

**Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities
Fourth Report**

Whole-of-Government Response

Recommendation 1

- 2.28 The committee recommends that all Australian Government and state/territory agencies, provide the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare with reports and publications as they are published, as well as statistics on an annual basis, to ensure that the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse is a relevant evidence base for policy makers.

Government response:

The Australian Government accepts this recommendation.

The Commonwealth's contract with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) to deliver the Clearinghouse services includes requirements for active engagement with government agencies to ensure they use and contribute to the Clearinghouse. Under the National Partnership Agreement on an Indigenous Clearinghouse, the Commonwealth and States/Territories are also required to contribute any relevant research and evaluations they have conducted to the Clearinghouse.

Accordingly, AIHW recently wrote to all Australian Government and state/territory agencies asking them to provide a list of relevant research and evaluation projects for the Clearinghouse online Research and Evaluation register. The Clearinghouse team will follow up with Departments to obtain reports for the Clearinghouse repository as they become available. The Clearinghouse team also distributes a quarterly newsletter and conducts annual presentations to all jurisdictions to encourage them to use and contribute to the Clearinghouse.

Recommendation 2

- 2.43 The committee recommends that the COAG work on the National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities include an analysis of alternative agriculture to improve the affordability, quality and availability of fresh fruit and vegetables in regional and remote Indigenous communities.

Government response:

The Australian Government notes this recommendation.

The Australian Government recognises the important role of local traditional food, local agricultural and horticultural projects, and community gardens in supporting food security in remote Indigenous communities and agrees that these are an important element in improving the supply of healthy food to remote Indigenous communities.

Through the National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities, a draft National Healthy Eating Action Plan (NHEAP) is being developed which is proposing to, amongst other things, look at agriculture and local food supply development in an effort to improve the food security in remote Indigenous communities.

While the NHEAP is yet to be considered by COAG, the Australian Government notes that any analysis of agricultural and horticultural projects in remote Indigenous communities would need to take into account: the impact on food security; the economic viability and sustainability of the projects; and the capacity and willingness of nearby Indigenous communities to support the ongoing implementation of the projects.

More generally, the Australian Government supports the development of sustainable and economically viable agriculture and horticulture projects in remote Indigenous communities. Significant funding support for this sector has been provided through the Aboriginal Benefits Account (ABA). This includes: \$3.2 million for the Alekarenge Horticulture Pty Ltd to construct an artesian bore field and support the farming of watermelons; over \$900 000 to support the ongoing operations of Centrefarm Aboriginal Horticulture Ltd; \$386 000 for the Ti Tree Horticulture Strategy for commercial horticulture development to cultivate bush tomatoes and other native plants; and around \$90 000 for a feasibility study of 21 communities and outstations to identify suitable sites to develop sustainable community farms.

In addition, the Australian Government also encourages the development of community and school gardens where a need is identified and community capacity and willingness to support the sustainable implementation of a garden project are demonstrated. The Australian Government also acknowledges the work of organisations such as Edge of Nowhere (EON) Foundation in facilitating and supporting gardens in remote Indigenous communities.

The EON Foundation has successfully established school gardens in a number of remote Indigenous communities in Western Australia, including Beagle Bay, Djarindjin and One Arm Point. Each garden grows a variety of vegetables and bush tucker, and medicine plants are also being propagated with help from community elders for planting into the garden. The work of the EON foundation is supported by \$300 000 in funding from the Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC).

Recommendation 3

- 2.50 The committee recommends that the Australian Government expand the remit of the Coordinator General for Remote Indigenous Services' reporting mandate for basic service and infrastructure in all regional and remote Indigenous communities with over 200 residents. The committee considers that the Coordinator General should be afforded additional resources to undertake such an expanded reporting role.

Government response:

The Australian Government notes the recommendation.

The functions of the Coordinator-General for Remote Indigenous Services (CGRIS) are defined in the *Coordinator-General for Remote Indigenous Services Act 2009* (CGRIS Act). The CGRIS responsibilities are presently confined to 29 locations which, in accordance with section 5(2) of the CGRIS Act, are identified in a Gazette Notice. It is intended that the CGRIS functions support the implementation of service delivery reforms through the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery (RSD NP). For this reason, the 29 locations identified in the Gazette Notice are aligned with the priority locations identified under the RSD NP.

The Australian Government supports the role of the CGRIS in driving the implementation of the RSD NP and it will consider the recommendation further. However, it is important to ensure that the attention of the CGRIS is not diverted from the current 29 priority communities at this important stage.

The Australian Government also draws to the committee's attention the COAG National Urban and Regional Service Delivery Strategy for Indigenous Australians. The Overarching Bilateral Indigenous Plans will capture the efforts underway across each state and territory to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage in urban and regional areas. The Overarching Bilateral Indigenous Plan governance meetings provide a regular opportunity to discuss shared priorities and identify areas for joint action.

Recommendation 4

- 2.57 The committee notes the consultation being undertaken in developing local implementation plans but considers that as a matter of practice, consultation plans which are not readily accessible to the public should be made public prior to consultation being undertaken.

Government response:

The Australian Government notes this Recommendation.

The Australian Government is committed to transparency in the implementation of the RSD NP. Importantly, all agreed Local Implementation Plans (LIPs) are public documents.

LIPs are developed and agreed with Indigenous communities, and other parties to the LIPs (such as relevant local governments), through an open process of negotiation.

LIPs are expected to be evolving and iterative documents and subject to amendment as the implementation of the RSD NP in each location evolves.

All efforts will be taken to ensure that relevant parties are aware of consultation sessions well in advance to maximise engagement.

Recommendation 5

- 2.72 The committee recommends that on a monthly basis the Australian Government publish the number and location of new, rebuilt or refurbished homes completed under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing program.

Government response:

The Australian Government notes this recommendation.

The Australian Government is committed to transparency in the delivery of remote Indigenous housing.

Reporting of the nature recommended by the committee will require consultation and agreement by state and territory governments.

Performance against new, rebuilt and refurbished housing targets is reported annually. In 2009-10 the states and the Northern Territory delivered 316 new houses and 828 refurbishments in remote Indigenous communities across Australia. The combined targets for all states and the Northern Territory were 320 new houses and 587 refurbishments.

In the Northern Territory, the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP) which is delivered through the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH) exceeded its December 2010 targets of 150 new houses and 1,000 rebuilds and refurbishments by delivering 174 new houses and 1,023 rebuilds and refurbishments. Since the commencement of the NPARIH, the Northern Territory has delivered 228 new houses (with a further 157 underway) and 1,322 rebuilds and refurbishments (with a further 74 underway).

To date, across the country, the NPARIH has delivered 556 new houses (with an additional 251 underway) and a further 2,152 existing houses have been rebuilt or refurbished (with an additional 424 underway) since the commencement of the program. The final progress figures for 2010-11 will be released shortly following the completion of the financial year.

Please note: data is current as at 28 Feb 2011 for NSW, QLD, SA and WA. 4 April 2011 for NT and 5 April 2011 for TAS.

Recommendation 6

- 2.73 The committee also recommends that the Coordinator General for Remote Indigenous Services conduct a detailed analysis of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing in his next six monthly report.

Government response:

The Australian Government notes this recommendation.

Information on progress under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH) is provided to the Coordinator General for Remote Indigenous Services to assist in the preparation of his six monthly reports.

The NPARIH was renegotiated in December 2009 when it became clear that progress was insufficient to meet the targets. A new competitive process was established for the allocation of Australian Government funding to provide strong financial incentives for states and the Northern Territory to deliver on new houses and refurbishments.

Recommendation 7

- 2.118 Noting the success of the Sporting Chance Program, the committee recommends that the Australian Government investigate programs for other extra curricular activities such as a program for students interested in the arts.

Government response:

The Australian Government notes this recommendation.

The Australian Government supports programs for school students interested in the arts and is currently funding a range of initiatives in this area. The effectiveness of such programs is enhanced when they are structured and delivered to support the implementation of curriculum. All Australian Governments are committed to the development and implementation of the Australian Curriculum in the arts, which will strengthen arts education across Australia.

Current Australian Government Initiatives in the Arts

The Australian Government works collaboratively with the states and territories, and the non-government school sector to deliver high quality arts education in schools. The Government has allocated over \$7.5 million between 2007 and 2012 to support a range of arts education initiatives.

The Australian Government funds arts and music education projects to improve equity of access and participation in arts education, including a focus on students in rural and remote areas. This includes support for:

- The Song Room's Enhanced Learning through the Arts project focussed on improving student learning outcomes through music and the performing arts for schools identified as disadvantaged and with no existing specialist music teacher (\$1.45 million). This project will refine models of program delivery that are appropriate to schools in different geographical regions (including remote locations) and to different target groups (including Indigenous communities);
- Australian Children's Music Foundation music programs that focus on improving equity of access and participation in music education, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (\$1.02 million), including provision of music tuition and musical equipment to Indigenous and disadvantaged schools and communities in remote and Indigenous areas;

- The delivery of Musica Viva's school concerts and teacher professional development programs to regional and remote areas (\$1.35 million); and
- *Bell Shakespeare's education initiatives* that focus on schools from regional areas (\$1.32 million).

Funding is also provided for annual national awards for excellence in school music education (\$0.5 million) and the annual national *Music. Count Us In* event for schools across Australia (\$2.22 million).

Inclusion of Arts in the Australian Curriculum

All Australian governments are committed to the development and implementation of Australia's first national curriculum. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is overseeing this important work beginning with the learning areas of English, mathematics, science and history. On 8 December 2010, Australian education ministers endorsed the Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum in these first four learning areas, which can be viewed at www.australiancurriculum.edu.au.

A second phase of ACARA's work involves developing an Australian Curriculum in languages, geography and the arts. ACARA prepared an initial paper *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts* which was available for public consultation until 17 December 2010. The feedback received will be used by ACARA to revise the paper and guide its curriculum writers in drafting the arts curriculum, which will be available for public consultation in 2011.

Recommendation 8

- 2.176 The committee recommends that the evaluation mechanisms that underpin COAG's investment of the \$100 million Tackling Smoking initiative be publicly released to ensure that this funding provides a tangible difference on the ground in communities.

Government response:

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The evaluation mechanisms are currently under development and will be publicly released once they have been finalised.

Recommendation 9

- 2.219 Given the evidence that the committee has received about problems with funding models, the committee considers that COAG should expedite implementation of the Coordinator General for Remote Indigenous Services' recommendation to examine the use of more flexible funding approaches which aggregate departmental funding into a master contract with each National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery community.

Government response:

The Australian Government notes this Recommendation.

COAG noted the first six monthly report of the CGRIS in December 2009, and tasked the Working Group on Indigenous Reform (WGIR) with providing a progress status report to COAG in early 2010. On 19 April 2010, COAG noted the WGIR progress status report. The full text of the WGIR report may be accessed on the COAG website at:

http://www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2010-04-19/index.cfm?CFID=521211&CFTOKEN=80868279 .

In relation to CGRIS recommendation 3.1 (which raises the issue of exploring options for funding flexibility) the WGIR reported as follows:

Progress report of an inter-jurisdictional working group on options for flexible funding approaches in RSD communities to be prepared by 30 September 2010 and subsequently provided to COAG for consideration.

An inter-jurisdictional working group was formed following the 19 April meeting of COAG and its report will be presented to the next meeting of COAG.

The Australian government has also partly addressed the CGRIS's recommendation 3.1 by developing a Remote Service Delivery Flexible Funding Pool. This Funding Pool will:

- support the implementation of the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership;
- provide the Australian Government with the capacity to address high priority projects in a timely way; and
- support projects identified through the Local Implementation Planning process.

The Australian Government is contributing \$46 million over three years to the Funding Pool. The Funding Pool commenced operation from July 2010. The Flexible Funding Pool will allow for the development of more flexible funding arrangements within and across governments, consistent with the CGRIS Recommendation 3.1.

Recommendation 10

- 3.15 The committee recommends that all state and territory governments consider the publication of a Quarterly Report in line with that published by the Queensland Government and that this information feed into the Council of Australian Governments baseline data collection process.

Government response:

The Australian Government notes the recommendation.

This recommendation is a responsibility of the states and territories. No Commonwealth action is required.

Recommendation 11

- 3.34 The committee recommends that the evaluation of the Cape York Welfare Reform trial be made public to inform other governments about the results of the program and its applicability to other regional and remote Indigenous communities.

Government response:

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The Australian and Queensland Governments have jointly committed funds to the evaluation of the Cape York welfare reforms, as evaluation is a central element of the trials. The evaluation is being done in two stages:

1. A post-implementation review of the Family Responsibilities Commission conducted by KPMG was released on 26 November 2010; and
2. Further evaluation covering the progress and outcomes of the trial as a whole is planned for 2011 – this will examine progress based on monitoring and outcomes data, and will examine success against objectives.

Recommendation 12

- 3.84 The committee recommends that the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs expand the policy on attendance currently in the draft Indigenous Education Action Plan to include the need for measures that facilitate reintegration of students who have missed large amounts of schooling but recommence attending school as the result of attendance measures.

Government response:

The Australian Government notes the recommendation.

The revised draft of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014 (ATSIEAP) was approved by the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs in April 2010, and was referred for the consideration of the Council of Australian Governments. It contains a number of actions that could be employed by state and territory education systems and providers to recognise local and systemic support for reintegration or re-entry programs. For example, at the local level, schools are to develop Personalised Learning Strategies, involving families, teachers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Workers to support improved educational outcomes. In responding to long-term absences by students, these Personalised Learning Strategies would typically include targeted actions to assist students to make up time lost as a result of prolonged absence. This could include re-entry programs such as those considered by the committee.

It is also expected that focus schools under the ATSIEAP would develop local attendance strategies, in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and the community. Commitments to re-entry programs could be one element of these locally developed attendance strategies. Additionally, under the ATSIEAP, systemic attendance strategies are to be developed, providing an enabling framework for locally developed strategies. Education systems have the capacity to ensure their strategies outline the need to consider re-entry measures for students returning after long-term absences from school.

The Australian Government considers that the revised ATSIEAP contains sufficient scope to support the intention of the committee's recommendation. However, as this is a matter for education systems, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations will ensure that state, territory and non-government education systems are made aware of the committee's recommendation and observations.

Recommendation 13

- 3.248 The committee recommends that the Australian Health Ministers Conference develop a framework specifying interoperability between social and emotional wellbeing services and clinical mental health services.

Government response:

The Australian Government notes this recommendation.

The government supports a number of programs targeted at improving social and emotional wellbeing and Indigenous mental health services.

The Australian Government, through the Department of Health and Ageing, is encouraging clinical and non-clinical practitioners to work collaboratively through a number of initiatives designed to support the sector including the Health Reform agenda, the National Mental Health Policy 2008, the Fourth National Mental Health Plan 2009-2014 (the Plan), the COAG National Action Plan on Mental Health 2006-2011, and the Closing the Gap initiative.

Most recently as part of the COAG decision on 12 April 2010 to establish the National Health and Hospitals Network, all governments except Western Australia agreed to undertake further work on the scope of additional mental health service reform for report back to COAG in 2011. This included the potential for further improvements to the allocation of roles and responsibilities in the delivery of mental health services.

The Plan, which was endorsed by Health Ministers on 4 September 2009, takes forward the vision set out in the National Mental Health Policy 2008 through implementation of 34 specific actions. The Plan will further embed the whole of government approach to mental health which recognises the importance of coordinated service delivery, including health, housing and community support services, particularly for people with a severe mental illness.

Central to the Plan is the principle of social inclusion. It recognises the importance of social, cultural and economic factors to mental health and wellbeing. Policy and service development needs to recognise the importance of a holistic and socially inclusive approach to health in promoting mental health and wellbeing.

Action 7 of the Plan seeks to improve the implementation and coordination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders social and emotional well being activity. An implementation approach for this action has been prepared for consideration by the Mental Health Standing Committee (an Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council subcommittee).

In February 2006, all governments through COAG committed additional investment to improve mental health services nationally. A five-year action plan was developed and included a series of measures by both state/territory and Australian governments.

One of the measures being implemented by the Department of Health and Ageing is '*Improving the Capacity of workers in Indigenous Communities*'. This comprises \$20.8 million over 5 years to support health practitioners identify and address mental illness and associated substance use issues in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The programs funded under this measure encourage the sector to work together, through the development of various culturally appropriate resources and training.

The Closing the Gap initiative targets the preconditions for social and emotional wellbeing through its building blocks of healthy homes; safe communities; health; early childhood; schooling; economic participation; governance and leadership, and through improved quality and availability of data.

Recommendation 14

- 3.361 The committee recommends that Queensland Corrections consider including routine hearing assessments in the induction and assessment process for persons newly entering the corrective services system.

Government response:

The Australian Government notes this recommendation.

People eligible for the Australian Government Hearing Services Program retain their entitlement to services while in prison, in custody on remand, or in juvenile justice centres, provided that person's eligibility is current while in custody. Where the request for services is initiated by the client and the client is still eligible (that is holds a current voucher), the service is provided by the Program. However, where the service is initiated by the custodial authority or provided by a service provider working for or on behalf of that authority, the service is not covered by the Program and all costs remain the responsibility of the state or territory government. Arranging access to hearing services for prisoners is a matter for the custodial authorities. All costs incurred in arranging access to hearing services will also be borne by the custodial authorities.

Clients eligible for the voucher component of the program include Australian citizens and permanent residents who are 21 years of age or older and in one of the following categories:

- a holder of a Pensioner Concession Card;
- a person receiving sickness allowance from Centrelink;
- a holder of a Gold Repatriation Health Card;
- a holder of a White Repatriation Health Card issued for conditions which include hearing loss;
- a partner, or dependent child between the ages of 21 and 25 undergoing full time study, of a person in one of the above categories;
- a member of the Australian Defence Force; or
- a person in a Disability Employment Services - Disability Management Service who is referred by an approved Disability Management Service Provider.

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In addition, eligibility for free hearing services through the Community Service Obligation component of the Program, provided by Australian Hearing, is targeted at people who are:

- under 21 years of age (including replacement of cochlear implant speech processors);
- eligible for the Voucher Program but who have complex hearing needs;
- eligible for the Voucher Program and live in remote areas;
- Aboriginal person or Torres Strait Islander who:
 1. are eligible for the Voucher Program;
 2. are over 50 years of age;
 3. are a participant in a Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program; or
 4. was a participant in a CDEP program between 1 December 2005 and 30 June 2008 (until 1 July 2012).
 - 5.

Queensland Corrective Services (QCS) advises that it is working with the Queensland Health Department to determine the extent of hearing impairment amongst Indigenous people in Queensland correctional institutions and to reach agreement between the agencies on an appropriate response. At present, QCS undertakes general health screening of all prisoners. It advises that, with respect to Indigenous prisoners, certain key health markers have been identified and QCS will now move to ensure that hearing is one such marker. The Queensland Department of Communities has advised that juveniles entering detention centres also undergo screening for hearing.