

Aboriginal Executive Council (AEC)

*Submission to the Victorian Parliament
Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry
– State Government response to COVID-19 pandemic*

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More Information

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1.0 Acknowledgment and Background

The Aboriginal Executive Council (AEC) acknowledges Aboriginal Traditional Owners of Country across Victoria and their rights as sovereign Aboriginal Nations, the AEC pays respect to their Elders, past and present, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria.

The purpose of the Aboriginal Executive Council (AEC) is to provide an independent self-determining co-ordination, collaboration, policy development and advocacy mechanism for Victoria's peak, lead and statewide Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Detailed information on the AEC is provided as **Attachment One**.

The functions of the AEC include, but are not limited to:

1. Promoting and pursuing the rights and interests of Aboriginal people in Victoria including the right to self-determination
2. Acknowledging and extending the legacy of Aboriginal community members who established and developed the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector
3. Providing strategic leadership to further develop and sustain the Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector
4. Coordinating public policy and advocacy from across its membership
5. Working collaboratively with other Aboriginal Community Controlled bodies including the First Peoples Assembly of Victoria
6. Engaging with the Victorian Government and Parliament to provide expert advice and set the direction for government commitments to Aboriginal self-determination
7. Monitoring and providing publicly available reports on government policy frameworks and commitments including the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs and Closing the Gap frameworks
8. Working with the Victorian Secretaries' Leadership Group on Aboriginal Affairs (SLG) and Senior Officers' Group on Aboriginal Affairs (SOG) to achieve measurable outcomes in support of self-determination and implementation of the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework
9. Encouraging mutual support and collaboration across the AEC's members
10. Communicating and engaging with the Aboriginal community through AEC members
11. Participating on behalf of the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector in processes relating to the Closing the Gap framework
12. Influencing other stakeholders with an interest in issues impacting Aboriginal people including the broader community services sector, public entities and authorities and Commonwealth Government Ministers, Departments and agencies.

2.0 Overview

The Aboriginal Executive Council (AEC) has prepared this submission being mindful of the broad and devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic; impacts that are ongoing. Hundreds of families have suffered the loss of life; and no person, place or community has been immune to the deep negative impacts on health and social and emotional wellbeing, income and housing security, schooling and education, family relationships and caring responsibilities, employment and economic opportunities.

Our objectives in engaging with this inquiry are to:

- Contribute to the continuous learning, innovation and adaptation that is required in all stages of the pandemic from preparedness to response and recovery
- Highlight the leadership role, strengths, and success of Victoria's Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in protecting the Victorian Aboriginal Community, one of the highest risk communities in Victoria, from the severe impacts of the pandemic
- Highlight that structural inequalities and escalating service demand pressures associated with high Aboriginal population growth which are impacting the ACCO sector are being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, deepening inequality and 'widening the gap'
- See developed and resourced, with some urgency and with ACCOs as lead partners, a whole of government and whole of Aboriginal community COVID-19 recovery plan
- Ensure that an agreed *Disaster Management Plan for the Victorian Aboriginal Community* is developed with the State Government to be enacted in response to future natural disasters

While the impacts of the pandemic affect the whole Victorian community the impacts are not borne equally. The pandemic has exposed and deepened structural and systemic inequalities and created the risk that these deepened inequalities will be 'locked in' for generations.

As submissions to this inquiry from AEC members demonstrate the pandemic is exacerbating inequalities in outcomes for Aboriginal people in health, family violence, housing, employment, child protection and other domains.

A well resourced whole of Aboriginal community COVID-19 recovery plan, developed with the AEC and other stakeholders, must form part of the broader recovery effort. That plan must be founded on the principles of Aboriginal self-determination and Aboriginal community control and commit to supporting social and economic justice for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria.

The Victorian Aboriginal Community has been and remains particularly vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19. The initiative, creativity and expertise of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations has proven remarkably successful in responding to the pandemic. ACCO led communications, risk management and mitigation and assertive outreach and rapid response strategies have minimised impacts on the Aboriginal community.

ACCO strengths have come to the fore when needed the most. Strengths including family and community connections, localised knowledge, common purpose, cultural connections and Aboriginal ways of caring for family and vulnerable community members.

ACCOs are succeeding in mitigating the risks presented by the pandemic.

In July the Victorian Government, Commonwealth Government, Australian Local Government Association and the National Coalition of Aboriginal Peaks, represented in Victoria by the AEC, all entered into a new National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Across the Aboriginal community, the broader community and across the spectrum of political parties there is commitment and a desire to see the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap deliver on its reform priorities, outcomes and targets. The pandemic has shifted the starting point for that agreement; the task has become greater.

The over representation of Aboriginal people in many of the 'negative' data sets will be well known to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. Important that the committee also knows that the transmission rate of COVID-19 is disproportionately low in the Victorian Aboriginal community despite the community being disproportionately vulnerable. Aboriginal community control is delivering the most critical outcomes of preserving life and supporting well-being.

A number of AEC member organisations have provided detailed submissions to this inquiry focusing on the particular sectors and interests they support and represent. This includes submissions from the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Aboriginal Community Elders Service, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service and Aboriginal Housing Victoria. The AEC does not seek to repeat that detail here and commends these submissions to the committee.

3.0 Shared ACCO/State Government Governance Arrangements

There are a range of established joint governance structures between Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and the State Government. They include the following portfolio focused structures;

- Marrung Central Governance Committee (Education)
- Aboriginal Strategic Governance Forum (Health and Human Services)
- Aboriginal Justice Forum (Adult and Youth Justice)
- Aboriginal Children's Forum (Children, Families, Child Protection and Out of Home Care), and
- Dhelk Dja Partnership Forum (Family Violence)

With the exception of the Aboriginal Children's Forum all the portfolio based shared governance arrangements include linked regional and/or local governance and decision-making structures.

The AEC- SLG (Secretaries Leadership Group) was established in 2017 to focus on whole of government self-determination reforms, Closing the Gap and the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework. The AEC-SLG is Co-Chaired by the AEC Chairperson and the Secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

In the early stages of the pandemic there was a lack of engagement or communication from the state government with the above structures. There was no consultation with these structures on an agreed approach to planning and deploying the response to the pandemic with and for the Aboriginal community. This was a significant oversight.

The State Government made a unilateral decision that the existing structures would not play a leading role in developing responses to the pandemic. Instead the State Government decided to establish the *Joint COVID Aboriginal Community Taskforce* with membership determined by the State Government.

None of the existing structures, all of which are co-chaired by community and government, were asked for a view about the best way to govern the response to the pandemic for the Aboriginal community. The AEC, the only whole of Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector mechanism, was not asked for a view about how Government should approach decision making with the ACCO sector in response to the pandemic.

The Joint COVID Aboriginal Community Taskforce membership includes 10 of the 12 AEC member bodies and a number of local Aboriginal community organisations. The AEC is not a member of the taskforce but now participates as an 'observer'. The experience of the AEC member organisations on the taskforce has been positive; the taskforce has been responsive and provided a mechanism for ongoing information sharing.

On reflection the AEC would comment that in the early stages of the pandemic time was lost as Government made a unilateral decision to set aside existing governance structures despite having no clear alternative agreed with ACCOs, and ready to enact with ACCOs. This had the effect, at least for a time, of destabilising the focus and status of existing structures, undermining the importance of shared decision making and leaving important Aboriginal community partners excluded from decision making in the early weeks of the pandemic.

While this has been rectified the process of establishing the Joint Taskforce was less than ideal and highlights that joint governance arrangements between the State Government and the ACCO sector for responding any other natural disaster need to be developed and agreed before the natural disaster.

At the Commonwealth level establishing some direct communication and planning with the ACCO sector was not something the Commonwealth initiated. And at the Commonwealth level there are no existing consultative or shared decision-making arrangements between the Commonwealth Government and the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector. The AEC has sought to fill this gap by inviting the Victorian State Office of the Commonwealth's National Indigenous Australian's Agency (NIAA) to meet periodically with the AEC.

[AEC COVID-19 Meetings](#)

As part of its immediate response to the pandemic the AEC established fortnightly AEC COVID-19 meetings for the CEOs and key staff of all 12 AEC member organisations. This forum is being used to directly engage with the Commonwealth and State Government officials. Establishing regular opportunities for officials from the Commonwealth and State to access direct advice and information on how the pandemic is impacting Aboriginal people in Victoria, and how to collaboratively respond has proved invaluable.

The AEC COVID-19 meetings and the Joint COVID-19 Aboriginal Community Taskforce complement each other and their combined efforts are proving effective.

Significantly the AEC COVID-19 meetings provide a forum for the ACCO sector to develop urgent responses, share resources between ACCOs and for identifying issues to bring to the attention of the State and Commonwealth governments. Some of the outcomes have included:

- responding to the needs of Elders and vulnerable members of the Aboriginal community through assertive and coordinated outreach
- establishing a coordinated and integrated response with a single access point for Aboriginal families in public housing estates subjected to the hard lock down measures to contact for support, this response was developed within hours of the announced lockdown and relieved some the stress and anxiety families were experiencing by providing a single access point for all ACCO services
- coordinating assertive outreach and direct communication with Aboriginal families who live in public housing estates in areas including Collingwood, Richmond and Fitzroy
- sharing and coordinating access to PPE when supplies were difficult to obtain ACCO services, particularly for services such as the Aboriginal Community Elders Service
- creating and sharing communications in the voice of Aboriginal people on the critical public health measures that Aboriginal community members need to observe to keep themselves and others safe
- ensuring that ACCOs across all sectors are well briefed and able to advise community members on how to access available support such as assistance to access to technology for home schooling
- gathering input and priorities for COVID response funding as Departments have been developing measures to be funded by the State Government

Important lessons have been learnt about pandemic/natural disaster preparedness in relation to the critical value of shared decision making and having governance and decision-making arrangements agreed in advance of any natural disaster.

The development of a comprehensive Victorian Aboriginal community disaster management plan should be a priority for the State Government with the plan to be developed with the AEC, ACCOs and all relevant stakeholders; including the Commonwealth.

Recommendation One: Disaster Management Plan for the Victorian Aboriginal Community

That the PAEC recommend the development of a Disaster Management Plan for the Victorian Aboriginal Community, to be developed with the AEC, ACCOs and all relevant stakeholders, to form part of Victoria's broader disaster management and emergency response planning

4.0 Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Recovery Plan

Work on the development of a long-term Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Recovery Plan needs to commence urgently.

The plan should:

- be developed and agreed with the ACCO sector and other stakeholders
- be based on the principles of Aboriginal Self-Determination
- comprehensively respond to the socio-economic circumstances, health and wellbeing of the Victorian Aboriginal Community
- respond to ACCO sector capacity constraints stemming from inadequate infrastructure
- take account of the impacts of the COVID-10 pandemic and the pre-pandemic demand pressures on the ACCO sector including service demand pressures stemming from population growth
- contribute to the implementation of the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap and achievement of the agreed outcomes and targets

Across Victoria the Aboriginal population is projected to grow by 45 per cent by 2028 with population growth highest in Central Highlands, Ovens Murray, Barwon and Western Melbourne.

The rate of population growth, significantly above that of the general population in Victoria, is having major impacts on the capacity of the ACCO sector and the broader service system to respond to the needs of the Aboriginal community.

In Aboriginal population growth areas ACCO services are under escalating demand with many areas of high population growth having no ACCO service outlets or ACCO community facilities. The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service for instance has not been supported or assisted to expand its operations into high population growth areas including western, eastern and southern metropolitan Melbourne. This lack of infrastructure has hampered efforts to support Aboriginal families in those areas.

In 2019 the AEC commissioned SVA Consulting to prepare detailed advice on the service demand implications of Victorian Aboriginal population growth across all parts of Victorian and across different service sectors. The report is provided as **Attachment Two**.

Some of the implications of Aboriginal population growth on service demand include that by 2028;

- 5,500 Aboriginal households with children under the age of 15 will be living under the poverty line and be potential family support and emergency relief service clients
- Almost 4,000 Aboriginal children will be in OOHHC, nearly double the current number
- 4,500 Aboriginal children aged 3-6 and will be eligible to access early education and 41% will be identified as vulnerable when they start school
- Based on current access criteria, which are limited and do not extend to all families in-need of support, over 1700 Aboriginal families will be referred to Intensive Family Services
- An estimated 6,300 Aboriginal people, predominantly Aboriginal women, will be reported as affected by family violence, noting that Indigenous status is often not recorded in data sets
- Aboriginal people will access homelessness services nearly 15,000 times
- Over 1400 Aboriginal adults will be recorded as offenders in the justice system and approximately 1,000 Aboriginal young people will be involved with the justice system, and
- Approximately 3000 Aboriginal young people under 24 will be not be engaged in education, employment or training, and at current rates
- 31,000 Aboriginal people, 36 per cent of the Aboriginal population, will have high or very high levels of psychological distress with more than 5,000 estimated to be potential users of community support services

This snapshot of the escalating demand on ACCO services was prepared before the impacts of the pandemic. Separate submissions from AEC members provide details of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the needs of the Aboriginal community and the increased service demand and capacity pressures arising from the pandemic.

As noted above the State Government recently entered into the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap, a formal partnership agreement with the National Coalition of Aboriginal Peaks, including the AEC.

The National Agreement runs until 2031 and sets out agreed Priority Reform Areas, Outcomes and Targets. It would be pertinent to have these commitments inform the development of the COVID-19 recovery plan.

It is critical that in the first years of the National Closing the Gap Agreement Victoria does not fall further behind the Outcomes and Targets. In a number of areas Victoria already has relatively high levels of over representation compared to other States and Territories.

Concerningly this includes the highest rates of child removal and placement in Out of Home Care and adult incarceration rates above the national average. Victoria's child removal rate of Aboriginal children is 90 Aboriginal children per 1,000, the figure for Australia is 57 per 1,000.

Comparable baseline data is now available for all jurisdictions on their starting point in relation to the agreed Closing the Gap Outcomes and Targets. Baseline data can be accessed here

<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/data>

To drive the systemic change required to deliver outcomes under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap four priority reforms have been agreed, these are

1. Building and strengthening structures to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making with governments
2. Building formal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sectors to deliver services to support Closing the Gap
3. Systemic and structural transformation of mainstream government organisations to improve accountability and better respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
4. Enable shared access to location specific data and information to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations achieve the first three Priority Reforms

The development of an Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Recovery Plan should be developed, funded and implemented consistent with the agreed Closing the Gap priority reforms.

Recommendation Two: Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Recovery Plan

That the PAEC recommend to the State Government the development of an Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Recovery Plan with the AEC, ACCO sector and all relevant stakeholders; and that the plan

- *take account of and respond to existing service demand pressures on the ACCO sector, Aboriginal population growth and the exacerbating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic*
- *support the National Agreement on Closing the Gap including agreed priority reforms, outcomes and targets*
- *be a high priority and receive significant long-term investment in forthcoming State Budgets*

5.0 Summary

The AEC and its member organisations appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee and in doing so contribute to the best possible responses and assistance being available to the Victorian Aboriginal community.

We believe that the work of ACCOs has not only minimised direct impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Aboriginal community, including keeping the level of infection well below that being experienced in the broader community; but that it has valuable lessons that can be applied more broadly.

High amongst these is the effectiveness of targeted communications in the voice of the people and specific communities that we are seeking to support, and highly localised knowledge to enable the rapid distribution of resources and practical assistance through organisations that are deeply connected to the families and communities they serve.

We trust and hope the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee will support the recommendations the AEC has put forward in this submission.

Attachments:

- Attachment One: AEC Terms of Reference
- Attachment Two: SVA Consulting Report – Demand for Services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Victoria