

West Metro Aboriginal
Community Forum

First report back to community on progress delivering actions in the Joint Secretaries' Statement

DECEMBER 2022



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Joint Secretaries'
Statement and
Factsheets

On 23 June 2022, a community forum was held at the Footscray Community Arts Centre with the West Metro Aboriginal community. The community shared stories about the many challenges experienced by families in the West due to a lack of resources and culturally safe supports and services.

We acknowledge the leadership, strength, and resilience of the community and their Elders, including the courage to share your stories and experiences. We also acknowledge that these experiences are part of the lasting impact of colonisation and that our actions must respond to this too.

The Community Forum highlighted issues across our service systems, particularly around cultural safety and cultural strengthening, transitioning into and out of custody, and in family services, child protection and out of home care.

Many of these issues are longstanding. We heard community's frustration at needing to repeat their stories and we acknowledge the need to improve how we engage and respond. This is why we worked with community to put together a series of 'composite stories', which members of the West Metro Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee (WMRAJAC) presented at the Forum.

The stories prompted many personal reflections – of services not intervening early enough, of the failure to provide community with the right supports, and then of community being burdened with the responsibility to fill these gaps in our system. These stories tell us we must do better across our service systems, including by building on the strength of your community, supporting Aboriginal-led responses and embedding Aboriginal ways of working.



Working with the WMRAJAC, departments made a shared commitment to twelve actions in a Joint Secretaries' Statement. This was published in late August and can be read [here](#).

We are keeping the conversation going in other ways too. So far this has been through the WMRAJAC and our internal Aboriginal programs and policy areas. As the work to implement the Joint Secretaries' Statement progresses, there will be more opportunities for us to talk with and listen to you about how we can design and deliver our services to support you better.

We will keep you updated on when this will happen and the results of our conversations through community channels such as [Dearly Western Connections](#).

Over the coming weeks, each department will update their Aboriginal community governance groups. In the meantime, we want to share some of the first steps we've taken since the Forum, in addition to acquitting our commitment to report back on actions 5 (fact sheets) and 12 (self-organisation process for community) specifically.



New models of care (action 3)

We heard that departments and services need to work better together to intervene earlier and provide more culturally informed, holistic supports.

- The Putting Families First (PFF) pilot, which was in the early stages of implementation at the time of the Community Forum, responds to many of these issues by supporting the whole family through an integrated service response.
- PFF is now running in the Brimbank Melton Area and is so far supporting four Aboriginal families (11 people in total), in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA).

Learnings from the PFF pilot will be shared with programs and policy areas as part of actions to improve the accessibility and cultural safety of, and therapeutic approaches in, the justice system (actions 8, 9 and 10).



Information access (action 5)

You told us it is often difficult to know what services and supports are available.

- To make this information more accessible, we created a series of fact sheets on culturally specific services available to Aboriginal people living in the West Metro area. You can find these [here](#). We will also provide these to our funded services to support service navigation and link up responses.
- We will continue reviewing how departments communicate this kind of information going forward and look at replacing current sources with community-controlled platforms if needed.

This action is connected to the community self-organisation process to develop better ways for government to engage with community (action 12).



Carer supports (actions 6 and 7)

We know that many community members are carers, and many are under-supported or can't access their entitlements. In response:

- we have established a Care Support Help Desk in the West to help kinship or foster carers to resolve any concerns you may have or to help you to connect to the appropriate support services. You can contact them via westcaresupporthelpdesk@dffh.vic.gov.au or 1800 319 510.
- we are in the process of reviewing supports to Aboriginal carers and, where appropriate, have increased payments to reflect caring responsibilities.



Justice system issues (actions 8, 9 and 10)

Ahead of the next report back, we've started work in relation to court delays, access to legal services and culturally safe and therapeutic practices in custodial settings. Some of the things we are doing include:

- reviewing policies to ensure that they address local needs, service gaps and reflect Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing
- planning further community consultations so that you can shape the design and delivery of services
- exploring options to improve funding approaches so that responses are community driven and community contributions are properly recognised
- the independent Cultural Review of the Adult Custodial Corrections System, which is looking carefully at Aboriginal cultural safety and self-determination and is expected to report to the Minister for Corrections in December 2022.



Cultural safety in schools (action 11)

You told us that Aboriginal children are still experiencing culturally unsafe teaching and bullying due to racism in our schools. We are responding to these concerns by:

- delivering workshops to school principals across the state with the Indigenous organisation 'Leading with Strength' to support them to create more inclusive schools
- partnering with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. to adapt the Speaking Out Against Racism (SOAR) program for implementation in 2023. SOAR will include specific professional learning to support teachers and students to identify and respond to racism.



Community engagement (action 12)

You told us that the way we engage with community is confusing, difficult and doesn't help resolve the issues you raise.

- We are working with the WMRAJAC to rethink how government can be more responsive to service issues and how community can be better equipped to lead responses locally.
- The next step involves working directly with grassroots community members and the local sector to support community self-organisation and more sustainable ways for government to meet with and learn from community. We are now working with the WMRAJAC to recruit a community engagement and project lead to support this work.

This will contribute to supporting the establishment of a dedicated Aboriginal community space and supporting Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations to build their capacity (actions 1 and 2).

We will have more substantial updates on the remaining actions at the next community report back in March 2023, which will also include updates on:

- how funding for culturally specific services is allocated and used in mainstream services (**action 4**), and
- how we are supporting community-driven solutions and ways of working in the long term through **actions 1, 2 and 12**.

We invite you to provide any feedback, ask questions, or share your reflections in response to the Statement or this update through the WMRAJAC, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) West Division Aboriginal Governance Group, or the West Metropolitan Integrated Strategic Executive (WISE).