ACKNOWLEDGING AND CELEBRATING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CULTURES

Progress report on development of a Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing Action Plan

July 2016

QUEENSLAND MENTAL HEALTH COMMISSION

Introduction

Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders have understood the importance of social and emotional wellbeing for thousands of years. It is an intricate part of traditional practices and customs which have been at the centre of the world's oldest continuing cultures.

Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders have endured and survived through resilience and connection – to culture, land and sea, family and community. However, the effects of historical policies and events as well as present day circumstances impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders.

In 2016, the Queensland Mental Health Commission started a conversation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders about what social and emotional wellbeing means to them. We also asked them and other stakeholders how the State Government could support improved social and emotional wellbeing.

This report summarises what we heard from over 200 community members and stakeholders from across Queensland through:

- two Strategic Conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and government and non-government organisations on 29 February and 28 June 2016

- feedback provided in response to the Discussion Paper *Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing in Queensland*

- nine community forums held in Ipswich, Logan, Townsville, Toowoomba, Cairns, Rockhampton, Thursday Island, Mount Isa and Brisbane attended by over 200 participants

- a youth forum hosted by Headspace and held in Brisbane on 22 June 2016.

We acknowledge and thank the Traditional Owners and Elders who welcomed us to their Country to undertake the community forums.

We thank the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and service providers for generously sharing their experiences and views.

We would also like to acknowledge the work of Mr Murray Saylor from Tagai Management Consultants for co-facilitating the Strategic Conversations and community forums.

What we heard

What social and emotional wellbeing means

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders told us that the community forums were the first time they had been asked what social and emotional wellbeing means for them.

They used different language to describe social and emotional wellbeing such as leading a 'fulfilling life', 'being happy', 'dreaming big', 'having hope', and being resilient and healed.

Many indicated that being and feeling culturally safe was essential to having good social and emotional wellbeing. Some described it has 'having respect for yourself and others as well as being respected'.

Being connected to community, family, culture, land and sea as well as having a strong identity and spirituality were all identified as a critical part of social and emotional wellbeing.

What supports social and emotional wellbeing

Stakeholders identified a wide range of factors which impact on social and emotional wellbeing, including community and family resilience, being accepted and valued by the broader community and government service delivery.

Cultural identity and connection

All communities and stakeholders identified cultural identity and connection as the foundation to good social and emotional wellbeing. While Elders and others in the community are maintaining culture and are handing it down to the next generation, many indicated that a number of factors were impacting on cultural identity and connection. They identified historical factors which continue to impact on Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders to this day, such as displacement from traditional lands which has had an impact on connection to culture and land. The need to 'walk in two worlds' was also identified as an issue, with some indicating that this places significant stress on their lives as they maintain their cultural identity.

The need to celebrate culture was viewed by many as an important way to promote the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and also to develop and maintain connection. Others indicated that there is a need to establish a space in each community where cultures can be celebrated and practiced and where the histories of different Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders are shared.

Acknowledgement and acceptance by the broader community

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders indicated strongly that they are diverse communities but are often put together as one group and there is little acknowledgement of the significant differences between Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders.

As one community member indicated, there is a need to acknowledge, accept and value all Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders in Queensland as the First Nations Peoples. The need to acknowledge, accept and value is not only needed in service delivery but also in the media and in the broader community.

Racism and discrimination were identified by all consulted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders as having a profound impact on their social and emotional wellbeing, affecting their sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Fear of being subjected to racism and discrimination lead to many feeling culturally unsafe and influencing their participation in the community.

Celebrating NAIDOC week and the increasing recognition through the use of 'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgement of Country' at significant events and at meetings were identified as important ways of breaking down barriers and of acknowledging the place of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders as the First Nations Peoples.

A number of stakeholders called for more schools to teach the real history of Australia and Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders.

Healing from grief and trauma

All communities described being in a continual cycle of grief and trauma, some of which has been passed down through the generations, from the impact of previous policies and practices.

Reduced life expectancy and a high suicide rate also mean that communities are continually attending funerals and experiencing Sorry Business.

The frequency of these events compounds already existing grief and trauma and there is no opportunity to heal or recover. As noted by one Aboriginal community member, 'we are sick to death of death'.

Some noted that the process of healing for their communities and families will take decades, but it is important that communities own their own journey of healing.

Community strength and leadership

A strong sense of community was identified as a significant strength. Many indicated a need to recognise and build on this strength.

However, many indicated that decisions affecting their future and the future of their communities were not in their hands and that the focus of much government policy is on 'problems' rather than building on existing strengths.

One of these strengths is the role played by Elders and Traditional Owners. Many said that there is a need to ensure that Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders are empowered to take a leadership role in decisions regarding their future and to support Elders in their role. Many indicated there was a lack of appropriate and meaningful consultation with Elders and a need to build on the strengths, resources and enablers that already exist within communities.

The need for communities to come together and resolve issues among community members was considered essential. There is also a need to ensure that people, particularly those living with mental illness and problematic alcohol and other drug use are actively involved in decisions about their care. Others indicated that people from more remote communities need to be more included in community life when they go to visit or live in other communities.

Families and young people

Families play a central role with cultural obligations and reciprocity all playing a significant part in an individual's life. Families include extended family members who have very important cultural roles to play in the raising of children such as Aunties, Uncles and Grandparents.

Families are critical to providing a loving and nurturing environment where children have a good start in life and are able to flourish. Stakeholders indicated that social and emotional wellbeing starts before birth and every experience as a child from that point on will have an impact on life outcomes.

However, a very high proportion of children and young people are removed from their families, breaking connections to culture and community. The number of children and young people in youth

detention and adults in correctional centres around Queensland is a significant issue identified by many.

Loss of connection to culture and community when placed in the care of child safety, and the influence of social media, were highlighted as impacting on the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people.

Exposure to social media and negative portrayals of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders has had a profound impact on young people. Some stakeholders indicated that this leads to feelings of shame and children and young people losing their identity and cultural connection.

Financial pressures were also identified as a significant sources of stress on families with many finding it hard to make ends meet and to meet the costs of daily living.

Increasing awareness about mental health, alcohol and other drugs and suicide prevention

All communities identified a need for increased community awareness regarding mental health, alcohol and other drugs and suicide prevention. Providing education about these issues is considered to be an important step in reducing stigma and enabling people to seek help earlier, as well as helping community members and families to identify and respond when someone is at risk.

Awareness training however should be tailored to meet the cultural needs of each community. Stakeholders in the Torres Strait indicated that they needed a few people to be trained who would then be able to translate what they learned in an appropriate way for their individual communities.

Preventing problematic alcohol and other drug use

The use of alcohol and other drugs including volatile substances was raised in all communities as an ongoing problem. Some communities such as Cairns and Townsville indicated that their community was experiencing problems with the emergence of 'ice'.

Increasing education, employment and housing

Education and employment were considered important priorities.

Stakeholders indicated that employment opportunities were limited. It appeared to many that a higher value is placed on qualifications rather than on cultural expertise, resulting in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people not getting jobs or being promoted.

Some indicated that there is a need to provide opportunities to those in school or who have left school to gain employment in government agencies through fully funded cadetships and graduate programs.

In some parts of the State, stakeholders indicated there is a need for more crisis accommodation and social housing.

Providing more effective and culturally capable services and supports

The majority of stakeholders and communities agreed that there is a need to use current funding more effectively on services and programs that work and are culturally capable rather than increasing investment. All community forums and Strategic Conversations identified a need to improve the cultural capability of services. Some indicated there have been improvements but all agreed that more change is needed, including:

- increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in government agencies at all levels including through identified positions

- involving Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders in policy and program development

- improving and embedding cultural capability training and principles into policies, programs and services

- ensuring services are welcoming of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders.

Improving service integration and coordination

All communities indicated that services needed to work together more effectively, particularly for those who access multiple services. The need to repeat their stories to different service providers results in some not accessing the help they need.

The barriers to better coordination and integration identified by stakeholders included:

- privacy laws which prevent information sharing between services

- limited funding to collaborate

- competitive tendering processes.

Others indicated that more coordination is needed locally and flexible approaches to funding and service delivery should be adopted to enable services to better meet the holistic needs of clients. This included providing more coordinated and flexible approaches to service delivery by extending opening times to cater more effectively for local needs, particularly in relation to drug, alcohol and mental health services.

Our next steps

The Commission is working with State Government agencies and other stakeholders to identify priorities and actions based on the experiences and views shared during consultations. The Action Plan is due to be released later in 2016.

Further information

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