



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elder Care

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety called for:

- a separate aged care pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, developed through genuine consultation and co-design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- block funding for providers delivering services under that pathway with separate, flexible, funding streams for service provision, capital development and provider growth and to support peoples' connection to Country
- aged care to be culturally safe, trauma-aware and healing-informed
- the establishment of an independent, statutory, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Commissioner, and
- government to support the growth of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled aged care sector and the development of employment and training opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in aged care.

The vision of the Royal Commission has not been achieved. Instead, the government intends to mainstream aged care services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for the next 4 years.

The Inspector-General of Aged Care thinks this decision could cause harm.

Partnering in genuine co-design

The government has not progressed the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pathway. There has been no commitment to genuine co-design of a culturally safe end-to-end model of aged care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner has called on the government to 'commit to co-designing and developing in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people a 10-year transformation plan'. This call is based on extensive consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and is strongly supported by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care sector. Evidence provided to the Inspector-General over the course of the reporting period strongly reiterated the criticality of this need.

Statutory independence – First Nations Aged Care Commissioner

The role of Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner has been established within the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing.

The Royal Commission called for a Commissioner to hold government and the aged care sector to account for ensuring older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equitable access to culturally safe aged care.

Why is mainstreaming harmful?

- Social, emotional and spiritual care is at the core of aged care services that Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) provide. Yet this type of care attracts the highest co-contribution under Support at Home when ACCO service-delivery will be mainstreamed under the *Aged Care Act 2024*. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — even those on full pensions, where they have not negotiated recognition of ‘hardship’ — will be required to pay the highest level of contributions for care that fulfills the Royal Commission’s ambition of being culturally safe, trauma-informed and healing-aware.
- Co-payments under Support at Home will mean that unless someone can satisfy Services Australia’s hardship provisions, they will need to contribute to the cost of care that supports cultural connection and wellbeing.
- This has significant implications given that a substantial proportion of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are survivors of the stolen generation and child removal practices.
- ACCOs are concerned they will be expected to deliver care based on who can afford it, not need.
- This will require ACCOs to collect payments for the care that is core to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of doing and being. It also places their staff under exceptional cultural load to act counter-culturally in the collection of payments for culturally safe, trauma-informed care.
- Between the impact of payments and the withdrawal of ACCOs, fewer Elders will have access to the care they need.
- Failing to recognise emotional, social and spiritual support as central to providing culturally safe, trauma-aware and healing-informed care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders undermines both the recommendations of the Royal Commission and the priority reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, to which all governments have committed.

What needs to happen?

Urgent action is needed to progress the development of a genuinely co-designed system.

Government needs to commit to the development of the ‘10 year transformation plan’, developed in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Australia needs an aged care system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that provides culturally safe, trauma-aware and healing-informed care. ACCOs need to be supported to deliver such care.

Mainstreaming needs to be paused while the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care pathway is developed.

An independent, permanent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioner is needed. The Commissioner needs to be an independent, statutory appointment. To realise the vision established by the Royal Commission, the Commissioner needs to operate without the constraints of working within the existing government infrastructure.