



# Aboriginal health and wellbeing in public health planning

## ***Acknowledgement of Country and people***

WA Health acknowledges the Aboriginal people of the many traditional lands and language groups of Western Australia. It acknowledges the wisdom of Aboriginal Elders both past and present and pays respect to Aboriginal communities of today.

## ***Using the term Aboriginal***

Within Western Australia, the term Aboriginal is used in preference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of Western Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander may be referred to in the national context and Indigenous may be referred to in the international context. No disrespect is intended to our Torres Strait Islander colleagues and community.

## Introduction

This is the first in a suite of resources that will support local governments to effectively integrate Aboriginal health and wellbeing into their public health planning process. This suite of resources supports the development, implementation, and evaluation of local public health plans. These resources should be read alongside the *State Public Health Plan 2025–2030* (State Plan).<sup>1</sup>

Many local governments already contribute to Aboriginal health and wellbeing, particularly related to reconciliation and community engagement. These resources will support those local governments to apply a public health lens to the meaningful work already underway. These resources will also support local governments who are seeking additional strategies to support Aboriginal health and wellbeing.

## Public health planning

Aboriginal health and wellbeing is an overarching objective in the State Plan and must be considered by all local governments in their public health planning process.

The health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people is everybody's business. Local government, as the level of government that works most closely with individuals and communities, shares responsibility to address racism and strengthen the cultural determinants of health for Aboriginal people in WA. This responsibility should be embedded when applying the 4 objectives of the State Plan (Figure 1, overleaf).

OBJECTIVES			
Aboriginal health and wellbeing			
<b>Promote</b> <i>Foster strong, connected communities and healthier environments</i>	<b>Prevent</b> <i>Reduce the burden of chronic disease, communicable disease, and injury</i>	<b>Protect</b> <i>Protect against public and environmental health risks, effectively manage emergencies, reduce disaster impacts and lessen the health impacts of climate change</i>	<b>Enable</b> <i>Bolster public health systems and workforce and leverage partnerships to support health and wellbeing</i>
<i>Address racism and strengthen the cultural determinants of health for Aboriginal people in WA</i>			

**Figure 1:** Overview of Aboriginal health and wellbeing in the State Plan

Local governments have an opportunity to build ongoing and respectful relationships and formal partnerships with Aboriginal communities, creating a strong foundation for meaningful collaboration.

The *Public Health Act 2016* states that local public health plans must describe how the local government will work with stakeholders undertaking public health initiatives, projects and programs to achieve the identified objectives and priorities. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), including Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) undertake significant work in public health and are therefore key stakeholders in public health planning. Furthermore, the *Local Government Act 1995* requires local governments to recognise the particular interests of Aboriginal people and to involve Aboriginal people in planning and decision-making processes.

Local governments can help ensure Aboriginal people and communities are empowered to shape the solutions that matter most to them by working together in a way that supports self-determined health and wellbeing outcomes.

## Aboriginal health and wellbeing

For Aboriginal people in WA, health and wellbeing encompass the various dimensions of physical health, psychological health, social and emotional wellbeing, spirituality, and cultural integrity.<sup>2</sup> The cultural determinants of health originate from and promote a strength-based perspective, acknowledging that stronger connections to culture and Country build stronger individual and collective identities, a sense of self-esteem, resilience, and positively impact other health determinants.<sup>3</sup>

Racism, however, is also recognised as a significant health determinant, with evidence showing its impact on the mental and overall wellbeing of Aboriginal people.<sup>4</sup> Addressing racism is essential to fostering communities where Aboriginal people can thrive.

Addressing racism and strengthening the cultural determinants of health for Aboriginal people is critical.

## Aboriginal health related policies

It is important for local governments to familiarise themselves with the current Aboriginal health policy landscape to ensure effective public health planning that embeds Aboriginal health and wellbeing initiatives. Familiarisation of the policies should be undertaken prior to any consultation with Aboriginal stakeholders to ensure meaningful engagement, relationships and partnerships. By doing this, local public health priorities and strategies can align with local, state and federal policies, achieving appropriate, coordinated and sustainable outcomes for Aboriginal health.

## National Agreement on Closing the Gap

The *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (the National Agreement) came into effect 27 July 2020. This is the first National Agreement developed with all levels of government in genuine equal partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, through the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations. The National Agreement outlines the commitment from all Australian governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives to a fundamentally new way of developing and implementing policies and programs that impact on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The National Agreement stems from the belief that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a genuine say in the design and delivery of services that affect them, better life outcomes are achieved.<sup>5</sup>

The National Agreement is built around the 4 priority reforms (Figure 2).<sup>6</sup> These reforms are relevant to public health planning as they are central to changing the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



**Figure 2:** Four priority reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap

It is recommended local governments do additional research on the 4 priority reforms and consider how they relate to both the work they are doing at a local level as well as the local needs of the Aboriginal community.

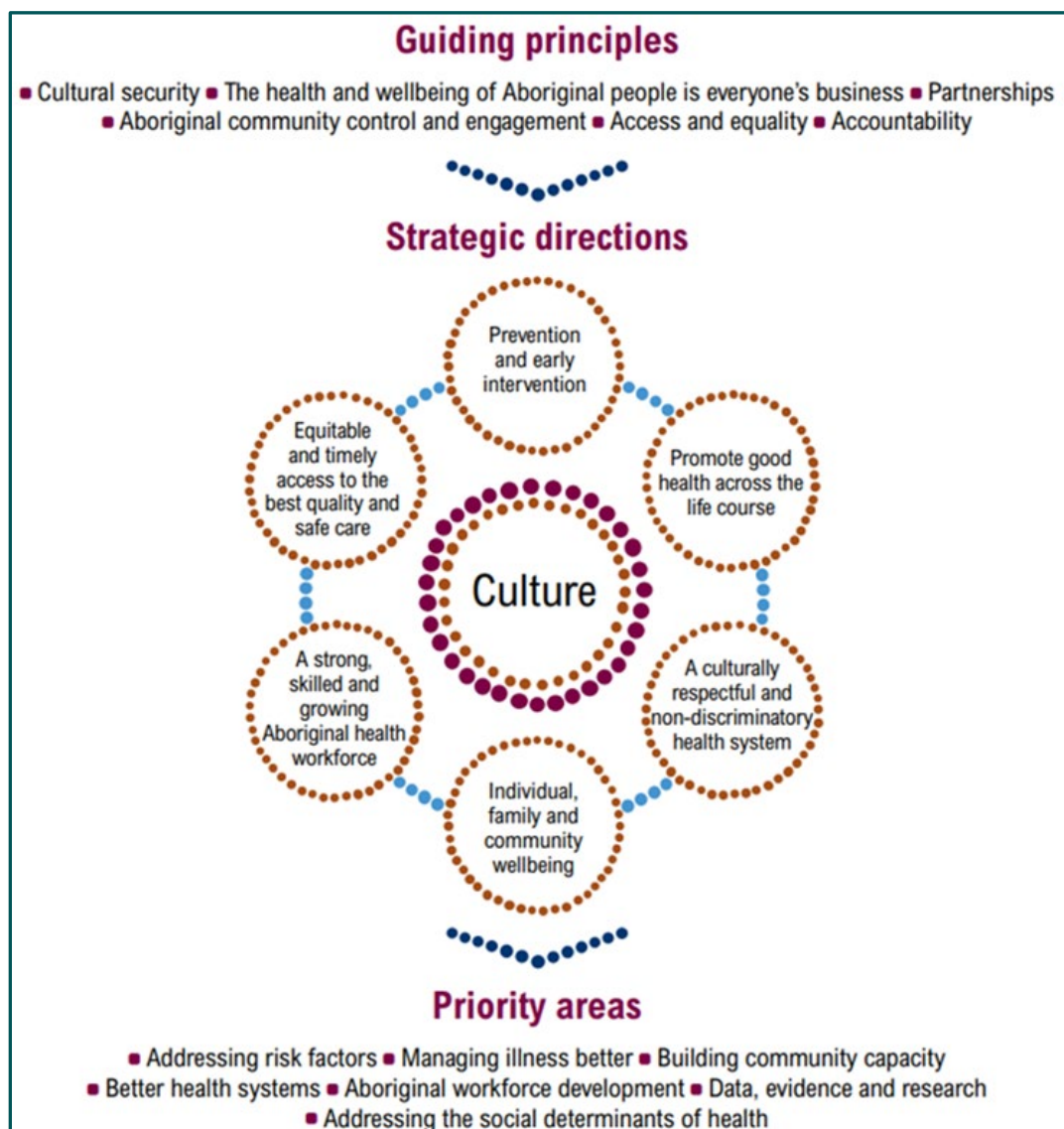
Under the National Agreement, parties have committed to key reporting and accountability measures to enable transparency to all Australians of how the socioeconomic outcomes and priority reforms are being embedded into government policies, strategies, and partnerships. The WA Government's Closing the Gap Implementation Plans and Annual Reports are key reporting mechanisms which provide WA specific initiatives, strategies and progress related to the National Agreement.<sup>7</sup>

## WA Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework 2015–2030

The *WA Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework 2025–2030* (the framework) was developed to ensure Aboriginal people in WA have access to high quality health care and services, while assisting community to make good health a priority through a focus on prevention.<sup>8</sup> The framework outlines a set of strategic directions to improve Aboriginal health and wellbeing outcomes.

The framework aims to guide the approach that WA Health, other government agencies, non-government organisations, ACCOs and communities can adopt to support the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people in WA.

The framework includes 6 guiding principles, 6 strategic directions and 7 priority areas, all of which are applicable to public health planning (Figure 3, overleaf).



**Figure 3:** Guiding principles, strategic directions and priority areas of the WA Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework 2025–2030

Implementation of the framework is supported by an implementation guide.<sup>9</sup> Local governments are encouraged to apply the implementation guide in their public health planning and support effective implementation through collaboration with local stakeholders and community consultation.

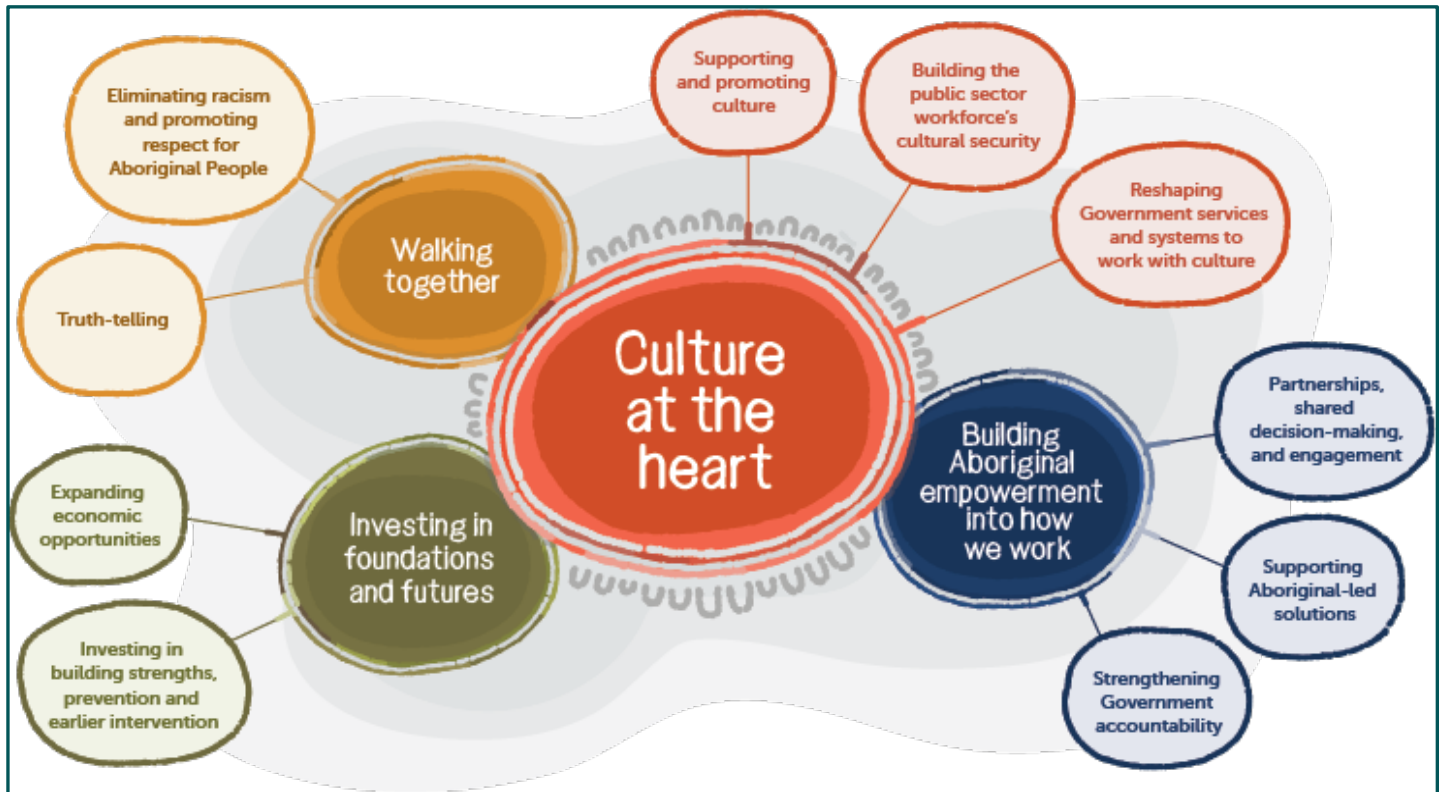
### *Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy 2021–2029*

The *Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy 2021–2029* (the strategy) outlines how the WA Government will direct its efforts towards a future in which all Aboriginal people, families and communities are empowered to live good lives and choose their own futures from a secure foundation.<sup>10</sup>

The strategy consists of 10 strategic elements grouped into 4 themes, and a set of core principles (Figure 4, overleaf). Together, these set the high-level direction for the WA Government, its agencies and staff to work towards achieving the strategy's goal: Aboriginal people, families and communities empowered to live good lives and choose their own futures from a secure foundation.

The strategic elements, themes and core principles of the strategy align with effectively integrating Aboriginal perspectives in public health planning.





**Figure 4:** Strategic elements of the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy 2021–2029

## Potential strategies

There are numerous strategies local governments can incorporate into their public health planning process to support the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people and are consistent with relevant Aboriginal health policies as well as the State Plan. Local governments should identify and support the delivery of public health strategies through shared decision making with the local Aboriginal community and ACCOs.

This suite of resources presents potential strategies for local governments to consider in collaboration with Aboriginal stakeholders. Aboriginal communities may have other ideas of important strategies which could be embedded in the public health planning process.

## Key considerations

This suite of resources also presents key considerations for how to embed Aboriginal health and wellbeing in public health planning.

## References

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- <sup>2</sup> Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing Project (2022). *The Dance of Life*. University of Western Australia. Available from: <https://timhwb.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/TIMHWP-Fact-Sheet-The-Dance-Of-Life.pdf>
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- <sup>4</sup> Kairuz, C. A., Casanelia, L. M., Bennett-Brook, K., Coombes, J., & Yadav, U. N. (2021). Impact of racism and discrimination on physical and mental health among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in Australia: a systematic scoping review. *BMC Public Health*, 21, Article 1302. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11363-x>
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- <sup>6</sup> Australian Government. (n.d.). *Priority Reforms*. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Available from: <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>
- <sup>7</sup> Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Government of Western Australia. (2024). *Closing the Gap*. Available from: <https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/departments/departments-of-the-premier-and-cabinet/closing-the-gap>
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- <sup>9</sup> Department of Health, Government of Western Australia. (2017). *Implementation Guide for the WA Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework 2015–2030*. Available from: <https://www.health.wa.gov.au/~media/Files/Corporate/general-documents/Aboriginal-health/PDF/13283-implementation-guide-final.pdf>
- <sup>10</sup> Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Government of Western Australia. (2021). *Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy – Western Australia 2021–2029*. Available from: <https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/departments/departments-of-the-premier-and-cabinet/aboriginal-empowerment-strategy-western-australia-2021-2029>

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