



# IMPROVING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING IN QUEENSLAND

## Discussion Paper

### Purpose

This discussion paper seeks the views of Queenslanders and stakeholders on actions to be taken as part of the whole-of-government Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing Action Plan 2016-18 (the Action Plan).

It has been developed based on principles outlined in the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration<sup>1</sup>, consultations held to date and evidence about what works to improve the mental health and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders.

### Our Shared Goal

The Action Plan will acknowledge the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and will aim to support improved social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities.

Our shared goals include reducing the incidence, severity and duration of mental illness, reducing suicide and its impact and preventing and reducing the adverse impact of alcohol and other drugs. These goals cannot be achieved by a single organisation or group. It will require all levels of government, non-government organisations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and non-Indigenous communities to work together.

### About the Action Plan

The Action Plan will realise a commitment made under the *Queensland Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol Strategic Plan 2014-2019* (the Strategic Plan) to identify and take actions to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders.

It will build on actions already being implemented under the Strategic Plan and in other action plans including:

- The *Early Action: Queensland Mental Health Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention Action Plan 2015-17* which aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of all Queenslanders and reduce the incidence, severity and duration of mental illness
- The *Queensland Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2015-17* which aims to reduce suicide and its impact on Queenslanders
- The *Queensland Alcohol and Other Drugs Action Plan 2015-17* which aims to prevent and reduce the adverse impacts of alcohol and other drugs on Queenslanders.

It will also complement the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health Strategy being developed by Queensland Health which will focus on mental health and alcohol and other drug health services.

The Action Plan will initially be in place for 18 months although actions may be implemented over a longer period. To ensure continual improvement, it will be reviewed and updated by the Commission after 12 months. This will provide flexibility to adjust the Action Plan to address new or emerging issues and take into account progress being made at both the State and national level.

It is envisaged that the Action Plan will focus on factors which contribute to improved social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders by supporting:

1. Community participation
2. Community and family resilience
3. Individual social and emotional wellbeing.

## Developing the Action Plan

The Action Plan will be developed based on evidence of what works as well as extensive consultations being undertaken throughout Queensland and feedback provided to this Discussion Paper.

The consultations will involve a series of Strategic Conversations and community forums in the Torres Strait, Cairns, Townsville, Rockhampton, Mount Isa, Logan, Ipswich, Toowoomba and Brisbane held between April and June 2016.

Responses to this Discussion Paper will also inform the Action Plan's development. A progress report outlining the consultation results will be publicly released in July 2016.

It is anticipated that the Action Plan will be publicly released later in 2016.

## Share your views and experiences

You are invited to consider the questions outlined below and provide feedback to [sewb@qmhc.qld.gov.au](mailto:sewb@qmhc.qld.gov.au) by **30 June 2016**.

1. What should the Action Plan focus on?
2. What actions should be taken to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders?
3. What actions are likely to make the greatest difference and what should be done?
4. What is currently being done that works?
5. What is currently being done that could be improved?
6. What measures should be used to see if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing has improved?

## What is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing?

Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders have known about the importance of social and emotional wellbeing for thousands of years. It is an intricate part of cultural practices and spiritual belief, linked closely to community, family and connections to land and sea which continue to be a source of resilience and strength to this day.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' view social and emotional wellbeing in a different way to non-Indigenous concepts of mental health and wellbeing and mental illness.

While non-Indigenous mental health and wellbeing focuses largely on the ability of the individual to function within their environment, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing encompasses not only the wellbeing of the individual, but also the wellbeing of their family and community. It reflects a holistic understanding of life and health which includes mental health, but also considers other factors such as cultural, spiritual and social wellbeing<sup>2</sup>.

All people experience differing levels of social and emotional wellbeing regardless of whether they are living with a mental illness. For example, a person can be living with a mental illness but experience good social and emotional wellbeing which supports recovery<sup>3</sup>.

## Why is it important?

Social and emotional wellbeing influences the everyday lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders, their families and the community. It influences life outcomes in all areas including education, employment and economic participation, physical health and mental health<sup>4</sup>.

Social and emotional wellbeing is a significant protective factor against the worst impacts of stressful life events and has enabled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders to endure historical and present day hardships and adversity<sup>5</sup>.

However, there is a need to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders to improve levels of social and emotional wellbeing. Representing 4.3 per cent of Queensland's population, a greater proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders experience high or very high levels of psychological distress than non-Indigenous people (30.3 per cent compared to 11.5 per cent)<sup>6</sup>.

It is also well accepted that social and emotional wellbeing is influenced by and reinforces other life outcomes including suicide rates, levels of problematic alcohol and other drug use and levels of mental illness. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders are almost three times more likely to suicide than non-Indigenous people (30.9 per 100,000

people compared to 13.3 per 100,000 people)<sup>7</sup>. Suicide has a ripple effect within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities and its relative frequency compounds grief and trauma.

Social and emotional wellbeing can have a positive impact on the recovery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living with a diagnosed mental illness leading to reduced hospitalisation. However, nationally the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being hospitalised for mental health related conditions was more than double that of non-Indigenous people (12.7 and 6.3 per 1,000 people respectively)<sup>8</sup>.

Levels of problematic alcohol and other drug use is influenced by and impacts on social and emotional wellbeing. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to abstain from drinking alcohol (23 per cent) than non-Indigenous people. However, those who report drinking alcohol do so at life-time risky levels (20 per cent) and over half (57 per cent) report drinking alcohol at single occasion risky drinking levels<sup>9</sup>. A larger proportion than the national rate also report smoking tobacco daily (44 per cent)<sup>10</sup> and using illicit drugs (23 per cent)<sup>11</sup>.

Social and emotional wellbeing also affects and is influenced by a range of other socio-economic factors including educational outcomes, employment and training levels, victimisation and incarceration rates and child protection issues.

Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing benefits all Queenslanders including the broader community and economy, industry and governments.

## How can good social and emotional wellbeing be supported?

To improve social and emotional wellbeing, responses need to take into account unique historical factors which have had a trans-generational impact, along with present day circumstances that adversely impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Effective responses recognise the connectedness between the individual, family and community and:

- take a holistic approach and adopt interdisciplinary approaches
- focus on recovery and healing from stress and trauma

- empower people to regain a sense of control over their lives
- include Indigenous-led strategies that are family focused, culturally capable, and are context specific<sup>12,13,14</sup>.

These approaches need to focus on the factors that support good social and emotional wellbeing including:

- cultural identity and connections to community, land and cultural practices
- family connections
- community connections and to land, spirituality
- social inclusion and ability to participate in the broader community including in schools and workplaces
- economic participation, employment and income levels
- the ability to access effective health and other support services such as housing and family support
- unresolved grief and loss
- racism and discrimination<sup>15,16</sup>.

The research indicates that these factors should not be considered in isolation as they interact and reinforce each other<sup>17</sup>.

Much of the research and participants at the Strategic Conversation identify resilience as fundamental to good social and emotional wellbeing. Resilience has many definitions. It can mean the ability to 'overcome odds' where a person's strength enables them to withstand adversity; coping in the face of sustained negative circumstances such as family conflict; and recovery from trauma for example the death of a family member.

Participants at the Strategic Conversation indicated that there is a need for governments and the broader community to take action to support resilience and social and emotional wellbeing. They also indicated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples had a very strong role to play and also have a responsibility to address these issues.

## What is currently being done?

Many policies, programs and services focus on addressing those factors which influence and are affected by social and emotional wellbeing across a wide range of areas including health, education, employment, housing, justice and community support services. They are being

implemented by a wide variety of organisations including governments at all levels, the non-government sector, private enterprise and communities and include actions being taken as part of the *Closing the Gap* agenda.

Actions being implemented under the *Queensland Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol Strategic Plan* include a specific focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing.

## PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

The Action Plan will acknowledge the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Building on this strength, it is proposed that the Action Plan will focus on three inter-related priorities to support:

1. Community participation
2. Family and community resilience
3. Individual social and emotional wellbeing.

### 1 COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Social and emotional wellbeing is influenced greatly by the social conditions in which a person lives and the kind of society they live in<sup>18</sup> and in the ordinary places where we all spend our lives, such as schools and workplaces.

Participants at Strategic Conversations and the research clearly indicated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not feel valued in the broader community. The impact of racism and discrimination has a significant impact on self-worth and self-esteem and is a significant barrier to participating in the community and in the economy<sup>19</sup>.

As described by participants at the Strategic Conversations, feeling and being valued and safe within the broad community are essential to enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participate in the community and the economy.

Participants at the Strategic Conversations also indicated that while there are laws such as the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth)* and the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1991 (Qld)* that seek to protect all people from racial and other forms of discrimination, accessing those protections can be difficult. For example, being able to make a formal written complaint can be difficult for those who have limited access to resources and support.

The cultural capability of services was also identified as a significant factor with some indicating that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are less likely to access or to continue to access services which do not acknowledge or address cultural needs and circumstances. Participants at the Strategic Conversation also indicated a need to recognise the diversity of Aboriginal traditions and Torres Strait Islander customs rather than applying a one size fits all approach. This is particularly important as many services are provided through mainstream organisations such as schools and hospitals.

One of the suggestions made at the Strategic Conversations was that cultural capability training be provided to all public servants including those providing frontline services, managing programs and developing policies and that there is a process of accreditation.

This priority area will focus on enhanced community participation by:

- Addressing racism in the broader community and improving access to protections
- Improving the cultural capability of services.

Actions which are currently being implemented include *beyondblue's Stop. Think. Respect.* project.

### 2 COMMUNITY AND FAMILY RESILIENCE

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have demonstrated significant resilience and strength in the face of many challenges since colonisation. However, past policies and practices, such as policies which separated children from their families, have had a detrimental effect on effective parenting practices<sup>20</sup> and have contributed to present day levels of child protection issues.

Participants at the Strategic Conversation and the research indicated that there is a need to support stronger family and community resilience in order to improve social and emotional wellbeing.

To support resilience, a number of areas need to be addressed including:

- Grief and trauma including by providing support to those in distress as a result of suicide

- Cultural identity including connections to land and sea and to engage in cultural practices and cultural expression including through the arts and language
- Supporting families including by providing parenting support
- Building the capacity of communities including supporting community-led initiatives and community leadership.

Actions which are currently being implemented include:

- Delivering arts and cultural services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Arts Queensland)
- Scoping current service models, barriers for accessing services and options for improvement, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people at risk of suicide within the Townsville (Queensland Mental Health Commission).

The Commission is also supporting the National Empowerment Project in Cherbourg and Kuranda which is being delivered by the Ngoonbi Cooperative Society. The project was conceptualised by the School of Indigenous Studies at The University of Western Australia. To date the Commission has provided funding for support services, community worker training and a healing program in each community.

### 3

## INDIVIDUAL SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Promoting social and emotional wellbeing of individuals requires strengthening socio-economic protective factors such as good educational outcomes, economic participation through training and employment, access to housing and early intervention. Other areas to be addressed include:

- Intervening early when the first signs of problems are seen
- Supporting individuals to reduce harms related to alcohol and other drug use
- Providing support to people who are at risk of suicide.

Actions which are currently being implemented and are included in other Action Plans include:

- Children and Family Centres (CFC) servicing 10 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities, providing early childhood and family support services, delivered in centre-based and/or

community settings. The program supports and promotes the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within their extended family and cultural community (Department of Education and Training).

- Improving outcomes for children in the statutory child protection system by developing a service model to facilitate earlier intervention and access to therapeutic services at an earlier stage of their entry in care. Services will prioritise access to culturally capable support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and continue to provide services to children and young people in out-of-home care who have severe and complex psychological and behavioural support needs (Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services).
- Providing mental health and personalised support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participate in their community and to achieve outcomes that are meaningful to them (Queensland Health).
- Delivering post release support services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people with severe and complex mental health problems transitioning from detention into the community who require ongoing care and support (Queensland Health).
- Increasing access to alcohol and other drug treatment and support services by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (Queensland Health).
- Continuing to invest in public intoxication services to respond to adults affected by alcohol, targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services).
- Continuing to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander discrete communities to improve the effectiveness of Alcohol Management Plans (AMPs) and reduce sly grog in the communities (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships).

## How will we know if social and emotional wellbeing has improved?

Many aspects of the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are reported and monitored, from infant birth weight to life expectancy. These indicators, predominantly reported as part of *Closing the Gap* have been important, along with other information, in

determining whether government policies and services are making a difference.

Research and projects which consider how to measure social and emotional wellbeing have been undertaken over many years, however very few have resulted in an established set of indicators.

In 2015, the Commission engaged Edward Tilton Consulting Health and Social Policy Services to undertake research and consult with leaders in the health sector and two communities to identify potential measures of social and emotional wellbeing. The report *Key performance indicators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health and substance misuse in Queensland*<sup>21</sup> identified indicators under three domains:

### Health and wellbeing status / outcomes

1. Psychological distress (social and emotional wellbeing)
2. Racism and resilience (social and emotional wellbeing)
3. Suicide (social and emotional wellbeing / mental health)
4. Hospitalisations: mental and behavioural disorders (mental health)
5. Hospitalisations: psychoactive substance use (substance misuse)
6. Alcohol-related mortality (substance misuse)

### Health system performance

7. Mental health / social and emotional wellbeing service gap (social and emotional wellbeing / mental health)
8. Pre-admission community care for mental health patients (mental health)

9. Post-discharge community care for mental health patients (mental health)
10. Alcohol, tobacco and other drugs service gap (Substance misuse)
11. Access to community controlled health services (social and emotional wellbeing / mental health / substance misuse)
12. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in mainstream services (social and emotional wellbeing / mental health / substance misuse)

### Social and cultural determinants

13. Connectedness to culture and community
14. Early childhood development
15. Child protection
16. Contact with the criminal justice system
17. Income

Other indicators such as school attendance and educational outcomes may also be appropriate when measuring social and emotional wellbeing.

Given the large number of issues which influence social and emotional wellbeing including those outside of the health system, the Action Plan will focus on outcomes related to health and wellbeing and social and cultural determinants.

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### Further information

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- <sup>4</sup> National Mental Health Commission (2014) *Contributing Lives, Thriving Communities – Report of the National Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services*, National Mental Health Commission, Sydney.
- <sup>5</sup> Op. cit., Dudgeon et al, (2015).
- <sup>6</sup> Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2014), *Report on Government Services 2015*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.
- <sup>7</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) *Causes of Death 2013*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- <sup>8</sup> Op. cit., Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2014).
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2014) *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2014*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.
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- <sup>13</sup> Dudgeon, P., Walker, R., Scrine, C., Shepherd, C., Calma, T., and Ring, I. (2014) *Effective strategies to strengthen the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Issues paper No. 12*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Canberra.
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