

What will we do?

- Embed Aboriginal perspectives, including local ways of working and trauma-informed practice in the design, delivery, evaluation and review of services, policies and programs.
- Learn from community, collaborations, best practice and partnerships and share findings.
- Engage fully and transparently when undertaking significant changes to policy and programs that primarily impact on Aboriginal people.
- Prioritise and support Aboriginal-led, place-based solutions and approaches to service delivery with localised decision-making.
- Develop and establish mechanisms that support shared access to location-specific data and information.
- Implement policies and mechanisms to report, respond to and prevent racist and discriminatory behaviour in the workplace or in service delivery.
- Monitor cultural capability and responsiveness of services through employee and community feedback, service reviews and measurable outcomes, to identify and implement improvements.
- Apply flexibility to internal systems and processes to remove barriers to cultural reform and to aid the development of new ways of working.



Leadership and accountability

The Department responds to the needs of Aboriginal people, families and communities by demonstrating cultural capability.

Why is this important?

Leaders drive accountability across the Department and are responsible for developing internal processes and external services. Currently, Aboriginal people account for a significant proportion of the people who access the Department services, so it is critical to have Aboriginal people in formal leadership positions with decision-making authority throughout the Department to ensure services are designed and delivered in a culturally safe way.

However, leadership is not just about position, it is a practice encompassing self-awareness and self-development, building genuine and effective relationships, and being able to achieve outcomes and drive change. All employees, in particular non-Aboriginal employees, can practice personal leadership by developing their own cultural competency, promoting cultural safety, and contributing positively and actively to cultural reform in their team and division.

What will we do?

- Communities Leadership Team (CLT) and the Department to formally commit to truth-telling, reconciliation and cultural reform.
- CLT and senior leadership lead by example and role model culturally responsive thinking and action.
- Embed cultural responsiveness in strategic and annual plans for each division and for the Department.
- Support the recruitment, professional development and promotion of Aboriginal people into leadership roles with decision-making authority.
- All employees take personal responsibility for contributing to cultural reform in everyday business and to build personal cultural competency.
- Support and encourage cultural reform champions to lead and promote cultural safety and competency.
- Promote and highlight examples of best practice and innovative cultural reform initiatives by teams or employees.
- Provide transparent information and be accountable to the Aboriginal community regarding the Department's actions and outcomes.
- Monitor, seek feedback and evaluate cultural reform across the Department, in a culturally responsive way.
- Implement improvement measures arising from monitoring and evaluation processes at individual, team and division levels across the Department.

What success will look like

The Department acknowledges that improving cultural competency is an ongoing journey requiring a strong commitment from all involved. In delivering on this 10-year Framework the Department will be known as an organisation that deeply respects and values its Aboriginal employees as well as the Aboriginal people, families, communities and organisations that it interacts with. Successful implementation of the Framework will look like:



Aboriginal culture is valued, respected and celebrated.



Racism is eliminated from the workplace and for those accessing services.



The Department provides culturally safe employment and working conditions for Aboriginal employees.



The Department has a culturally competent workforce delivering culturally safe and appropriate services.



Cultural responsiveness and safety are embedded in everyday business and ways of working.



A growing ACCO sector provides front line services to Aboriginal communities.



Genuine partnerships are in place between the Department and Aboriginal communities, sharing decision-making on key policies, services and initiatives.



Aboriginal communities have access to localised data to monitor the implementation of their priorities and drive the direction of their services.



The Department is accountable to the Aboriginal community for its services, decisions and actions.



The Department is consistently reporting progress against the targets in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Implementation and monitoring

Implementation

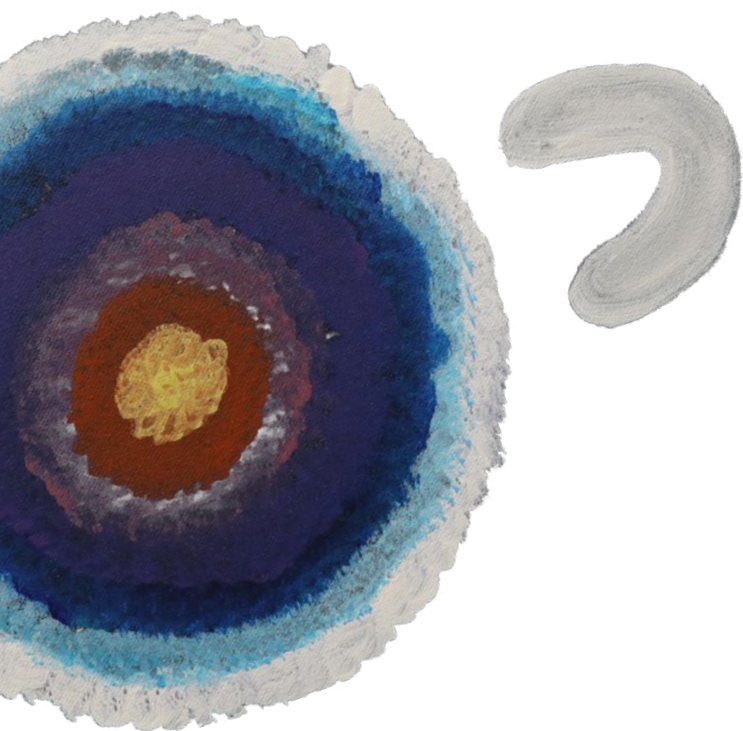
Through a collective effort and shared responsibility, the Framework will drive change across all divisions. The Framework will be supported by a series of implementation plans with strategies, activities and initiatives which all divisions must implement to achieve cultural reform. Key to the implementation process will be the Aboriginal Cultural Learning Strategy which will support all employees, at all levels, in all locations to build their cultural competency.

This flexible and phased approach will ensure that progress can be measured, and future implementation plans will build on the positive steps and changes already undertaken to develop the cultural capability and responsiveness of the Department's systems, policies and services.

Monitoring and evaluation

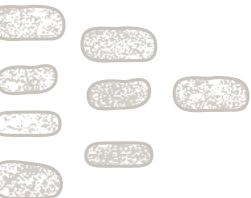
Measuring progress is vital to any reforms being implemented. Even more so when the changes being implemented may take some time to manifest due to their complexity and involve developing the cultural competency of employees and services.

To monitor, report and evaluate on the implementation of the Framework, a culturally appropriate, place-based and independent Monitoring and Evaluation Framework will be developed. The Monitoring and Evaluation Framework will measure the success by defining key indicators, targets, responsibilities and reporting methods, allowing the Department to monitor and review its cultural reform journey.



Glossary

Term	Description
Aboriginal people	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
Aboriginal Cultural Learning Strategy	The Department of Communities' Aboriginal Cultural Learning Strategy
Aboriginal Data Sovereignty	Refers to the right of Aboriginal people to exercise ownership over Aboriginal Data. Ownership of data can be expressed through creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination and reuse of Indigenous Data. ¹⁹
Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy	Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy – Western Australia 2021–2029
ACCO Strategy	The Department of Communities' Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation Strategy 2022–2023
ACCRP	Aboriginal Cultural Capability Reform Program
Child protection services	A legislated remit of the Department of Communities services, which protects and cares for Western Australian children and young people who are in need and supports families and individuals who are at risk or in crisis.
Colonisation	The process of settling among and establishing control over the Aboriginal people
Cultural capability and reform priorities	Six priorities identified through engagement, which provide actions aimed at improving cultural competency in the Department of Communities
Cultural Competency Matrix	The Matrix is used to assess a person's cultural competency and recommend actions. See Appendix 1.
Cultural responsiveness	The ability to recognise cultural differences and respond respectfully and professionally in a safe way.
Family Support Network	Family Support Networks are delivered in partnership with an ACCO and aim to provide culturally appropriate services which prioritise the needs of Aboriginal families.
Formal leadership	Leaders in a formal leadership position responsible for shaping strategy and direction, enabling and motivating others to deliver high quality work, and with decision-making authority
Formal partnership	Partnerships which meet the 'strong partnership elements' as defined in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap [Clause 32 and 33]
Gari Yala	"Speak the truth"
NAIDOC	The National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme



Term	Description
Out-of-home care services	A range of care options for children and young people aged less than 18 years who are unable to live with their families for a variety of reasons, usually due to child abuse and/or neglect
Peak Body	A non-government organisation that represents the interests of Aboriginal people and/or organisations in a particular field such as health, education or child protection. They are often established to develop standards and processes or to act on behalf of members when lobbying government or promoting the interests of members.
Personal leadership	Leadership in this context is about the work of individuals not yet in traditional leadership positions who make a direct and immediate difference to the agency. ²⁰
Reconciliation Action Plans	<p>Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) have enabled organisations to sustainably and strategically take meaningful action to advance reconciliation.</p> <p>Based around the core pillars of relationships, respect and opportunities, RAPs provide tangible and substantive benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, increasing economic equity and supporting First Nations self-determination.²¹</p>
Self-determination	<p>Self-determination can mean different things to different groups of people.</p> <p>According to the Australian Human Rights Commission, self-determination is an 'ongoing process of choice' to ensure Aboriginal people and communities are able to meet their social, cultural and economic needs. It is the right to be recognised by law as Australia's First People, the right to live according to a set of common values and beliefs, and for that right to be respected by others.²²</p>
Specialist homelessness services	Specialist homelessness services deliver services for specific groups (such as people experiencing family and domestic violence and young people) as well as more generic services for people in housing crisis.
The Department	The Department of Communities
The Framework	The Aboriginal Cultural Framework

Appendix 1:

Cultural Competency Matrix

The Cultural Competency Matrix is a tool which identifies levels of cultural competency, the associated implications for what this means in practice, and what managers can do to support the individual in developing their cultural competency. This tool acknowledges that cultural competency is a journey, and the suggested indicators are a starting point upon which individuals can use for self-reflection and to aid discussions on training needs.



Cultural resistance



INDICATORS	PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS	MANAGEMENT/ SUPERVISION IMPLICATIONS
<p>Will likely generate complaints (from Aboriginal clients or colleagues) of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • racism • insistent 'mono-culturalism' • prejudice and judgement <p>May actively resist the need for cultural responsiveness ('I treat everyone as I want to be treated. That's enough.')</p>	<p>Seek opportunities to minimise unsupervised contact</p>	<p>Plan for improvement</p>



Cultural blindness

INDICATORS	PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS	MANAGEMENT/ SUPERVISION IMPLICATIONS
<p>May believe (with goodwill) that 'treating everyone the same' is a worthy end goal</p> <p>May feel affronted by the idea that they're not culturally competent</p> <p>May be surprised when Aboriginal people express anger at them</p> <p>Will likely generate (and be particularly affronted by) complaints of racism</p> <p>May 'not know that they don't know' (unconscious incompetence)</p>	<p>Seek opportunities to minimise unsupervised contact</p>	<p>Plan for improvement</p>



Cultural awareness

INDICATORS	PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS	MANAGEMENT/ SUPERVISION IMPLICATIONS
Can recount facts (but may struggle with relevance)	Able to work with healthy families and people	Able to receive mentoring
May still 'not know that they don't know' (unconscious incompetence)		Able to engage in regular 'discussion sessions'
May be hindered by guilt, 'walking on eggshells', under-confidence		Able to engage in reflective practice
Many Aboriginal people are unlikely to feel safe with this person		



Cultural understanding

INDICATORS	PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS	MANAGEMENT/ SUPERVISION IMPLICATIONS
Will be proactively striving to understand Aboriginal perspectives	Actively work towards partnership	Able to receive mentoring
Will be reflecting, with self and others, about how their attitudes and approach may impact Aboriginal people	Work with struggling families and people	Able to engage in regular 'discussion sessions'
Many Aboriginal people will feel heard and understood by them		Able to engage in reflective practice
Know that they don't know and are willing to learn and change		

Cultural connection

INDICATORS	PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS	MANAGEMENT/ SUPERVISION IMPLICATIONS
<p>Are actively building relationships with a range of Aboriginal community members and stakeholders</p> <p>Are known by local Aboriginal people/relevant stakeholders and have a number of positive and constructive connections</p> <p>Can deal with disagreements and hostility constructively (and without reactivity)</p> <p>Know that they have much to learn and are actively and reflectively striving to learn it through dialogue with others</p> <p>Have recognised, and can name, how certain of their own and others' practices have done damage</p> <p>Can identify elements of good practice, even if they don't always enact it</p>	<p>Able to work with struggling and/or traumatised families and people</p>	<p>Able to build connections with other workers</p> <p>Able to co-mentor with Aboriginal employees</p>

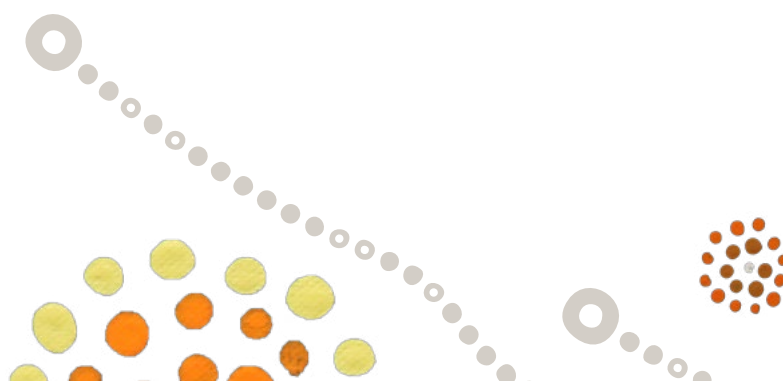
Cultural responsiveness

INDICATORS	PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS	MANAGEMENT/ SUPERVISION IMPLICATIONS
<p>Are highly trusted by local Aboriginal people/ stakeholders</p> <p>Understand and respond to each person within their cultural context (rather than a theoretical view of 'Aboriginal culture')</p> <p>Are well trusted by local Aboriginal people</p> <p>Can engage in vigorous and sometimes challenging debate without losing relationships</p> <p>Can play an active role in community capacity building</p> <p>Can act as a leader in Department/community partnerships and shared problem solving</p>	<p>Able to work with heavily traumatised/ mistrusting people</p> <p>Able to have a leadership role amongst peers</p>	<p>Able to use them as a resource to draw others towards responsiveness</p> <p>Able to use them as a leader in local Aboriginal relations and accountability</p>


Endnotes

- 1 Cross, T. L., Bazron, B.J., Dennis, K. W., & Issacs, M. R. (1989). Towards a culturally competent system of care, Vol. 1. Washington, DC. CASSP Technical Assistant Center, Georgetown University, Child Development Center
- 2 Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing (telethonkids.org.au), p.204
- 3 National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020
- 4 Australian Human Rights Commission, Support and self-care guide. Full Stop Australia, 2021
- 5 HF_Glossary_of_Healing_Terms_A3_Poster_Jul2020_V1.pdf (healingfoundation.org.au)
- 6 HF_Glossary_of_Healing_Terms_A3_Poster_Jul2020_V1.pdf (healingfoundation.org.au)
- 7 Child Protection Activity Performance 2023–24 (p.17)
- 8 Child Protection Activity Performance 2023–24 (p.5)
- 9 Child Protection Activity Performance 2023–24 (p.2)
- 10 NDIS Quarterly Report Q1 2023-24, Appendices (p.92)
- 11 AIHW Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022-23, data tables, 'Indigenous.2'
- 12 Data sourced from Habitat (Tenancy Management system) as at 31 December 2023. The term 'Aboriginal' refers to householders who identify as 'Aboriginal and/or 'Torres Strait Islander' and it is not a mandatory requirement for clients to disclose this information the Department
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 The Gari Yala (Speak the Truth): Centring the Experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians at work report highlights the workplace racism and exclusion that Aboriginal people face. The report found that 38% of Aboriginal people reported being unfairly treated because of their background sometimes, often or all the time; 44% of Aboriginal people reported hearing racial slurs sometimes, often or all the time; and 59% reported experiencing appearance racism – receiving comments about the way they look or 'should' look as an Aboriginal person.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Public Sector Commission, Leadership Expectations: Building Leadership Impact in practice, November 2022
- 17 The Framework draws on a range of previous reports and recommendations, including those contained in the Indigenous Psychological Services (IPS) 2019 report on opportunities to improve the cultural competency and capability of the Department's child protection workforce and practices.
- 18 As per cl.32 of the National Agreement
- 19 As defined by by Maïam nayr Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective
- 20 Public Sector Commission: Building Leadership Impact, November 2022
- 21 Reconciliation Action Plans - Reconciliation Australia
- 22 Right to self determination | Australian Human Rights Commission

The photographs of the Kimberley (page 2) and the South West (page 35) are stock images from istock.com







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