***Queensland: an age-friendly community Action Plan***

**Valuing the Voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders**

1. Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders play a significant role in their communities and also contribute to government service delivery. In recognition of the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders the [Queensland: an age-friendly community Action Plan](https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/resources/dcdss/seniors/age-friendly-community/qafc-action-plan.pdf) (the Action Plan) includes an action to:

*Value the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and seniors, and engage with them in co-designing initiatives for seniors.* (See Page 17 of the Action Plan) (the action).

Implementation of the action is the responsibility of the CEOs of all agencies and under the [Implementation Schedule](https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/seniors/queensland-age-friendly-community/strategy-reporting) for the Action Plan this action is to be developed in 2016/2017 and implemented and reviewed in 2017/2018.

1. Purpose of this document

This document has been developed by the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships (DATSIP) to assist agency CEOs to implement the action by providing some information about engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders.

The [Queensland Government Cultural Capability Portal](http://datsip.govnet.qld.gov.au/) also contains information (Community Profiles for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, statistical information, engagement material and all agency Cultural Capability Plans) that may also assist CEOs in formulating agency responses to this action.

The whole of government Cultural Agency Leaders committee has been consulted in developing this document.

The role of Elders is difficult for outsiders to understand. We rely strongly on them as key decision makers within families. They are the people we hold the greatest respect for because many of them went through so much, so that now we do not have to suffer the injustices they experienced. Their guidance is often illustrated through everyday life and their teachings are often done subconsciously; we follow, we observe and we go on to teach our own families. It is through our Elders that the spirit of Aboriginal people is kept alive. (YolandA Walker)

1. Who is an Elder

Elders are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who are respected in their community for their knowledge, culture and experience. Elders are generally respected for the value of their cultural knowledge, leadership abilities and for making decisions on behalf of their communities.

Different community groups may consider different people as Elders. Elders are not elected*,* it is not a hereditary position and is not associated necessarily with any particular role. In terms of community decision making the opinion of Elders will invariably be sought, either directly or indirectly*.* The acquiescence of Elders will often be a critical factor in deciding whether particular directions and approaches are taken. Part of an Elders’ strength in the Community is their networks and contacts with many service providers and other community and family groups*[[1]](#footnote-1)*

The term “Elders” does not always mean men or women over fifty or sixty years of age. A relatively young (30s to 40s) man or woman may be given the status of an Elder because of their highly respected position in the community. They may possess specific skills and knowledge in an area which endorses their position of high esteem.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. Why engagement with Elders is important

Engagement with Elders has been identified as a factor that works to ensure successful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in key sectors. *Engagement with Indigenous communities in key sectors[[3]](#footnote-3)* examines the evidence about what works in approaches to engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in some key sectors. Things that work, include:

* strong and strategic Indigenous leadership and guidance from Elders;
* Extensive community consultation using existing community organisations/structures, Aboriginal Elders; drawing on Aboriginal ideas, developing them and consulting again until a program meets Aboriginal needs [[4]](#footnote-4)

For example, recently, in consultation in relation to the development of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing Action Plan* many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples said that there was a need to ensure that Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples were empowered to take a leadership role in decisions regarding their future and to support Elders in their role. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples saw closer engagement with Elders as a way *to build on the strengths, resources and enablers that already exist within communities. [[5]](#footnote-5)* Similarly, in the recently published report *Elder Abuse in New South Wales* by the NSW Legislative Council, Aboriginal Elders indicated that government had a key role in empowering Elders to act and support their own communities.[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. Contacts for engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders

As a first contact, officers in your own agency, especially regional officers, may have direct knowledge of, and contact with, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and have local knowledge of appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elder contacts.

In addition, DATSIP Regional teams maintain strong connections with community Elders and leaders and have local knowledge of Indigenous communities. DATSIP Regional Directors are listed here <http://datsipintranet.root.internal/our-department/regional-operations>

1. Some organisational arrangements utilised by Elders

Elders are often active in their communities and may be associated with, and work through, a range of different organisational structures.

*Incorporated Elders entities*

In some cases Elder groups are formal entities. For example Elders organisations registered by the Office of Registrar of Indigenous Corporations under the Commonwealth Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006 as listed in the Table below.

Contact details for these organizations are provided on the [Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations](http://www.oric.gov.au/) website.

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| --- | --- |
| **Organisation** | **Location**  |
| Amaroo Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders Justice Group (Aboriginal Corporation) | Portsmith, Cairns |
| Brisbane Council of Elders Aboriginal Corporation | Thorneside, Brisbane |
| Cairns and District Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Corporation for Elders | Bungalow, Cairns |
| Gulgiburra Yidinji Elders Indigenous Corporation | Mareeba |
| Inala Elders Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Corporation | Inala, Brisbane |
| Keriba Mabaigal Torres Strait Islander Corporation for Culture and Heritage | Acacia Ridge, Brisbane |
| Kaurareg Traditional Elders Aboriginal Corporation | Horn Island, Torres Strait |
| Logan District Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Aboriginal Corporation For Elders | Slacks Creek, Logan |
| Mareeba and District Elders Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Corporation | Mareeba |
| Minjerribah Moorgumpin (Elders-In-Council) Aboriginal Corporation | Dunwich, Stradbroke Island, Redlands City  |
| Mununjali Aboriginal Elders Group Aboriginal Corporation | Beaudesert |
| Purga Elders & Descendants Aboriginal Corporation | Ellen Grove, Brisbane |
| Saima Torres Strait Islanders Corporation  | Rockhampton |
| Traditional Waanyi Elders Aboriginal Corporation | Mt Isa |

*Unincorporated Elders entities*

For example, DATSIP has frequent discussions with the Brisbane North Elder Group who, although not a formal entity, are strongly affiliated and supported by a local community organisation.

Discussions are convened by this organisation to provide a forum for Brisbane North Elders to identify emerging issues impacting their community and to provide advice and counsel on government business and direction.

*Individual Elders*

For example, DATSIP engages in planned or ad hoc discussions with individual Elders where there is no formal or organised structure supporting their work.  For example this model of engagement is used in the Sunshine Coast to Gympie area.

In addition, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Organisations (for a list of centres in Queensland see <https://www.qaihc.com.au/about/our-members>) and respite centres are often places where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander seniors and Elders meet.

1. Considerations when engaging with Elders

Engagement works best if it is in the context of a relationship that has been built over time and that reflects not only the needs/priorities of government but also provides the opportunity to respond to issues raised by Elders. For example, in order to ensure respectful engagement with Elders, one DATSIP region structures its engagements with Elders to ensure that matters for discussion reflect not only the needs/priorities of government but also responses to issues raised by Elders.

The demand on Elders from their communities and service providers is significant and many require support to undertake this important role. In recognition of these demands and often conflicting priorities, for example, one DATSIP region renumerates Elders for their time and expertise.

1. Examples of actions/initiatives that “value the voice” of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders

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| --- | --- |
| **Action**  | **Examples** |
| Regular open discussions with Elders re concerns and issues | * The DATSIP South East Queensland North region talks regularly to Elders via Elder organisations (e.g. Inala Elders) or through DATSIP partner organisations (Kurbingui Youth Services’ relationship with Brisbane North Elders).
* DATSIP central office invites Elders Groups (e.g. Logan Elders, Inala Elders) to meet with central office staff and senior executives with an open agenda.
* In Wujal Wujal and Coen opportunities are provided to Elders to meet with Government Champions during Government Champion visits.
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| Supporting local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders’ groups  | * The Inala Elders Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Corporation delivers a range of services (Home and Community Care, driver’s licence projects, school holiday programs) to address issues impacting their community.
* DATSIP maintains a close working relationship with the Inala Elders and is working with Inala Elders to build their capacity as an organisation by connecting them to BDO Finance Group to provide governance training and support on a pro-bono basis.
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| Inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders in the work of agencies | * Development of the [*Strategy and action plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families*](https://www.csyw.qld.gov.au/campaign/supporting-families/background/strategy-action-plan-aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-children-families). The strategy and action plan has been developed through a collaborative approach involving Elders, relevant Government agencies and community leaders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and peak bodies.
* The strategy and action plan was developed in partnership with [Family Matters](http://www.familymatters.org.au/about-us/) and community organisations and draws on the strengths and capabilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities and organisations.
* Elders in schools (cooperative arrangements between schools and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders who visit schools and provide guidance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children). For example, at the Bloomfield River State School Elders work with teachers and teacher - aides to expose children to Kuku Yalangi language and stories.
* Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service policy to recompense Traditional Owners and Elders for the provision of cultural advice and welcome to country services.
* Establishment of the Reparations Taskforce comprised of Elders and respected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons drawn from a state-wide nomination process. The Taskforce consulted with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and provided advice to Government about: eligibility for reparations payments, how the application, assessment and payment process should work; implementation issues and ongoing progress and outcomes until conclusion of the Queensland Government Reparations Scheme in 2017.
* The Woodridge Housing Service Centre Elder in Residence initiative.
* Elder consultative groups.
* Celebration and acknowledgement of Elders’ contributions to the community.
* Inclusion of Elders/Traditional Custodians at all major events (When requested)
* Incorporation of local language, traditional stories, song and artwork in the work and operation of agencies.
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| Healing on Country Programs | * Wujal Wujal Community Justice Group Traditional Owners and Elders work closely with schools, disengaged youth, the job services provider to share cultural knowledge, language and culture.
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Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships

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3. Australian Government, Closing the Gap Clearing House, Engagement with Indigenous communities in key sectors- 2013, Resource Sheet no.23 (<http://www.aihw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/ClosingTheGap/Content/Publications/2013/ctgc-rs23.pdf> (accessed 14 March 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Above, page 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Queensland Mental Health Commission, Progress Report on development of a Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing Plan, Page 4 (<https://www.qmhc.qld.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/PROGRESS-REPORT_Acknowledging-and-celebrating-Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-cultures_July-2016.pdf> ( accessed 14 March 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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