

CHAPTER 5

SERVICES TO INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Governments in Australia, including Local Government, have a critical role to play in improving the health and wellbeing of Indigenous people. In many locations, this means there is a need for far greater effort and collaboration to improve Indigenous access to mainstream services and, in some instances, to align the appropriateness of such services with Indigenous requirements.

Indigenous people in context

Indigenous Australians compare unfavourably against the national average on most socioeconomic indicators. For example, there is high mortality amongst Indigenous Australians compared to the total population. Data covering 1997 to 1999 show that the life expectancy for Indigenous males was 55.6 years compared with 76.2 years for all males. For Indigenous females, life expectancy was 63.0 years compared with 81.8 years for all females. In 1998, the infant mortality rate for Indigenous Australians was 14.1 deaths per 1000 live births compared with 5.7 deaths for the total population.

At the 2001 Census, Indigenous Australians numbered some 410 000 people. Some 2.2 per cent of the Australian population identified

as Indigenous, up from 2.1 per cent at the time of the 1996 Census. Table 5.1 provides the number of Indigenous people by State and as a proportion of each State and the national populations. It shows that the Indigenous percentage of State populations varied considerably – from 0.5 per cent in Victoria to 25.1 per cent in the Northern Territory. Also, over 83 per cent of the Indigenous population reside in just four States – New South Wales (29.2 per cent), Queensland (27.5 per cent), Western Australia (14.3 per cent) and the Northern Territory (12.4 per cent).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics notes that there continues to be an increased likelihood of people identifying as being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin in the census and surveys.

Across councils within a State, there is considerable variation in the distribution of Indigenous people. Most Indigenous people live in urban areas. But the Indigenous population is less urbanised than the total population.

Table 5.1 Estimates of State Indigenous populations, at 30 June 2001

State	Indigenous population '000	Total population '000	Proportion of total State population %	Proportion of Indigenous population %
NSW	119.9	6 371.7	1.9	29.2
Vic	25.1	4 645.0	0.5	6.1
Qld	112.8	3 655.1	3.1	27.5
WA	58.5	1 851.3	3.2	14.3
SA	23.4	1 467.3	1.6	5.7
Tas	15.8	456.7	3.5	3.9
NT	50.8	210.7	25.1	12.4
ACT	3.6	311.9	1.2	0.9
Total¹	410.0	18 972.4	2.2	100.0

Note: 1 Includes Jervis Bay Territory and Commonwealth External Territories.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: A Statistical profile from the 2001 Census, 2002 Year Book*.

Reporting requirements

The *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1995* requires an assessment, based on comparable national data, of the delivery of Local Government services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

To date, no performance measures have been developed to assess performance of councils in providing services to Indigenous people. However, in the past all States, the Commonwealth and the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) provided annual reports to the Local Government Ministers' Conference on progress in improving Local Government service provision to Indigenous communities. Subsequently, the States' reports were published in the corresponding National Report.

For 2001–02, progress reports from State agencies and for Local Government associations on Local Government service provision to Indigenous communities are provided at Appendix H. These reports identify a range of priorities, strategies and actions, and a variety of differing approaches.

State reports

When the State reports are examined, it is evident that there are different priorities across the jurisdictions and varied progress. In some jurisdictions there is considerable energy and commitment with a range of positive developments. The following summarises just some of the positive initiatives being taken.

In **New South Wales**, as at June 2001 the number of Local Government advisory committees had increased to 63, up from 45 in June 2000. These committees have made a significant contribution to improving communication, understanding and trust between Indigenous people and Local Government. Also in NSW, following the decision of the 2000 Local Government Association of NSW Annual Conference, NSW Aboriginal Land Councils are now full members of the Association and were fully represented at the 2001 Annual Conference.

In **Victoria**, the Department of Infrastructure in concert with the Municipal Association of Victoria and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Commission published a report on the study of factors that influence the nature of relationships between Local Government and Indigenous communities in Victoria. *Toomnangi: Indigenous Communities and Local Government*, provides Local Government with case studies, examples, statistics and ideas on initiatives that can strengthen community relationships and can help advance the reconciliation process.

Queensland is providing a substantial level of programme assistance for improving the level of service provision to Indigenous communities. Programmes include, amongst others, the Smaller Communities Assistance Programme, the Rural Living Infrastructure Programme and the State Government Financial Aid Programme.

In **Western Australia** on 10 October 2001 a partnership between the State Government and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission State Council was established as a basis for reconciliation. The partnership is intended as a framework that will lead to the support of Indigenous people in negotiating regional and local level agreements according to the priorities of the Aboriginal communities. An Indigenous Affairs Advisory Committee has also been established, with one of its aims to facilitate the better use of resources.

In **South Australia**, implementation of a number of recommendations relating to nine programme areas, stemming from the August 2000 *Local councils belong to Aboriginal people 2* report, has continued. Among developments, the Inter-Governmental Local Government/Aboriginal Network met with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission State Executive Committee in November 2001 to determine opportunities for forward planning links between Local Government councils and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Regional Councils.

Also in South Australia, with Commonwealth financial assistance, the Partnership Local Government/Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elections and Voting Project has been undertaken. The project identified culturally appropriate material to be developed to support councils and to foster interest among the Aboriginal population in nominating for council within their Local Government area. The project also sought to respond to the continuing lack of awareness of voting rights, the low level of nominations as candidates for Local Government elections and the consistently low levels of voter turnout by Aboriginal people in Local Government elections.

In **Tasmania**, the State Government is seeking to improve links between Local Government and Indigenous communities to deal with issues that affect Indigenous people and to improve the level of participation of Indigenous people in Local Government.

While further effort is required to improve service levels to Indigenous communities there have been some outstanding individual success stories at the Local Government level. Some of these have been recognised through the National Awards for Local Government initiative. In 2002, Strengthening Indigenous Communities was included as a special Local Government Award category for the first time. Further information about the awards, categories and category winners is included at Appendix I.

Access to services – recent assessments

One key indicator of the level of municipal services available to Indigenous communities is the *Housing and Infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities Survey* completed in 2001 and published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in May 2002. The survey collected selected information on

Indigenous organisations that provide housing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As well as details of housing stock, dwelling management, selected income and expenditure arrangements, the survey also collected information on the status of housing, infrastructure, education, health and other services available in discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities throughout Australia.

Although this survey covers only 108 085 people in 1 216 discrete communities served by Indigenous housing organisations (see Table 5.2), it gives a snapshot of the level of services accessible to remote communities in general and Indigenous communities in particular. Many of the issues highlighted by the survey are related to municipal services. They include water supply, sewerage systems, electricity supply and road maintenance.

Since the last Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities Survey in 1999 there have been some significant improvements. These include a reduction in the proportion of people living in temporary dwellings, an increase in the proportion of permanent dwellings connected to water, power and sewerage systems and a reduction in sewerage system overflows and leakages.

In 2001, flooding and drainage were again reported as major problem areas with a substantial number of communities reporting flooding, ponding and cuts to road access. Water quality was either not tested or had failed testing in the 12 months prior to the survey in 46 per cent of the 213 Indigenous communities not connected to a town water supply with a population of 50 people or more. Two per cent of the communities surveyed in 2001 reported having no organised water supply with 20 of the 21 communities in this category having a usual population of less than 20.

Bore water was the main source of drinking water for 784 of the surveyed communities representing a combined total of 66 531 people. 186 of the Indigenous communities with a usual population of 50 or more had town water as a main source of supply for a combined population of 18 134 people.

Seven per cent of Indigenous communities surveyed had no organised sewerage system. Overflows from sewerage systems in the 12 months prior to the survey occurred in nearly half of the communities with a population of 50 people or more.

Table 5.2 Indigenous population living in discrete communities by State, 1999

State or Territory	No. of discrete communities	Total population of discrete communities
NSW	60	7 771
Vic	2	279
Qld	142	30 961
WA	283	16 558
SA	96	5 226
Tas	1	57
NT	632	47 233
Total	1 216	108 085

Source: ABS, *Housing and Infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities*, 2001, cat. No. 4710

94 per cent of the communities with a population of 50 or more had an organised rubbish collection service. The majority of these communities dispose of their rubbish either in an unfenced community tip or in a tip outside the community land.

58, or 5 per cent of the communities surveyed were located in towns that provided major services. The remainder predominantly used road as the usual means of transport although 11 per cent used air or sea. 168 communities had their road access cut at least once one day or more during the period of the survey.

Nearly two-thirds of discrete Indigenous communities with a usual population of 50 or more people had access to sporting facilities such as outdoors sports grounds or courts for games such as basketball or tennis in their community, with the larger communities most likely to have these facilities.

In January 2002 the Office of Evaluation and Audit within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission initiated an assessment of performance monitoring, measurement and evaluation of service delivery programmes to Indigenous peoples. A report on the assessment, titled *Outcome data measurement unfinished business; Evaluation of data for outcome measurement for selected Indigenous service delivery programs*, was published in July 2002.

The terms of reference for the assessment were to:

- identify the scope and nature of data on outcomes and programme performance to improve outcomes for Indigenous peoples
- report on the availability of the data and its potential use in evaluation, and programme and policy formulation and delivery
- present to the (ATSIC) Key Managers Conference in early 2002 information on progress, including data availability and its potential applications.

Data examined was limited to four service delivery programs: law and justice, health, education, and housing and infrastructure.

The assessment examined over 75 data sources. Of these only 22 were considered to be of adequate quality to use to measure programme outcomes for Indigenous people. The assessment found there continued to be a lack of reliable data suitable for monitoring and evaluating programmes but noted that the establishment of a statistics unit within the Commission might play a key role in meeting the data requirement and providing assistance to ATSIC programme managers in the development of appropriate performance indicators.

Commonwealth expenditure and progress

Financial assistance grants

In 2001–02, there were 99 Indigenous councils receiving financial assistance grants from the Commonwealth. Some of these councils are established under mainstream Local Government legislation of the State such as Aurukun and Mornington Shires in Queensland and Ngaanyatjarraku in Western Australia. Others are established under separate State legislation such as the Deed of Grant in Trust councils in Queensland. The final group is those bodies that have been 'declared' to be local governing bodies by the Federal Minister, on advice from the State Minister, so they can receive financial assistance grants. Table 5.3 shows the distribution of Indigenous councils by State and by the way in which they have become eligible for the financial assistance grants.

In 2001–02, the Commonwealth provided these Indigenous community councils with around \$19.4 million in financial assistance grants. Of this, \$12.5 million was in general purpose grants and \$6.9 million in local roads grants.

In addition to these grants to Indigenous Community councils, the Western Australian Local Government Grants Commission allocated \$1.5 million from the financial assistance grants local road component (about 2 per cent) for access roads serving remote Aboriginal communities.

In most States, the methodology used by Grants Commissions to determine the distribution of financial assistance grants to Indigenous councils is the same as that applied to the distribution of grants to other State and Territory councils, with disability factors applied to assist the achievement of equitable grant outcomes (see Chapter 2).

Local Government Incentive Programme

Funding was provided by the Commonwealth under the former Local Government Incentive Programme to the South Australian Office of Local Government and Local Government Association of South Australia for an elections and voting project. This partnership project, which began in March 2002, sought to produce materials to help councils foster interest in nominating for, and voting in, council elections (due in May 2003) among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voting public. The project

Table 5.3 Distribution of Indigenous councils by eligibility type and by State, June 2002

State	Established under State Local Government legislation	Established under separate State legislation	Declared local governing bodies	Total Indigenous councils
NSW	0	0	0	0
Vic	0	0	0	0
Qld	2	32	0	34
WA	1	0	0	1
SA	0	0	5	5
Tas	0	0	0	0
NT	30	0	29	59
Total	33	32	34	99

Source: Department of Transport and Regional Services unpublished data

was run in collaboration with the ATSIC State Policy Office, the State Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the State Electoral Office.

Local Government ministers' reconciliation action plans

On 3 November 2000, the Prime Minister, State Premiers and Territory Chief Ministers and the President of ALGA, through Council of Australian Government (COAG), agreed on a framework to advance reconciliation with Australia's Indigenous peoples. As part of this framework, COAG directed Ministerial Councils – including the Local Government Ministers' Council – to develop action plans, performance reporting strategies and benchmarks to advance reconciliation.

In agreeing to the framework, COAG identified three priority areas for action that reflect the priorities of Indigenous people:

- investing in community leadership
- reviewing and re-engineering programmes and services to ensure they deliver practical measures that support families, children and young people. In particular, governments agreed to look at measures for tackling family violence, drug and alcohol dependency and other symptoms of community dysfunction
- forging greater links between the business sector and Indigenous communities to help promote economic independence.

The framework includes a new approach for governments based on partnerships and shared responsibilities with Indigenous communities, and programme flexibility and coordination between government agencies, with a focus on local communities and outcomes.

In relation to developing an action plan for the Local Government Ministers' Council in response to the Council of Australian Governments directive, each jurisdiction was asked to participate in a working party to develop a draft working paper for consideration by the Local Government Ministers' Council. With Commonwealth funding, the Australian Local Government Association agreed to take a lead role by engaging a consultant to work with the working party.

The working party has representation from the Commonwealth, each of the States and the Australian Local Government Association and is being assisted by an officer from ATSIC. At the first meeting of the newly formed Local Government and Planning Ministers' Council, the Council is expected to consider the draft action plan prepared by the working party for Local Government Ministers.

The development of performance reporting strategies and benchmarks are key elements of the framework required by Council of Australian Governments. That is, measuring and comparing the progress to achieve particular reconciliation outcomes. This is also an area identified by the Commonwealth Grants Commission in their review of the financial assistance grants arrangements. The Commission, at p. 27 of the report, said that the Commonwealth together with the States and Indigenous organisations should work to develop measures of the performance of councils in providing services to Indigenous people¹. Once these have been developed, the Commonwealth Grants Commission recommended that they should be applied and the results published in the National Report.

1 Commonwealth Grants Commission 2001, Review of the operation of the *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1995*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.