



# **Government Response to *Learnings* from the *message stick*: the report of the *Inquiry into Aboriginal youth suicide in remote areas***

---

## Table of Contents

<b>1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3. RESPONDING TO THE INQUIRY RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3.1 Increased government leadership, coordination and accountability .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3.2 Listening to, involving and empowering Aboriginal people.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3.3 Provision of culturally based programs.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3.4 Improved services and programs .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>4. NEXT STEPS.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>LIST OF ACRONYMS.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>ATTACHMENT A.....</b>	<b>19</b>

# 1. Executive Summary

The Aboriginal community is one of Western Australia's greatest assets, and has the capacity to be a formidable source of social, cultural and economic prosperity for the state. The Government recognizes this potential and is determined to implement a policy environment that realises it for the wellbeing of all Western Australians. To achieve this, we must address areas of disadvantage, as well as create building blocks of empowerment to allow our young Aboriginal people to thrive.

Despite more than 40 previous reviews and inquiries into the causes of Aboriginal youth suicide in Western Australia, the underlying issues have not yet been comprehensively addressed. The former Education and Health Standing Committee's report, *Learnings from the message stick: The report of the Inquiry into Aboriginal youth suicide in remote areas* (the Message Stick Inquiry) was released in November 2016. In the 18 months since that time, there has been a change in administration and numerous transformations in the machinery of government in Western Australia. As part of the Government's response to Message Stick, numerous programs, initiatives and strategies have been introduced or maintained that reflect the Inquiry's recommendations. This document affirms the Government's commitment and determination to address the issue of Aboriginal youth suicide as comprehensively as possible.

The Government is working on a range of initiatives to improve Aboriginal wellbeing. The work is multi-faceted and aims to ensure that government services are not only more appropriate, but also that cultural continuity is maintained as a protective factor. Accordingly, this document addresses the Inquiry's recommendations thematically; this will help to identify potential pathways for collaboration, ensure that we are all working together towards the same overall goals, and show how those objectives feed into the same aspiration: drastically reducing the incidence of youth suicide within the Western Australian Aboriginal community. The relevant themes are:

1. Increased government leadership, coordination and accountability.
2. Listening to, involving and empowering Aboriginal people.
3. Provision of culturally based programs.
4. Improved services and programs.

**Increased government leadership, coordination and accountability** identifies a range of government reforms and initiatives introduced since the report of the Inquiry was released, punctuated by a change of government in March 2017. Various policy and decision-making bodies have been established, both as part of, and parallel to, the machinery-of-government reforms. Significantly, there has been a commitment to a whole-of-government approach to improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal youth in Western Australia. This will be overseen by Cabinet with support from the Community Safety and Family Support Cabinet Sub Committee. The Department of the Premier and Cabinet will assume a central

agency role in coordinating these matters, including via its responsibility for the Aboriginal Affairs Coordinating Committee and the Western Australian Aboriginal Advisory Council. The Departments of Communities, Education, and Health, also have key roles in this process.

**Listening to, involving and empowering Aboriginal people** will ensure that we work together to provide our Aboriginal community with the tools and support it needs to achieve and maintain sustainable cultural, economic and social transformation. These tools include the implementation and meeting of objectives for housing and land tenure, education, employment, business (procurement), and health (especially mental health). The Government is committed to co-design principles in the delivery of services and planning of new initiatives. A range of strategies and frameworks have been identified, which provide guidance towards achieving a strong, healthy and vibrant Aboriginal community in Western Australia.

**Provision of culturally based programs** provides a significant challenge to agencies to look towards Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal philosophies to underpin the Government's approach to Aboriginal wellbeing, recognising the importance of culture as a protective factor. A number of key agencies have identified culture as a priority for policy and program responses, such as the Department of Health's *WA Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework 2015-2030*. Opportunities exist for all agencies to follow suit. Existing programs, such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention and Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP), and the Statewide Specialist Aboriginal Mental Health Service (SSAMHS), provide ongoing guidance and lessons to be learned.

**Improved services and programs** calls upon agencies to work together towards reforms and new initiatives across a range of areas, including finance, justice, housing, education, community care and health services. Within this approach is the need for all government employees to be more aware of, and responsive to, the needs and wants of Aboriginal people, via cultural training and by working side by side with the Aboriginal community.

This document serves as a statement of intent that the Government will take the recommendations of the Message Stick Inquiry to heart, and use them as a catalyst for change. With agencies working together to achieve the same goals, in tandem with the Aboriginal community and all Western Australians, we can help build a strong, healthy and vibrant future for our young Aboriginal people.

It is of paramount importance to address this issue as comprehensively as possible, confronting and addressing both the surface and underlying issues surrounding Aboriginal youth suicide. To emphasise this, the Hon Roger Cook, in his role as Deputy Premier, will assume leadership of this task on behalf of the Government, in partnership with the Aboriginal community. In this task, he will be supported by the Community Safety and Family Support Cabinet Sub Committee, the Aboriginal Affairs Coordinating Committee and the Western Australian Aboriginal Advisory Council. The Department of the Premier and Cabinet will coordinate a comprehensive response to improve outcomes for Aboriginal Western Australians. This will draw from the recommendations of the Message

Stick and other inquiries, including the Kimberley Coronial Inquest,<sup>1</sup> and from the lessons learned from successful programs—past and present. It will bring a genuine whole-of-government approach, actively and wholeheartedly working with the Aboriginal community. The response will form part of the Government's broader commitment to revitalizing and reforming the Aboriginal affairs agenda in Western Australia.

## 2. Introduction

Youth suicide is a tragic, complex issue that occurs too frequently in Aboriginal communities, especially in remote areas. The trauma has a multiplier effect on individuals, families and communities, compounding the levels of pain and grief experienced.

The Kimberley Aboriginal Health Planning Forum's 2016 *Suicide Position Paper* concluded:

Suicide and self-harm are tragic symptoms not of mental illness, but of underlying inter-related social/historical/political factors which are not modifiable by the mental health interventions currently available in the Kimberley ... it would be unproductive to consider suicide in isolation from other related issues such as child sexual abuse, alcohol abuse/other addictive behaviours, jealousy [conflict within a relationship, related to accusations of infidelity], family/domestic violence and incarceration in prison.<sup>2</sup>

The suicide rates for Aboriginal people in this state—especially our Aboriginal youth—are truly distressing. The former Education and Health Standing Committee's report, *Learnings from the message stick: The report of the Inquiry into Aboriginal youth suicide in remote areas* found that:

Around one quarter of suicide deaths among Aboriginal people in Australia occur in Western Australia despite the fact that Western Australia accounts for just 14 per cent of the nation's Aboriginal population. The suicide rate among Western Australian Aboriginal people is 3.3 times higher than among non-Aboriginal people.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Coronial Inquest into the Suicide Deaths of 13 Aboriginal Youths in the Kimberley Region 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Kimberley Aboriginal Health Planning Forum, 2016, *Suicide Position Paper*, p6.  
<http://www.kahpf.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/KAHPF-Suicide-Position-paper-May-2016.docx> - accessed 05/04/2018

<sup>3</sup> Education and Health Standing Committee, 2016, *Learnings from the Message Stick: The Report of the Inquiry into Aboriginal Youth Suicide in Remote Areas*, Parliament of Western Australia, p. 23.

On average, approximately 9% of the Western Australians who committed suicide from 2006-2016 were Aboriginal, although Aboriginal people comprise only 3.1% of the state's population.<sup>4</sup> Almost 40% of the Western Australian Aboriginal people who lost their lives to suicide in 2006-2016 were under the age of 25.<sup>5</sup>

In remote areas, especially in the Kimberley, these figures are magnified significantly, with a disturbing, more recent trend towards the younger end of the age distribution scale. The Message Stick Inquiry also observed:

In July 2016, a report was released by KMHDS [Kimberley Mental Health and Drug Service] staff found that 102 of the 125 suicides in the Kimberley region between 2005 and 2014 were by Aboriginal people. This equated to a suicide rate of 74 per 100,000. By comparison, the suicide rate for all Australians in 2014 was 12.2 per 100,000 people. Of the 102 suicides by Aboriginal people, 71 per cent were male, 68 per cent were less than 30 years old, and 27 per cent were less than 20 years old.<sup>6</sup>

The causes of Aboriginal youth suicide are numerous and varied, and in many ways particular to the life circumstances of many Aboriginal people. They differ significantly from the contributing factors for suicide in the non-Aboriginal community in Australia. Intergenerational trauma and grief, the result of colonisation and dispossession from land and law, affects many people in the Aboriginal community. This has been compounded by substance and alcohol abuse, family breakdown, and an erosion of cultural identity and sense of belonging. Today we have a generation of Aboriginal youth in parts of Western Australia who experience hopelessness, disconnection and alienation so profoundly that too many decide to end their own lives.

There have been more than 40 previous reviews and inquiries into the causes of Aboriginal youth suicide in Western Australia, but successive governments, in collaboration with the Aboriginal community, have yet to comprehensively address the underlying issues. In 2018, these questions are still being asked, while too many young Aboriginal people continue to find no alternative other than ending their own lives. It has become increasingly urgent for the Government to respond to this most recent Inquiry. Achieving this will require ongoing coordination and collaboration across a range of portfolios, and will challenge agencies to consider how they engage with the Aboriginal community in the design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of services.

Across government there is no single strategy that specifically and comprehensively addresses Aboriginal youth suicide. While individual agencies have developed approaches that provide strategic direction, these address only

---

<sup>4</sup> Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics:  
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mediareleasesbyReleaseDate/27CAE1A5F7F2BC90CA258148000A4331?OpenDocument> – accessed 5 April 2018.

<sup>5</sup> *Learnings from the Message Stick*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Learnings from the Message Stick*, p. 25.

some aspects of a complex issue that requires a coordinated, whole-of-government response. Current Aboriginal suicide prevention structures in place include:

- the Statewide Specialist Aboriginal Mental Health Service (SSAMHS);
- the Aboriginal Mental Health Program;
- the Suicide Prevention Coordinator program; and
- the Strong Spirit Strong Minds Aboriginal Programs (SSSMAP).

These initiatives largely fall under the purview of the Department of Health and the Mental Health Commission, and are guided by, or work parallel to, strategies such as the *WA Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework 2015-2030*, the *Suicide Prevention 2020* strategy, and the report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention and Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP). While all of these approaches contain culture-based elements, they do not reflect the whole-of-government approach to Aboriginal wellbeing recommended in the Message Stick Inquiry.

Since the report from the Inquiry was released in 2016, the Government's capacity to comprehensively respond to the recommendations has been affected by a range of factors, including:

- a change of Government;
- significant machinery-of-government reforms, designed to improve service delivery;
- completion of a Service Priority Review that will drive the reform of the delivery, accountability and efficiency of services; and
- the undertaking of a Coronial Inquest in 2017 into the deaths of 13 Aboriginal youths in the Kimberley region.

### 3. Responding to the Inquiry Recommendations

The following sections outline the Western Australian Government's preliminary response to the 44 recommendations made by the Message Stick Inquiry.

#### 3.1 Increased government leadership, coordination and accountability

The Western Australian Government has already taken substantial action to address the recommendations through a suite of reforms. Following its election in March 2017, the new Government commenced a major reform of the public sector. These changes to the machinery of government are an important precursor to systemic change.

A number of government agencies have had their functions merged into new departments. These changes are intended to provide, over time, more holistic and

coordinated service delivery to families and communities in need, including Aboriginal families and communities in regional and remote areas.

The Government has established the Community Safety and Family Support Cabinet Sub Committee, designed to improve coordination across portfolios and focus effort and expenditure on shared outcomes. It is accountable to Cabinet on the progress of policy initiatives against established outcomes and targets. The development of a whole-of-government approach to improve Aboriginal youth wellbeing is being led by the Deputy Premier through this subcommittee.

The Community Safety and Family Support Cabinet Sub Committee is supported by a Directors General Implementation Group, comprising the lead agencies from portfolios represented on the Sub Committee. The Implementation Group will lead, promote and support cross-agency and cross-sector approaches, including addressing barriers to collaboration and information sharing between agencies.

To strengthen cross-government collaboration further, the Government has committed to introducing whole-of-government targets. These targets are intended to focus effort on complex policy issues that require cross-portfolio coordination and a multi-agency response. The targets will be used to drive change in policy areas where progress has proven to be stubbornly elusive. Although Aboriginal youth suicide will not be a specific target, some of its contributing factors will be addressed.

Under the machinery-of-government changes, the Department of the Premier and Cabinet (DPC) has assumed responsibility for Aboriginal affairs policy. Relocating this policy-making function to a central agency enhances the Government's capacity to coordinate and collectively address a range of complex issues. DPC is assisting the Deputy Premier in developing a whole-of-government approach to Aboriginal youth wellbeing. Part of DPC's policy focus is to achieve better alignment of State and Commonwealth investment and service delivery in this space.

DPC has also assumed responsibility for the Aboriginal Affairs Coordinating Committee (AACC), a statutory body established by s19(1) of the *Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act 1972*. The AACC coordinates the activities of all persons and bodies that provide or propose to provide services and assistance to Aboriginal people. Aboriginal youth issues will be an important component of the AACC's broader approach to Aboriginal wellbeing.

The formation of the Department of Communities brought together several agencies that funded and/or provided services for Aboriginal people in remote areas, including housing, child protection, family support, disability services, community services, the Regional Services Reform Unit (RSRU), and the regional network of the former Department of Aboriginal Affairs. The Department is now integrating these functions and services and is progressing towards a holistic service model based on the needs of client, family and place. The Department has commenced this work in the Kimberley region, which has the greatest proportion

of remote communities, and where Aboriginal people comprise 44 per cent of the population.

The RSRU is a change agent for service delivery and is continuing to advance several projects and initiatives to improve coordination and collaboration among agencies. It also has a mandate to build regional leadership capability, including how those leaders empower Aboriginal people and enable Aboriginal success. This includes the formation of District Leadership Groups, comprising senior officers from State and Commonwealth Agencies, local government, non-government bodies and Aboriginal organisations.

Exchanging information across government is becoming increasingly important as agencies create further opportunities to collaborate and coordinate efforts. Data sharing is a priority and is supported through the establishment of the Government Chief Information Officer (GCIO). The purpose of the GCIO is to provide leadership for the Government's information and communications technology processes, translating into improved services, transparency, governance, delivery, consistency, commonality, savings, efficiencies and reform.

Other opportunities to improve and embed information sharing continue to be identified. For example, additional provisions in the *Children and Community Services Act 2004*, which came into effect in January 2016, broaden information-sharing arrangements for the wellbeing and safety of those experiencing family violence. These changes enable the exchange of information between prescribed authorities and certain funded non-government services.

### **3.2 Listening to, involving and empowering Aboriginal people**

The Western Australian Government's public service reforms will help ensure that Aboriginal people, families and communities are the key voice in its approach to this issue, and that they are actively included at every opportunity. One of the major themes to emerge from the Service Priority Review is the need for customer-focused and outcomes-based service design and delivery. This means we must actively and meaningfully engage Aboriginal people.

Fundamental to the wellbeing of any person is the right to choose where they live. The Government is committed to improving essential services in remote and regional communities. Supporting the sustainability of communities will achieve enduring outcomes across a suite of priority areas.

Around 10 per cent of Western Australia's land area is held as land reserved for Aboriginal peoples. The Aboriginal Lands Trust (ALT) administers and manages that land, with support from the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage. The Government is committed to the objective of divesting ALT land to Aboriginal ownership and/or management, including that on which many remote communities reside.

Among a range of issues considered in the Message Stick Inquiry, DPC and other agencies have been working on:

- facilitating local employment throughout Western Australia, including in the regions, via government procurement;
- developing Aboriginal entrepreneurship through the Aboriginal Procurement Policy that will require government agencies to award 3% of their contracts to Aboriginal-owned businesses by 2020;
- supporting the Public Sector Commission to increase Aboriginal employment in the public sector, including in regional Western Australia;
- a Kimberley Science and Conservation Strategy, which has generated employment in ranger programs and shared responsibility with traditional owners for the management of country;
- establishing the North West Aboriginal Housing Fund, a co-designed initiative that aims to support Aboriginal people to move out of social housing into transitional housing, private rental accommodation or home ownership; and
- strengthening and diversifying the range and quality of Aboriginal tourism offerings.

A range of initiatives designed to improve Aboriginal workforce and employment outcomes are being implemented across the public sector. Several agencies have developed strategies to address specific workforce diversity requirements. These approaches include recruitment and retention measures, with consideration for cultural factors that might otherwise form unnecessary barriers to employment for Aboriginal people.

The Public Sector Commission has commenced a number of such programs, aimed at increasing and enhancing Aboriginal people's employment in State Government agencies. The Commission's 'Attract, appoint and advance: An employment strategy for Aboriginal people' was released in 2016 and provides a cohesive set of actions to improve Aboriginal employment rates and career pathways in the public sector. The strategy's primary goal is to achieve greater retention as well as a sustainable improvement in the representation of Aboriginal employees at all levels. It was prepared in consultation with reference groups which included Aboriginal public sector employees. The Commission has also combined with Jawun Indigenous Corporate Partnerships to facilitate secondments of public sector employees to Aboriginal organisations. This is a shared opportunity for the individual to contribute their knowledge and experience towards building the organisation's capacity in identified areas, and in return develop their own skills and experience, and a greater understanding of Aboriginal culture.

The whole-of-government Aboriginal Traineeship Program provides an opportunity for Aboriginal persons under 24 years of age to undertake a traineeship in the public sector, in Perth or in regional areas. On successful completion of the program, trainees may be provided with entry level employment. Aboriginal corporations are engaged to support the Aboriginal Traineeship Program by identifying potential candidates and advertising the program in the

regions. Agencies such as the Department of Health and the Department of Communities also participate in an Aboriginal cadetship program, providing young Aboriginal people with opportunities and experience in the public sector workplace. In 2017 the Public Sector Commission piloted an Aboriginal university cadetship program that provides Aboriginal students in their final year of an undergraduate degree or Honours program with 12-month work placements in applicable public sector agencies. This is designed to give students the opportunity to consider a career in the public sector. Agencies with a significant regional workforce have been implementing the Regional Aboriginal Employment Package run by the RSRU, which requires those agencies to fill vacancies with more local Aboriginal recruits. From 1 July 2018, the Department of Communities' Aboriginal employment policy will create job opportunities for Aboriginal people in each region of the state, in line with the proportion of the working age population in that region who are Aboriginal. This will be achieved through mandatory, region-specific employment targets applied to all advertised vacancies for the Department. A number of agencies have also developed Reconciliation Action Plans, implementation of which includes components focusing on increasing the representation of Aboriginal people within the agency and procurement of services from Aboriginal businesses.

Identifying and nurturing leadership among young Aboriginal people is also an important facet in the empowerment of Aboriginal communities. In addition to cadetships provided by the government sector, some agencies have deployed programs designed to cultivate leadership in areas such as sport, culture and the arts.

The first WA Police Force Aboriginal Cadet Program commenced with a targeted advertising campaign in June 2016. In mid-2018, two Cadet Schools have successfully completed initial training, and a third will commence shortly – 60 Aboriginal cadets in total. These cadets will be provided with a range of opportunities to enhance their preparation for the police recruit selection process and future academy training, thereby increasing the proportion of successful Aboriginal applicants for employment as police officers. A number of cadets have since graduated from the recruit training program.

Across government an increasing number of opportunities have been created to listen to and act on the views of Aboriginal people. DPC has assumed responsibility for the Western Australian Aboriginal Advisory Council (WAAAC). The WAAAC consists of persons of Aboriginal descent and has an advisory role on matters relating to the interests and wellbeing of Aboriginal people in Western Australia.

The Kimberley Suicide Prevention Working Group, made up of representatives from local organisations and Commonwealth and State departments, is currently undertaking a suicide-prevention trial in the Kimberley. Principles guiding the trial include empowering communities to develop their own strategies, programs, services and workforce. A focus on community leadership and family approaches ensures that responses are community specific.

The process of co-design and consultation is a key foundation of the new service delivery model being developed for the Department of Communities. A new Stakeholder Engagement and Partnership Framework is being developed to provide a consistent approach to engagement and partnership. The Framework will support more meaningful engagement with local communities and leverage the extensive consultation conducted with Aboriginal communities by the RSRU. A robust example of the Government's commitment to working alongside the Aboriginal community is the recently announced West Pilbara Plan, developed to build community strength, resilience and healing as a result of child sex offences identified in an ongoing police investigation. The plan's actions have been developed in close consultation with Aboriginal elders in Roebourne and significant effort has been invested to ensure it is true to their priorities and wishes. The plan focuses on six priority areas:

1. More support for children, carers and families;
2. A safer community for children;
3. Tackling alcohol and drugs;
4. Greater engagement in school and work;
5. Healing the community; and
6. Reprioritising government contracts and services.

This outcome is has arisen from a two-year investment in the 6718 Project by the RSRU.

The Department of Communities' *Safer Families, Safer Communities: Kimberley family violence regional plan* takes a whole-of-community approach to reducing family violence and improving outcomes for children and their families. Implementation actions under the Kimberley Plan are informed and directed by engagement with Aboriginal elders, community leaders and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), such as the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre and the Wunan Empowered Communities group.

As part of the Department of Communities' *Remote Services Framework* (RSF), Senior Community Child Protection Workers are co-located at multi-functional police facilities (MFPFs) to work with children, young people and families to promote safety and wellbeing in remote Aboriginal communities. Incorporating local cultural authority into the services provided at MFPFs will be considered as part of the review of the RSF, which is planned for 2018. The Department of Justice also helps provide better access to government services, such as licensing, fine payments, and obtaining birth certificates, through regular open days in regional centres and communities.

The *WA Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework 2015-2030* also recognises capacity building in the Aboriginal community as a priority area for the delivery of Aboriginal health and wellbeing. One of the objectives of the Framework is to enhance community influence, decision making and control over the management and delivery of health services to Aboriginal communities. The WA Country Health Service's (WACHS) *Footprints to Better Health* strategy also promotes Aboriginal capacity building by contracting Aboriginal organisations to provide services and programs in health promotion, education and self-management. Minimum

standards of engagement are also provided through the ongoing Regional Aboriginal Health Planning Forums, District Health Advisory Committees, and the District Aboriginal Health Action Groups.

The WA Mental Health Commission's Strong Spirit Strong Minds Aboriginal Programs scheme provides culturally secure training to Aboriginal people working in areas pertaining to mental health, and alcohol/drug use.

The Government's efforts to improve engagement with Aboriginal people and preserve the state's Aboriginal heritage and culture is also apparent in the current review of the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972* (AHA) being undertaken by the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage. The AHA is responsible for the preservation and protection of Aboriginal heritage in Western Australia. The objective of the review, which commenced in March 2018, is to modernise the state's Aboriginal heritage laws in a way that is respectful of Aboriginal people and their culture, and to ensure that Aboriginal heritage is recognised, protected and celebrated by all Western Australians today and for generations to come.

### **3.3 Provision of culturally based programs**

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention and Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP) report provides a framework that encourages the use of cultural protocols, and promotes community ownership in determining suicide-prevention strategies. The Statewide Specialist Aboriginal Mental Health Service (SSAMHS) provides a culturally secure mental health service as part of a mainstream multidisciplinary team, promoting cross-cultural practice and culturally appropriate health care. The Aboriginal Mental Health Model of Care used by the SSAMHS aligns with the ATSISPEP general recommendations and continues to be refined and improved over time. ATSISPEP outcomes are also being incorporated into the planning, implementation and evaluation process for the Suicide Prevention Coordinator project in the Kimberley.

More broadly, the Government recognises the importance of cultural knowledge as a protective factor. A number of the agencies that are essential to improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal youth have identified culture as a priority for policy and program responses. For example, the Department of Health's *WA Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework 2015-2030* acknowledges cultural determinants as being critical to strength-based service delivery in building individual and collective wellbeing. This approach bolsters opportunities to invest in culture-embedded programs, and has been particularly evident through the funding of Aboriginal community-controlled health services and specialist Aboriginal health programs.

Other agencies are also endeavouring to strengthen and support the community-controlled sector as a means of enhancing the delivery of culturally based programs. The Department of Communities is implementing a range of strategies

to enhance the community-controlled family support sector, embedded in their *Aboriginal Services and Practice Framework 2016-2018*. The Department's strategic document, *Building a Better Future: Out-of-Home-Care Reform in Western Australia* emphasizes the development of a culturally competent service system that supports children in care to heal from trauma and to maximize the success of family reunification.

Funding obtained through the Department of Transport's Special Plate Fund has been allocated for the implementation of initiatives such as youth intervention and diversion, building relationships with Aboriginal communities, protective behaviours, and community engagement. Through this scheme, WA Police Force have provided funding to Police and Community Youth Centres (PCYC) to operate the Safe Space program in several of their centres. This program provides participants—predominately Aboriginal youths—with the opportunity to mix socially and participate in a variety of structured activities, including engagement with family and Aboriginal culture through food, art, cultural stories and excursions. Work is now being undertaken to identify other Special Plate Funding opportunities around Aboriginal youth at risk in metropolitan and regional WA.

WA Police Force have also commenced scoping strategies, initiatives and programs that aim to improve capacity and capability in Aboriginal Communities. These include: place-based inductions; a review of the Warden Scheme; youth diversionary programs (cultural camps and inclusion of Aboriginal elders on Juvenile Justice Teams); partnering with existing Aboriginal programs to strengthen Police relationships (night patrols); engaging Aboriginal elders and incorporating them into the justice system to assist police in the investigation and court processes; and integrating Youth Crime Intervention Officers back into PCYCs to provide a safe place and targeted programs for Aboriginal youth. The Department of Justice also facilitates Community Supervision Orders to be carried out with Aboriginal communities and organisations.

Creativity and flexibility will also be needed to enhance the involvement of Aboriginal people and businesses in the Government's efforts to support Aboriginal cultural healing programs. Investment in culture-embedded programs should also grow steadily across a range of sectors.

### **3.4 Improved services and programs**

Addressing the risk factors for Aboriginal youth suicide requires a cross-agency approach. At a strategic level, the Government continues to focus on several areas to improve service delivery and coordination, including:

- sustained financial and policy investment to develop the capacity of the not-for-profit sector;
- reform in the youth justice system;
- mapping of services and funding provided to remote Aboriginal communities; and

- reform and investment to improve housing, utility services and infrastructure in regional and remote areas.

Core to improving services is being culturally responsive to the needs of Aboriginal people. A number of agencies, such as the Department of Communities, the Department of Health, the Department of Education, and WA Police Force, offer extensive cultural learning modules in relevant business units. While much of this is conducted online, it represents a commitment to provide cultural induction that will enhance staff capacity to engage more meaningfully with the Aboriginal people and communities they serve. The WA Mental Health Commission's SSSMAP provides a 'Ways of Working with Aboriginal People' training module for those working in mental health and alcohol/drug-related areas who have regular interaction with Aboriginal people. WACHS has also recently commenced a project in partnership with the WA Centre for Rural Health at the University of Western Australia, designed to train health professionals in 'clinical yarning', to assist them to communicate with Aboriginal people more effectively.

Culturally responsive agencies create welcoming and supportive environments and work holistically with Aboriginal people. The Department of Education has developed the *Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework*, which sets a series of standards for staff working with Aboriginal students, families and communities. Under this framework, school plans will need to embed actions that support the progression from cultural awareness to cultural responsiveness (learn from and relate respectfully). Other agencies have also devised tools or frameworks that ensure they provide appropriate and equitable services for Aboriginal people across the state. WACHS requires an Aboriginal Impact Statement and Declaration to be completed for any new policies or programs, while the Housing Authority's Equity Lens Tool also screens for any impacts on a particular section of the community.

The Government is committed to increasing the number of programs and services that support children and families. Key agencies will collaborate in the delivery of services through the Child and Parent Centres, as evidenced by the Letter of Agreement and governance structure. The Department of Education has recently developed strategies that focus on targeted teaching and improved attendance for Aboriginal students, and community co-design of early childhood education. Co-designed initiatives such as the Child and Parent Centres in Halls Creek, Fitzroy Valley and Roebourne illustrate the possibilities for providing significant gains for children in the areas of health, education and safer home environments. The Department of Justice and the Mental Health Commission also provide support via the 'Links' program, comprising teams of mental health practitioners and community support coordinators, for children with potential mental health issues who appear in the Perth Children's Court.

The Department of Communities has also implemented a number of programs and strategies on the back of its *Aboriginal Services and Practice Framework 2016-2018*. These provide culturally safe and secure programs designed to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and communities who come into contact with the child protection system. This includes the establishment of an

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation Strategy to build capacity and support the development of ACCOs to provide culturally secure services to vulnerable Aboriginal children and families throughout the state. The Department also funds an Intensive Family Support Service in each of its districts. These services work closely with families in their home environment to reduce risks to children and enhance family safety, including: tertiary family preservation services where children are at imminent risk of coming into care; reunification services where children or young people are transitioning from care to the family home; and family enhancement services where parenting issues are affecting the wellbeing of children. The Department's *Stakeholder Engagement Framework* also prioritises the co-design of services with the Aboriginal community.

The past year has also seen considerable efforts to improve service response to critical situations in the Kimberley region. The RSRU is working closely with WA Police Force and other service providers to establish an Aboriginal community incident management and monitoring framework, including established protocols for responding to critical incidents (such as a suicide) that require a coordinated agency response and mitigation of any further risks to community. This collaborative effort allows government to work more effectively with the community-controlled sector to support families and communities in crisis.

In terms of prevention, Youth Mental Health First Aid instruction has been delivered to staff across a range of sectors, including teaching and training staff. Adults working with or caring for adolescents in rural and remote areas are encouraged to complete the course, which is available to all agencies working with school-aged children and young people.

The Mental Health Commission is investing significant funds in community grants to assist with the upskilling of Aboriginal medical services across Western Australia. The Commission's Suicide Prevention Coordinators will also collaborate with the WA Primary Health Alliance to manage three Commonwealth-funded suicide-prevention trials in the Kimberley, Midwest and Perth South regions. The Suicide Prevention Coordinators also work with government and non-government organisations to provide wrap-around services in their respective regions.

The Department of Justice is investing in youth justice and adult rehabilitation and integration services. The Department has committed to the procurement of culturally competent and collaborative services to improve outcomes for Aboriginal young people, and service agreements have been awarded to a number of Aboriginal organisations. The Department's ongoing procurement of adult rehabilitation and reintegration services also embeds the specific needs of Aboriginal people. Many of these services have been co-designed with the Aboriginal community, targeting alcohol and drug use, accommodation, and transport barriers.

The Commonwealth has played, and will continue to play, a significant role in the provision of essential programs and services. While Commonwealth funding and support for regional and remote Aboriginal communities will remain crucial into the future, issue-specific programs, such as the suicide prevention trials, will help

guide state and regional agencies in their approach to youth suicide and its underlying factors.

## 4. Next Steps

Improving the life outcomes and overall wellbeing of Western Australia's Aboriginal people is one of this Government's foremost priorities. However, there is no 'one size fits all' approach to achieving this goal; all services need to be tailored and responsive to the individual needs of each community and region. We must be coordinated and bring a genuine whole-of-government approach, actively and wholeheartedly working with the Aboriginal community. It is essential that agency priorities become embedded in the cultural richness, diversity and strength of our Aboriginal people.

This response to the Message Stick Inquiry forms a first step in the Government's ongoing commitment to improving Aboriginal youth wellbeing. The work will be further informed over coming months by recommendations from ongoing activities, including suicide prevention initiative trials. It will also address the imminent recommendations of the 2017 Coronial Inquest into the Suicide Deaths of 13 Aboriginal Youths in the Kimberley region.

Recent service provision reviews, and reforms to the machinery of government, will provide the structure and processes required to formulate a united and comprehensive approach. DPC will continue to compile, coordinate and integrate the State's response to Message Stick and the Kimberley Inquest, addressing recommendations and building its capacity to explore cross-domain solutions to the underlying factors. This knowledge will be used more broadly in the development of a transformational agenda for Aboriginal affairs. Guided by the Western Australian Aboriginal Advisory Council and the Aboriginal Affairs Coordinating Committee, this work is intended to result in long-lasting change to policy and practice.

This document outlines the Government's commitment to tackling the issues, and serves to highlight initiatives already underway. It is an initial statement of the Government's intent to address the recommendations of the Message Stick Inquiry comprehensively as part of its broader approach to the Aboriginal affairs agenda.

## List of Acronyms

AACC	Aboriginal Affairs Coordinating Committee
ACCO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
ALT	Aboriginal Lands Trust
ATSISPEP	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention and Evaluation Project
DPC	Department of the Premier and Cabinet
GCIO	Government Chief Information Officer
KMHDS	Kimberley Mental Health and Drug Service
MHC	Mental Health Commission
MFPF	Multi-functional Police Facility
RSF	Remote Services Framework
RSRU	Regional Services Reform Unit
SRACs	Strategic Regional Advisory Councils
SSAMHS	Statewide Specialist Aboriginal Mental Health Service
SSSMAP	Strong Spirit Strong Minds Aboriginal Programs
WAAAC	Western Australian Aboriginal Advisory Council
WACHS	WA Country Health Service

# ATTACHMENT A

## SUMMARY OF PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY RECOMMENDATIONS BY GOVERNMENT IDENTIFIED THEMES

### *Increased government leadership, coordination and accountability*

#### **Recommendation 1 Page 13**

That Western Australian Government agencies revisit reports listed in Appendix Six and outline their actions of how the intention and recommendations of these reports will be implemented.

#### **Recommendation 2 Page 14**

That the Premier coordinates and provides a response to the recommendations of this Inquiry which have not been directed to a specific agency or Minister.

#### **Recommendation 3 Page 15**

That the Premier and each Minister to whom recommendations are directed should report to Parliament at six monthly intervals for no fewer than five years after the tabling of this report on the progress of implementing recommendations made in this report.

#### **Recommendation 4 Page 15**

That the Department of the Premier and Cabinet create a centralised database of inquiry recommendations made to Western Australian Government agencies. Further:

- the Department of the Premier and Cabinet retains overall responsibility for maintenance of the database and ensuring government agencies update the database in a timely fashion.
- the database should include the government's initial response to recommendations, and be updated at six monthly intervals to advise of progress made in implementing supported recommendations contained in the database. This advice should include detailed information of specific actions taken in response to particular recommendations, and not just whether actions are 'in progress' or 'complete'.
- information in the database should continue to be updated until implementation of a recommendation is 'complete' or superseded, in which case the reasons why the recommendation is no longer being implemented should be stated.

#### **Recommendation 5 Page 30**

That Western Australia be mindful of its obligations under international human rights agreements and take all possible measures to ensure these obligations are met.

#### **Recommendation 25 Page 123**

That the Western Australian Government urge the Commonwealth Government to now release the funds for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy.

#### **Recommendation 26 Page 127**

That the Mental Health Commission, as a matter of priority, works with the WA Primary Health Alliance and other stakeholders to establish clear roles and responsibilities for approaching Aboriginal suicide prevention in Western Australia.

**Recommendation 27 Page 138**

That the Premier, in conjunction with Cabinet, create or designate a government agency or authority to lead the Western Australian Government's actions in responding to issues affecting Aboriginal wellbeing.

**Recommendation 28 Page 138**

That the designated government agency responsible for Aboriginal wellbeing is fully resourced and provided with sufficient authority to fulfil its leadership role, and cause other government agencies to take action in accordance with its directions.

**Recommendation 29 Page 142**

That the Western Australian Government redesign its agency structure to achieve an integrated whole of government approach to addressing issues facing Aboriginal people in remote areas. The redesign should be led by senior public servants from within each agency which provides services to Aboriginal people in remote areas.

**Recommendation 30 Page 146**

That the Western Australian Government improve collaboration and coordination between agencies that develop strategies for, and deliver programs and services to, Aboriginal people in remote areas.

**Recommendation 31 Page 152**

That the Department for Child Protection and Family Support in conjunction with the Public Sector Commission prepare a circular outlining the operation of the information sharing provisions under the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* to be circulated to all government agencies.

***Listening to, involving and empowering Aboriginal people*****Recommendation 12 Page 77**

That the Western Australian Government places increased emphasis on empowering Aboriginal communities in developing and actioning all strategies, programs and services which are relevant to Aboriginal people.

**Recommendation 13 Page 79**

That the Western Australian Government shifts its focus from government owned and run programs and services for Aboriginal people to Aboriginal owned and run programs. The Committee acknowledges that this will be a gradual process; however, it can begin immediately by designing strategies, services and programs with the aim of empowering Aboriginal communities.

**Recommendation 14 Page 85**

That the Western Australian Government implement minimum standards of engagement with Aboriginal people when developing, actioning and funding strategies, programs and services which affect Aboriginal people.

**Recommendation 15 Page 86**

That the Mental Health Commission involves Aboriginal people in the ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of the *Suicide Prevention 2020: Together we can save lives* strategy.

**Recommendation 16 Page 93**

That the Mental Health Commission provide and fund programs and strategies which emphasise developing the capacity of community members to help youth at risk of suicide.

**Recommendation 17 Page 96**

That the Western Australian Government support the development of future Aboriginal leaders, by providing support and funding to existing leadership development organisations, funding scholarships and connecting future leaders with secondments opportunities to gain specific skills, and assisting with the early identification of leaders through school based programs.

**Recommendation 18 Page 103**

That the Public Sector Commission mandate higher Aboriginal employment targets for Western Australian Government agencies.

**Recommendation 19 Page 103**

That Western Australian Government agencies should recruit greater numbers of Aboriginal people, relying on section 51 of the *Equal Opportunity Act 1984* if necessary. These positions should not be limited to Aboriginal liaison or cultural advisory positions, but should be generally spread across all positions at all levels in all agencies.

**Recommendation 20 Page 103**

That the Western Australian Government establish clear and more attractive career paths for Aboriginal employees.

**Recommendation 21 Page 103**

That the Western Australian Parliament explores the option of employing an Aboriginal liaison officer based on the Queensland Parliament's experience.

**Recommendation 22 Page 115**

That the Mental Health Commission immediately make publicly available the *Suicide Prevention 2020: Together we can save lives* Implementation Plan, Aboriginal Implementation Plan and Youth Engagement Strategy.

**Recommendation 23 Page 117**

That the Mental Health Commission should evaluate the success of *Suicide Prevention 2020: Together we can save lives*, and report on the outcomes of its evaluations at least annually, including how progress is being measured and what changes in approach have been made based on evaluation findings.

**Recommendation 24 Page 117**

That the Evaluation Reference Group should include at least one Aboriginal member and should engage with Aboriginal communities as part of its ongoing evaluative role.

***Provision of culturally based programs*****Recommendation 7 Page 57**

That Western Australian Government agencies recognise the importance of cultural knowledge as a protective factor preventing Aboriginal youth suicide.

**Recommendation 8 Page 57**

That the Western Australian Government set aside an appropriate portion of grant expenditure to fund core culture-embedded programs for Aboriginal young people across the state.

**Recommendation 10 Page 66**

That Western Australian Government agencies use the assessment tools and evaluation framework created by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project.

***Improved services and programs*****Recommendation 6 Page 48**

That the Mental Health Commission broadens its scope of suicide prevention for Aboriginal people to encompass all identified risk factors.

**Recommendation 9 Page 63**

That non-Aboriginal employees of government agencies who are involved in developing strategies for, or delivering programs and services to, Aboriginal people should attend a locally-relevant cultural competency course run by suitably qualified providers.

**Recommendation 11 Page 70**

The Western Australian Government should foster strategies and programs which contribute to the greater appreciation of aboriginal culture, including placing a greater emphasis on reconciliation action plans, and providing funding for cultural events attended by aboriginal and non-aboriginal people alike.

**Recommendation 32 Page 156**

That the Department of the Premier and Cabinet coordinates and collaborates with the Mental Health Commission and WA Primary Health Alliance to integrate the Mental Health Atlas with the map of local or regional Aboriginal youth services.

**Recommendation 33 Page 156**

That the Department of the Premier and Cabinet amend the Aboriginal Youth Investment Priority and Principles to allow funding amounts of less than \$300,000 to be granted to Aboriginal organisations.

**Recommendation 34 Page 165**

That the Western Australian Government should collaborate with Commonwealth agencies and non-government organisations to strengthen the evidence base to determine the effective ways to prevent Aboriginal youth suicide.

**Recommendation 35 Page 170**

That the Premier and the Minister for Community Services report to the Parliament on the implementation of Recommendation 6 in the Commissioner for Children and Young People's 2015 report, *Our Children Can't Wait: Review of the implementation of recommendations of the 2011 Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in WA*.

**Recommendation 36 Page 171**

That the Minister for Education increase the number of Child and Parent Centres operating in remote areas.

**Recommendation 37 Page 174**

That the Mental Health Commission implement the postvention recommendations in the *Solutions that Work: What the Evidence and Our People Tell Us, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project* report and the forthcoming University of Western Australia Critical Response Project report into its dedicated suicide prevention strategy Aboriginal Implementation Plan.

**Recommendation 38 Page 182**

That the Western Australian Government collaborates with the Commonwealth Government to provide accessible 24-hour mental health and suicide prevention services in remote areas.

**Recommendation 39 Page 184**

That the Western Australian Government collaborates with the Commonwealth Government to train and employ local community members to fill positions in remote areas.

**Recommendation 40 Page 186**

That the Western Australia Police and the Department for Child Protection and Family Support report to the Parliament on the scope for local cultural authority to be incorporated into the services provided at multi-functional police facilities.

**Recommendation 41 Page 187**

That the Department of the Premier and Cabinet and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs revisit Recommendation 8 of the *Coronial Inquest into 22 suicides – Kimberley*. The Premier and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs should then report to the Parliament on:

- the effectiveness of the multi-function government office in Broome in improving access to and referral of Aboriginal people to appropriate government services; and
- plans to establish any other multi-function government offices in regional centres.

**Recommendation 42 Page 187**

That the Department of the Premier and Cabinet and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs evaluate the new multi-function Department of Aboriginal Affairs office in Kalgoorlie after one year of operation. The Premier and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs should then report to the Parliament on its effectiveness in improving access to and referral of Aboriginal people to appropriate government services.

**Recommendation 43 Page 188**

That the Premier and the Minister for Mental Health report to the Parliament on the establishment of wraparound services in remote communities.

**Recommendation 44 Page 191**

That the Minister for Health report to the Parliament on measures to address the acknowledged gap in teaching and training staff about mental health issues and Aboriginal youth suicide.