Building better partnerships
Working with Aboriginal communities and organisations: a communication guide for the Department of Human Services
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Cover artist: Sonja Hodge

Story description:
The bold figure at the heart of this piece depicts the strength of Aboriginal people in Victoria and our pride and willingness to share our history and culture as we establish relationships and partnerships with non-Aboriginal people.

The background imagery portrays our strong connection to the land and the differing landscapes across Victoria that is indicative of the uniqueness of each Aboriginal community.
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Acknowledgments

The Department of Human Services thanks Aboriginal people and organisations and many departmental staff for contributing ideas for this guide. The department takes full responsibility for the accuracy of this guide and welcomes suggestions for improvements in future editions.

The department gratefully acknowledges the assistance of NSW Health in granting permission to draw on Communicating positively - a guide to appropriate Aboriginal terminology for NSW Health (May 2004).
Introductory note

Warning: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that this document may contain images or names of deceased persons.

A note on use of terms related to Aboriginal communities

The terms ‘Koori’, ‘Koorie’, ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Indigenous’ are used throughout this document, reflecting and respecting the broad usage across the community and government (while there are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria, parts of this guide are particularly focused on Victoria’s Aboriginal community). Aboriginal people may refer to themselves according to the language group of their family’s ancestral lands.

The term ‘community’ is used extensively throughout this document. There are many different perspectives on what is a ‘community’. Non-Aboriginal people often use ‘community’ to refer to a particular geographical locality. Aboriginal people in Victoria may originate from many areas of Australia or Victoria and as such may belong to more than one Aboriginal community; for example, their ancestral lands, where their family is, and where they live or work. The important thing to remember is that in Aboriginal culture a community is first and foremost about country, (extended) family ties and shared experience. Community is about interrelatedness and belonging and is central to Aboriginality.

Some terms used to identify Aboriginal people from across Australia are:

- Koori or Koorie, usually used by Aboriginal people in Victoria and parts of New South Wales
- Palawa, usually used by Aboriginal people in Tasmania
- Murri, usually used by Aboriginal people in north-west New South Wales and Queensland
- Nunga, usually used by Aboriginal people in South Australia
- Yolngu, usually used by Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory (north-east Arnhem Land)
- Anangu, usually used by Aboriginal people in Central Australia
- Noongar, usually used by Aboriginal people in south-west Western Australia.
The Aboriginal flag is a recognised flag of Australia under s. 5 of the Flags Act 1953. The Aboriginal flag was designed in 1971 by Harold Thomas, an Aboriginal artist. The flag was designed to be an eye-catching rallying symbol for the Aboriginal people and a symbol of their race and identity. The black represents the Aboriginal people, the red represents the earth and their spiritual relationship to the land as well as the blood spilled in the fight for recognition and justice, and the yellow represents the sun, the giver of all life.

The Torres Strait Islander flag is a recognised flag of Australia under s. 5 of the Flags Act 1953. The Torres Strait Islander flag is attributed to the late Bernard Namok of Thursday Island. The flag is emblazoned with a white Dari (headdress), which is a symbol of Torres Strait Islanders. The white five-pointed star beneath it symbolises the five major island groups and the navigational importance of the stars. The green stripes represent the land, the black stripes represent the people, and the blue represents the sea. The flag as a whole symbolises the unity of all Torres Strait Islander peoples.
Introduction

About the guide

The Department of Human Services acknowledges and respects Aboriginal Victorians as first Australians and original custodians of the land. In addition, the department recognises that improved outcomes in Aboriginal health and wellbeing can only be achieved if effective and respectful partnerships are established with Aboriginal people, communities and organisations.

Successful partnerships already exist between Aboriginal organisations and the department. The department wishes to acknowledge these efforts. Building better partnerships draws on this valuable knowledge and experience in documenting existing good practice for all new and future staff to use.

This guide aims to provide practical communication advice about working with Aboriginal communities and organisations. In particular, the guide identifies appropriate terminology and effective communication strategies for conducting departmental business with Aboriginal organisations and communities. It also assists staff in developing and distributing clear and culturally appropriate information to Aboriginal audiences.

Building better partnerships is designed to provide general advice on good communication for staff to use for a variety of purposes from consultations with peak bodies on program development to service agreement negotiations with service providers. It does not provide the detailed cross-cultural communication advice required for service delivery.

What’s in the guide?

Building better partnerships is divided into six sections.

‘Aboriginal people’ provides an overview of contemporary Aboriginal communities.

‘History’ addresses past policies and practice in Aboriginal affairs in Victoria and introduces key events in the recent history of Aboriginal affairs in Victoria and nationally.

‘Language and terminology’ provides useful definitions of commonly used words relating to Aboriginal communities, as well as general protocols to follow when referring to Aboriginal people.

‘Building blocks for good communication’ provides some important principles and an understanding of the context in which departmental business is undertaken.

‘Strategies and behaviours for effective communication’ provides tips, checklists and examples to aid staff in establishing good working relationships with Aboriginal people, communities and organisations.

‘Developing appropriate material’ provides guidelines on how to produce and disseminate culturally appropriate and effective material about the department’s programs and processes for Aboriginal people.
How to use the guide

Aboriginal communities are diverse and have different beliefs, cultures and practices. *Building better partnerships* is a general guide; it does not attempt to represent all Aboriginal communities.

This guide is not intended to provide all the answers and cannot substitute for the expertise of staff members who have been effective in their dealings with Aboriginal communities. Rather, it provides a starting point for departmental staff wishing to seek further and more detailed information on how to engage and work effectively with Aboriginal organisations and communities in their particular areas.

From March 2006 the department has been providing Aboriginal cultural respect training for staff. This training complements the strategies and practice tips provided in this guide.

The policy context

The Parliament recognises that Victoria's Aboriginal people, as the original custodians of the land on which the Colony of Victoria was established

a) have a unique status as the descendants of Australia’s first people; and
b) have a spiritual, social, cultural and economic relationship with their traditional lands and waters within Victoria; and
c) have made a unique and irreplaceable contribution to the identity and well-being of Victoria.

Section 1A, *Constitution (Recognition of Aboriginal People) Act 2004*.

Victorian Government policy for Aboriginal people

The Victorian Government is working in partnership with Aboriginal people in Victoria to create a society that:

• is proud of its Aboriginal history
• addresses dispossession and disadvantage
• heals the hurt of past injustice
• builds a positive future.

The Department of Human Services undertakes its responsibilities within the context of the government’s Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework. The government and Aboriginal Victorians developed the framework as a whole-of-government approach to overcoming Aboriginal disadvantage.
The framework aims to achieve partnership across government and between government and Indigenous communities, with particular emphasis on improving:

- outcomes for Indigenous people
- coordination of government programs
- input and direction by Indigenous communities
- approaches to service delivery.

The department is committed to improving the cultural, spiritual and emotional health and the social and economic wellbeing of Aboriginal people in Victoria by:

- incorporating Aboriginal needs, issues and positive outcomes in all planning through consultation with key stakeholders and Aboriginal communities
- providing an holistic, coordinated approach to improving the responsiveness and accessibility of its services for the Aboriginal community in Victoria
- addressing the disproportionate number of Aboriginal people in institutions and state care, especially within the juvenile justice, child protection and alternative care systems
- empowering Aboriginal communities to collaborate as partners
- providing support to build the capacity of Aboriginal managed community and health services across Victoria
- recognising the impact of past policies on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal communities
- increasing the understanding of Aboriginal identity and experience within the portfolio and in the broader community
- implementing recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families
- increasing the number of Aboriginal people employed within the portfolio
- increasing the number of Aboriginal people in decision making positions
- eliminating systemic racism in the workplace.
Department of Human Services’ Aboriginal Services Plan and associated regional plans

The department’s *Aboriginal Services Plan* aims to achieve a demonstrable improvement in the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people in Victoria in line with that of the general population by:

- understanding the factors contributing to the disparity in health and wellbeing
- maximising the use of primary and preventative services
- minimising the representation of Aboriginal people in identified secondary and tertiary services (Victorian Department of Human Services 2004).

The *Aboriginal Services Plan* builds on a number of inquiries and key publications at national, state and departmental levels. At national level, these include:

- Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991)
- National Commitment to Improved Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (1992)
- National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (1997)
- Memorandum of Understanding/Bilateral Agreement on Housing
- ‘[Trilateral]’ Framework Agreement on Aboriginal Health (2002)
- Council of Australian Governments Communiqué - Aboriginal Reconciliation (November 2000).

At Victorian Government level relevant strategies and agreements are:

- Reconciliation and Respect (September 1999)
- Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement (June 2000)
- Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Strategy (May 2002)

The plan plays an important role in achieving the government’s vision of reconciliation and its aim of addressing the disadvantage faced by Aboriginal people.

The plan recognises that improved outcomes can only be achieved if effective and respectful partnerships are established between Aboriginal people, communities and organisations. These partnerships ensure Aboriginal people are involved in the planning, development and delivery of health, housing and community services.
In line with strategy 2.1 in the plan, regional Aboriginal services plans have also been developed or reviewed for each of the department’s regions, establishing, through consultation with Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal community controlled organisations and service providers, regional priority needs and issues, desired outcomes, specific actions and review mechanisms.

1. Aboriginal people
1. Aboriginal people

Australia has traditionally been inhabited by two Indigenous peoples who are ethnically and culturally very different: Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. This guide focuses on Aboriginal people.

In Aboriginal culture, the land was created by the journeys of the ‘Spirit Ancestors’ during a period known as the ‘Dreaming’ or ‘Dreamtime’. In song, story, poetry, art, drama and dance, the Dreamtime tells how the Spirit Ancestors (each symbolised by an animal which is the totem of the clan) gave life to the land and laid down the Law – the structure of society, rituals to maintain the life of the land, and rules governing human behaviour.

Aboriginal people did not own the land in the European sense; ownership and management roles were determined through complex systems of descent, kinship and marriage. The Europeans did not understand the diverse and complex Aboriginal cultures, and the British Government did not consider the close connection between Aboriginal people and the land when it acted as if Cook’s 1770 discovery and annexation of territory gave them sovereignty, the land and a responsibility to conciliate the Aboriginal inhabitants (Connor 2005).

1.1 Victoria’s Aboriginal population

Aboriginal people have lived in Victoria for at least 40,000 years. Archaeological evidence of the great antiquity of Aboriginal occupation of all parts of Victoria is well documented. During this time, dramatic changes of climate and environment occurred but Aboriginal culture responded dynamically to each new challenge.

Victoria’s Aboriginal people developed complex traditional cultures. Prior to colonisation there were approximately 250 Indigenous languages spoken in Australia (approximately 36 in Victoria). Some of these had several varieties, and there were altogether about 500 language varieties used across Australia. Before settlement, Aboriginal people were capable of fluently speaking five or more languages. Since colonisation, more than three quarters of the original languages have already been lost.

In recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in the Aboriginal languages. The Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Language is focused on retrieving, recording and researching Aboriginal languages and providing a central resource on Victorian Aboriginal languages with programs now looking at educational tools to teach the Aboriginal community about language (Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Language 2002).
The map below, produced by the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, is a reconstruction of Aboriginal language areas in Victoria prior to colonisation. Spelling and pronunciation of language names varies throughout Victorian communities depending on oral knowledge and beliefs.

Aboriginal language areas in Victoria: a reconstruction
The Victorian Aboriginal population is approximately 0.6 per cent of the total Victorian population and 6.1 per cent of the total Australian Aboriginal population. Aboriginal Australians present a considerably younger age structure than that of the non-Aboriginal population, with 57 per cent being under the age of 25 years, compared with 34.1 per cent of the total population. Further, 2.9 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians are over the age of 65 years compared with 12.6 per cent of the total Victorian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001a).

1.2 The health and wellbeing of Aboriginal Victorians

Aboriginal Victorians have a lower life expectancy than the general population. Life expectancy for Aboriginal people (both male and female) is approximately 18 years less than that for non-Aboriginal people (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004).

Aboriginal Victorians in every age group are more likely than other people to be hospitalised for most diseases and conditions, indicating a high occurrence of illness at more acute levels. These illnesses include high levels of injury and poisoning, drug and alcohol disorders, kidney disease, digestive diseases, diabetes and social and emotional and behavioural disorders (Department of Human Services 2005).
1.3 Continuing culture

Despite the devastating impact of European colonisation on Aboriginal ways of life, Aboriginal people have survived and Aboriginal culture is alive and strong. Aboriginal culture provides significant strength to the community; it is apparent and celebrated throughout Victoria.

The continuing strength of Aboriginal cultural beliefs is passed on through the generations. Their influence and importance in contemporary health services is well reflected in the following statements, which the Aboriginal Best Start Reference Group has developed about children and their future:

- Our children are our present and our future.
- Our children have the right to an education that strengthens their culture and identity.
- Our children have the right to identify as Aboriginal Australians, to be proud of our history, cultural beliefs and practices.
- Our children have the right to maintain connection to their land and country.
- Our children have the right to maintain their strong kinship ties and social obligations.
- Our children have a strong contribution to make to enrich the Aboriginal community and as members of the wider community.
- Our children have a right to be taught our cultural heritage by our Elders (Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Incorporated et al. 2004).
1.4 Aboriginal organisations

A range of Aboriginal organisations has been established in Victoria. Those most relevant to the Department of Human Services include:

• key organisations represented at the Aboriginal Human Services Forum (convened by the department):
  • Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO)
  • Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited (VACSAL)
  • Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria (AHBV)
  • Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEI)

• statewide or metropolitan service delivery organisations:
  • Aborigines Advancement League (AAL)
  • Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency Co-operative Ltd (VACCA)
  • Ngwala Willumbong Cooperative Ltd
  • Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Ltd
  • Elizabeth Hoffman House Co-operative Ltd
  • Victorian Aboriginal Health Service Incorporated
  • Aboriginal Community Elders Service
  • Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service
  • Aboriginal cooperatives providing a range of heath and community services.
DHS - Funded Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations

The following map depicts the Aboriginal community controlled organisations funded by the department.

A more detailed list of Aboriginal organisations in Victoria is at the Aboriginal Affairs web site www1.dvc.vic.gov.au/aav/info/com%5Fcontacts/
1.5 Community events - key dates

The key dates and events below are significant to Aboriginal people and communities. Departmental staff are able to show their support for Aboriginal people by attending and acknowledging these events and dates.

26 January - Survival Day
Aboriginal Australians choose to mark Australia Day as a day to highlight the invasion of Australia by Europeans and to acknowledge the survival of their cultural heritage.

26 May to 3 June - National Reconciliation Week
This week begins with National Sorry Day on 26 May and ends with Mabo Day on 3 June.

26 May - National Sorry Day

3 June - Mabo Day
This day commemorates the anniversary of the 1992 High Court decision in the case brought by Eddie Mabo and others, which recognised the existence in Australia of Native title rights. On the tenth anniversary of this day in 2002 there were many calls for the day to become a public holiday, an official National Mabo Day.

First full week of July - NAIDOC Week
The first Sunday of July sees the beginning of a week dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people to celebrate NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Day Observance Committee) Week. It is a celebration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people of their survival. It is also a time for all Australians to celebrate the unique contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions and cultures and to bring issues of concern to the attention of governments and the broader community. Each year NAIDOC has a theme. Past themes have included:

- 1972: ‘Advance Australia Where?’
- 1990: ‘New Decade - Don’t Destroy, Learn And Enjoy Our Cultural Heritage’
- 1996: ‘Survive - Revive - Come Alive’
- 2000: ‘Building Pride In Our Communities’

In Victoria, the Department of Human Services, along with other government departments, organises events and activities to celebrate NAIDOC week.
August - National Aboriginal and Islander Children’s Day

This day was first observed in 1988 and each year it has a special theme. The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care has always produced a poster to celebrate the day.

Information about these events can be obtained by:
- contacting your local Aboriginal organisation
- viewing advertising in Aboriginal publications, such as the Koori Mail and the National Indigenous Times
- visiting web sites, such as the ABC’s Message Stick
- accessing local radio stations that contain Aboriginal programming.

(See 6.4 Methods for delivering information for more details).
2. History
2.1 The history of policy and practice in Aboriginal affairs in Victoria

Past government policy and practice, particularly relating to Aboriginal Australians’ disconnection from traditional lands and the removal of children from their families, has had a profound influence on the health, wellbeing and attitudes of Victoria’s contemporary Aboriginal community. The following is a brief history of Aboriginal affairs in Victoria since colonisation, largely drawn from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, Bringing Them Home (1997).


Colonisation

In the early 1800s, sealers and whalers operating from Bass Strait to Western Australia regularly interacted with Aboriginal people, usually in violent, exploitative ways. Sealers established temporary settlements, usually with Aboriginal women providing the labour force.

Two official expeditions to establish colonies in what is now Victoria were mounted in 1803 and 1826. The 1803 settlement at Sorrento was abandoned in 1804 (leaving behind William Buckley, who lived with the Watha Wurrung people for 30 years). The 1826 settlement at Corinella on Westernport Bay was abandoned in 1828. There is little evidence of interaction between these expeditions and the Boon Wurrung traditional owners.

In 1834, settlers from Tasmania travelled across the Bass Strait to Portland Bay in search of new farmland. A year later, John Batman signed a farcical ‘treaty’ with the Aboriginal leaders of the Port Phillip Bay clans, which purported to give him ownership of almost 250,000 hectares of land. The colonial government did not recognise Batman’s ‘treaty’ and his ownership of the land was dismissed when the official Port Phillip settlement was established.

To maintain order in the new settlement on the Yarra, New South Wales Governor Sir Richard Bourke sent a magistrate (Captain William Lonsdale), soldiers, and policemen from Sydney in 1836. In March 1837 the Governor visited the Port Phillip district and directed that a town be laid out and named Melbourne. In 1839 Charles Joseph La Trobe was sent from England as Superintendent of the Port Phillip district.
By the late 1840s the only parts of Victoria still unoccupied by European colonists were the arid areas in the north-west of the Mallee district and the mountainous and heavily forested parts of Gippsland (then referred to as Gipps Land) and the Otway Ranges.

The impact of this rapid European colonisation was an extraordinary decline in the Aboriginal population from an estimated 15,000 to fewer than 2,000 by 1863. The causes of this excessive mortality are almost clichés: increased intergroup warfare, the violence of settlers and the punitive expeditions of police, intemperance and, above all, the introduction of alien diseases (Barwick 1971).

In response to this situation, the colonial government introduced a series of well meaning but counterproductive measures.

The Port Phillip Protectorate (1839 to 1849) issued occasional rations to Aboriginal people in an attempt to induce them to settle at four protectorate stations in the Loddon Valley, the Western District, the Goulburn Valley and near Melbourne. Three church missions were also established near Colac and on the Murray, but they and the Protectorate lacked the funds to provide adequate food, clothing and medicine (Barwick 1971).

A Select Committee (Legislative Council 1858-59) recommended that the government reserve land for Aboriginal people on their own country and grant funds for the regular distribution of food and clothing. The Board for the Protection of the Aborigines was established in June 1860 to administer this expenditure.

The Board for the Protection of the Aborigines

The Board for the Protection of the Aborigines, together with a number of sympathetic settlers appointed as ‘local guardians’ and Moravian, Anglican and Presbyterian missionaries, maintained a system of stations, reserves and ration depots; however, it was the board’s policy, supported by lack of funds, that the able-bodied should support themselves and their families by working for pastoralists.

In 1869 the Victorian Parliament passed the Aborigines Protection Act 1869. This Act gave powers to the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines, which subsequently developed into an extraordinary level of control of people’s lives, including regulation of residence, employment, marriage, social life and other aspects of daily life.

One of the regulations made under the Act allowed for ‘the removal of any Aboriginal child neglected by its parents or left unprotected’. Children were removed to a mission, an industrial or reform school, or a station. Another regulation allowed the board to remove any male child under 14 years and female child under 18 years living on reserves and relocate them elsewhere.
These powers of removal were even given to station managers. These regulations were used to separate Aboriginal children from their parents and to house them in dormitories on the reserves at Lake Hindmarsh, Coranderrk, Ramahyuck, Lake Tyers and Lake Condah.

At first the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines aided all persons of Aboriginal descent, but in 1886 the Aborigines Protection Act was amended to require the removal of Aboriginal people of mixed descent from Aboriginal stations and reserves. Those who were not genetically ‘full-blood’ were told they were ‘legally white’ and must find homes and jobs away from the Aboriginal stations and reserves and merge into white society. The board refused assistance to those it expelled from the reserves.

Between 1886 and 1923 the number of Aboriginal reserves in Victoria declined from six to one. All Aboriginal people who wished to receive assistance from the board had to move to Lake Tyers, the only staffed institution after 1924. The number of people there fluctuated, with a maximum of about 290 in the 1930s.

There were many Aboriginal people living off the reserve, whether by force or choice. Those not living on the Lake Tyers reserve were denied any welfare assistance from the government and the board. Facing hostility from the non-Aboriginal community, these Aboriginal people moved into shanty towns on the outskirts of country towns or the sites of former reserves. Aboriginal communities grew in the Goulburn Valley, East Gippsland and along the Murray River. Many also moved to Melbourne.

Between 1887 and 1954, private welfare agencies and individuals were authorised to remove Indigenous children if they suspected the child was neglected. They could assume guardianship of them or send them to an institution.

The policy of excluding so-called ‘half-castes’ assumed that numbers of Aboriginal people on the reserves would decline so that reserves could be reduced and eventually closed down. The inadequacy and inhumanity of the policy and legislation led to the Aborigines Act 1910. In this Act, Victoria moved away from the extreme control over Aboriginal people established in the nineteenth century. The legal distinction between the rights of the white population of the state and those of Aboriginal people within Victoria’s borders was lessened, but not removed (National Archives of Australia 2006).
Assimilation

In 1955, the newly elected Premier appointed Charles McLean to review and recommend changes to the state’s Aboriginal affairs policy. Soon after his appointment, McLean reported back on the dire conditions in which many Aboriginal people lived:

On these two areas [at Mooroopna] live about 59 adults and 107 children, in most squalid conditions. Their humpies are mostly constructed of old timber, flattened kerosene tins, and Hessian...They are not weatherproof, have earthen floors, very primitive arrangements, and no laundry or bathing facilities except for the river...

The police had the most power to remove Aboriginal children. Until 1985, the Victorian police were empowered to forcibly remove Aboriginal children under the Child Welfare Act 1954.

During 1956 and 1957 more than 150 children were living in government-run children’s institutions. This is more than 10 per cent of Aboriginal children in Victoria at that time.

Self-determination and recognition of past injustices

The Victorian Aborigines Advancement League emerged in May 1957. Its members played a role in the formation of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement which pushed for rights for Aborigines across Australia and was behind the 1967 referendum. The league became a powerhouse of ideas and began to critique the assimilation policy. In 1959 it defined its role as: ‘to work towards the complete integration of people of Aboriginal descent with the Australian community with full recognition of the contribution they are able to make’. It defined ‘integration’ as the ability of a minority to retain its identity. Aboriginal self-reliance and self-respect were other key aims. The league sought practical help for Aboriginal people (emergency assistance, employment, legal advice) and spoke to countless public and club meetings (Broome 2005).

Following the 1967 referendum, the Commonwealth Government entered into the field of Aboriginal affairs and appointed a Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. The Act enabled the Minister to review existing laws and policies on Aboriginal people living in Victoria. Despite this change, the number of Aboriginal children forcibly removed continued to rise, from 220 in 1973 to 350 in 1976.

Following the federal election in 1972, the assimilation policy that had dominated Aboriginal affairs for 20 years was replaced by a policy of self-determination. The policy of self-determination shifted the focus to empowering Aboriginal people to decide on and achieve their own futures. This approach, based on the recognition that Aboriginal people should be actively involved in all decision making that affects their lives, gave support to the development of many Aboriginal organisations in Victoria.
Community control by Aboriginal people came about because too often mainstream services failed to meet community needs. Geographical, financial and cultural barriers made access to services difficult. Mainstream services were found to be unwelcoming and openly discriminatory. Aboriginal community controlled organisations were seen to better understand Aboriginal people’s needs and cultural beliefs and as such to provide a more welcoming, friendly, culturally appropriate service and setting.

Following the lead of the Aborigines Advancement League, the 1970s saw the emergence of a range of key Aboriginal community controlled organisations. In Victoria, an Aboriginal Legal Service, Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Aboriginal Health Service, Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and Aboriginal Housing Cooperative were formed by Aboriginal people with the assistance of professionals (lawyers, doctors and dentists), some of whom provided their services free. They all performed multiple functions, providing welfare and emergency assistance beyond their legal, health or housing briefs. These organisations were also social and information centres (Broome 2005). The efforts of Aboriginal-operated organisations resulted in a 40 per cent reduction in the number of Aboriginal children in homes as early as 1979.

In 1979 the Victorian Government adopted the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. Under the principle, an Aboriginal family must be the preferred placement for an Aboriginal child in need of alternative care. This is now included in the main child welfare and protection laws.

The reports of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1987 and the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families 1995 drove further policy and program change in Victoria. In 1997 a bipartisan initiative in the Victorian Parliament saw the passing of a motion of unreserved apology to Aboriginal people for past government policies of separating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their parents.

Aboriginal people have fought long and hard for their rights, and many important milestones mark modern Aboriginal history. A number of significant developments at a national and state level have helped to promote a wider understanding within the community of issues facing Aboriginal Australians.
### Key events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>The Victorian Aborigines Advancement League</td>
<td>The Victorian Aborigines Advancement League emerged in May 1957 and pushed for rights for Aboriginal people across Australia. It was behind the 1967 referendum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Constitutional amendment referendum</td>
<td>The Commonwealth Government acquired power to legislate for Aboriginal Australians and allowed for their inclusion in the census.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Lake Tyers and Framlingham reserves</td>
<td>Aboriginal trustees of the Lake Tyers and Framlingham reserves in Victoria were granted individual title (<em>Aboriginal Lands Act 1970</em>).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>The Aboriginal flag first flown</td>
<td>Designed by Harold Joseph Thomas, a Luritja man from Central Australia, the Aboriginal flag was first flown in Adelaide on National Aborigines Day, 12 July.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Self-determination introduced into government policy</td>
<td>The Department of Aboriginal Affairs was established, and the Whitlam Government introduced the policy of self-determination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Victorian Aboriginal Health</td>
<td>The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service was established in a shopfront <em>Service</em> in Gertrude Street, Fitzroy. It was set up by a group of Aboriginal volunteers, with a volunteer doctor, in response to the need for an appropriate and accessible health service for Aboriginal people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Racial Discrimination Act</td>
<td>On 11 June the <em>Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act</em> came into effect.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>VACCA established</td>
<td>The Victorian Aboriginal Child Placement Agency, later renamed the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, was established.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Aboriginal Child Placement Principle</td>
<td>The Victorian Social Welfare Department adopted policy guidelines on Aboriginal adoption and foster care. A decade later the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle was incorporated into the <em>Children and Young Persons Act 1989</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Aboriginal Development Commission established</td>
<td>The <em>Aboriginal Development Commission Act 1980</em> (Cwlth) came into force on 1 July 1980. This established the Aboriginal Development Commission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>SNAICC established</td>
<td>The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care was established. SNAICC represented the interests on a national level of Australia’s 100 or so Aboriginal community-controlled children’s services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aboriginal Housing Board established</td>
<td>The Aboriginal Housing Board established its office at 108 Smith Street, Collingwood.</td>
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### Key events (con't)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Ownership recognised</td>
<td>Victorian Premier John Cain announced legislation recognising the Aboriginal ownership of the Framlingham forest near Warrnambool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Uluru handed back</td>
<td>Uluru (formerly known as Ayers Rock) was handed back to the traditional owners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody</td>
<td>The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was established in 1987 in response to concerns expressed about the proportion and number of Aboriginal people dying in custody.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Bicentenary</td>
<td>A large march in Sydney on 26 January was organised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and joined by supporters from the wider community in a celebration of Aboriginal cultural survival.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act</td>
<td>The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission was established by the <em>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989</em> and began operations on 5 March 1990.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991</td>
<td>The Council for Reconciliation was established in 1992 by the Commonwealth Government to foster better understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Native title (Mabo)</td>
<td>In 1992, the High Court decision on Native title (Mabo) overturned the concept of ‘terra nullius’ and established that Native title can exist over particular kinds of land. This led to the establishment of the <em>Native Title Act 1993</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Redfern speech</td>
<td>At the launch of the International Year of Indigenous People in Redfern, Sydney, Prime Minister Paul Keating delivered a speech in which he acknowledged the past wrongs of Australian governments towards Aboriginal people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Torres Strait Islander flag</td>
<td>Bernard Namok of Thursday Island designed the Torres Strait Islander flag.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families</td>
<td>In 1995 the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families was established.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Court ruling on Wik</td>
<td>The Federal High Court ruling on Wik stated that Native title rights could co-exist with pastoral leases.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Key events (con't)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Bringing them home</td>
<td>The Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, <em>Bringing them home</em>, was released. In 1999, the Federal Government issued a statement of sincere regret over the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Victorian Parliament apology</td>
<td>A bipartisan initiative in the Victorian Parliament saw the passing of a motion of unreserved apology to Aboriginal people for past government policies of separating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>26 May, National Sorry Day</td>
<td>The first National Sorry Day was held on 26 May, one year after the tabling of the <em>Bringing Them Home</em> report which recommended that a National Sorry Day be declared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Australian Government: changes to the administration of Indigenous affairs</td>
<td>On 15 April the Australian Government announced its intention to abolish the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). New arrangements from 1 July included a new appointed advisory body, the National Indigenous Council. Programs formerly the responsibility of ATSIC and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS) were transferred to ‘mainstream’ agencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission</td>
<td>On 16 March Parliament passed the ATSIC Amendment Bill, repealing provisions of the <em>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 1989</em> (Commonwealth) and thereby abolishing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and its structures from 30 June 2005.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New representative arrangements</td>
<td>Working in partnership with the ATSIC Regional Councils and the former ATSIC State Commissioner for Victoria, the Victorian Government (Aboriginal Affairs Victoria) and the Australian Government (Office of Indigenous Policy Co-ordination) consulted with Aboriginal communities on new models for Indigenous representation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The first positive determination of Native title in Victoria</td>
<td>The first positive determination of Native title in Victoria was made by the Federal Court at a hearing near Dimboola in western Victoria on 13 December 2005. Under the <em>Native Title Act</em>, the Wotjobaluk, Jadwada, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagalk peoples are recognised as the Native title holders of 269 square kilometres in the Wimmera area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>New arrangements for Aboriginal community engagement and representation</td>
<td>Under its 2006-07 Budget the Victorian Government announced the allocation of funding for new arrangements for Aboriginal community engagement and representation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.2 Further reading


3. Language and terminology
3. Language and terminology

This section draws largely on a similar section contained in *Communicating positively: a guide to appropriate Aboriginal terminology* produced by NSW Health, however some modifications have been made to acknowledge views and circumstances within the Victorian Aboriginal community.

An awareness of cultural difference and the use of accurate and non-offensive language are essential components of showing respect and communicating with Aboriginal people, organisations and communities. Following European colonisation, Aboriginal people were forbidden from speaking traditional languages. As a result, knowledge of Aboriginal languages suffered. Europeans did not understand and were generally prejudiced against Aboriginal ways of life. English was used to describe and communicate with Aboriginal people, which led to the use of inappropriate and often discriminatory language.

Today, just as attitudes towards Aboriginal culture are changing, terms used to describe Aboriginal people are continually evolving. This makes sensitivity to appropriate forms of address and terminology particularly important.

3.1 Collective names used to describe Aboriginal people

**Aboriginal/Aborigine**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A broad definition, developed by the former Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs is generally accepted as a working definition for administrative purposes. This definition states that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not all Aboriginal people are dark skinned.

✗ It is offensive to question the quantum of Aboriginal blood or to expect an Aboriginal person to divide their Aboriginality into parts.

‘Being Aboriginal has nothing to do with the colour of your skin or the shape of your nose. It is a spiritual feeling, an identity you know in your heart. It is a unique feeling that may be difficult for non-Aboriginal people to understand’ (Burney 1994).

The policy referred to as ‘assimilation’ was designed to solve the ‘Aboriginal problem’ by ensuring that Aboriginal people would lose their identity and culture within the wider community (Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997).

✗ Terms such as ‘full-blood’, ‘half-caste’ and ‘quarter-caste’ were derived from these destructive government policies of the past and as such are highly offensive.
Aboriginal or Aborigine

Recommended usage and issues for consideration

Although it is grammatically correct, the term ‘Aborigines’ has negative connotations for some Aboriginal people. ‘Aboriginal person’ or ‘Aboriginal people’ can be used as an alternative.

The term ‘Aboriginal’ is not generally inclusive of Torres Strait Islander people, and reference to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should therefore be made where necessary.

Always capitalise the ‘A’ in ‘Aboriginal’ as you would other proper nouns and names such as ‘Australian’ or ‘Minister’. The word ‘aboriginal’ with a lower case ‘a’ refers to an aboriginal person from any part of the world and as such does not necessarily refer to the Aboriginal people of Victoria. It is offensive when literature for distribution within the Aboriginal community refers to Aboriginal people or communities with a lower case ‘a’.

Do not use ‘Aboriginal’ as a noun; it should only be used as an adjective.

✗ The government’s new strategy will support increased business with Aboriginals.
✓ The government’s new strategy will support increased business with Aboriginal people.

Never abbreviate the term ‘Aboriginal’ because this is offensive.

Remember, when preparing speech notes that refer to ‘our history’, ensure the use of the word ‘Australians’ includes Aboriginal people or peoples.

Consider the opening statement:

✗ ‘Most Australians continue to see Aboriginal people …’

This infers that Aboriginal people are not Australian, which is incorrect.

The correct terminology is:

✓ ‘Most non-Aboriginal Australians continue to see Aboriginal Australians …’
Aboriginal people or peoples

Description

‘Aboriginal people’ is a collective name for the original people of Australia and their descendants and does not emphasise the diversity of languages, communities, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs. By adding an ‘s’ to ‘people’, you are emphasising this diversity.

Recommended usage and issues for consideration

Both ‘Aboriginal people’ and ‘Aboriginal peoples’ are acceptable depending on the context. For example:

✓ ‘At the time of European colonisation, there were approximately 600 Aboriginal peoples.’ Note that in this instance ‘peoples’ is used to describe the groups of Aboriginal people, each with their own language, cultural practices and beliefs.

✓ ‘At the time of European colonisation, there were between 300,000 and one million Aboriginal people living in Australia.’ Note that in this instance ‘people’ refers to more than one person.

First People/First Australians

Description

‘First People’ and ‘First Australians’ are collective names for the original people of Australia and their descendants, and are used to emphasise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived on this continent prior to European colonisation.

Recommended usage

The Victorian Government acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Australians.

Indigenous people or peoples

Description

The Macquarie Dictionary defines ‘indigenous’ as ‘originating in and characterising a particular region or country’. Based on this definition, an indigenous person is a person originating in or characterising a particular region or country.

Recommended usage and issues for consideration

Because ‘indigenous’ is not specific, some Aboriginal people feel the term diminishes their Aboriginality and must be avoided. While the term ‘Indigenous’ will sometimes be found in government publications it is recommended that departmental staff give preference to the terms ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’.
Torres Strait Islander or Torres Strait Islander person

Description

A Torres Strait Islander or a Torres Strait Islander person is a person or descendant from the Torres Strait Islands, which are located to the north of mainland Australia.

In the 1996 and 2001 Censuses, people could be recorded as being of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002). The term ‘Torres Strait Islander’ refers to people of Torres Strait Islander origin, whether or not they are also of Aboriginal origin.

Recommended usage and issues for consideration

Always capitalise ‘Torres Strait Islander’. Never abbreviate the term ‘Torres Strait Islander’ because this is offensive.

Koori and other terms

Description

‘Koori’ and other terms are directly derived from Aboriginal languages and are the names often used by Aboriginal people in specific areas when referring to themselves. Note that many Aboriginal people from other areas of Australia reside within Victoria and still use their traditional names.

Some examples of these terms are:

• **Koori** or **Koorie**, which is a New South Wales term that is used by many Aboriginal people in Victoria and New South Wales
• **Palawa**, which is usually used by Aboriginal people in Tasmania
• **Murr**, which is usually used by Aboriginal people in north-west New South Wales and Queensland
• **Nunga**, which is usually used by Aboriginal people in South Australia
• **Yolngu**, which is usually used by Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory (north-east Arnhem Land)
• **Anangu**, which is usually used by Aboriginal people in Central Australia
• **Noongar**, which is usually used by Aboriginal people in south-west Western Australia.

Recommended usage

Always check with the local Aboriginal community about using this type of terminology. There are many Aboriginal language groups within the above mentioned areas and the use of such terms can be restrictive. Also, people may be living or working in one particular area, but be from another.
For example, a person from Queensland may be living and working in Bendigo and refer to themselves as a ‘Murri’. Often a diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will be in the audience and as such appropriate terms need to be used. Ask the group at the beginning of your presentation or listen to advice you receive in planning your communication.

3.2 Terms associated with Aboriginal communities and community organisations

Clan

The basic unit of Victorian Aboriginal society is the clan; a named, localised descent group whose members have an historical, religious and genealogical identity and a territory defined by ritual and economic responsibilities.

Clusters of adjacent clans who shared a common dialect or manner of speaking and mutual political and economic interest distinguished themselves by a ‘language’ name, usually with the suffix -wurrung. For example, the first people who occupied the Melbourne area prior to European colonisation were the Woi-wurrung language group, specifically the Wurundjeri people.

This is a list of the clans within the Wurundjeri area:

- **Wurundjeri-balluk and Wurundjeri-willam** (Yarra Valley Yarra River catchment area to Heidelberg)
- **Balluk-willam** (south of the Yarra Valley extending down to Dandenong, Cranbourne, and Koo-ween-rup Swamp)
- **Gunnung-willam-balluk** (east of the Great Dividing Ranges and north to Lancefield)
- **Kurung-jang-balluk** (Werribee River to Sunbury)
- **Marin-balluk (Boi-berrit)** (land west of the Maribyrnong River and Sunbury)
- **Kurnaje-berreing** (the land between the Maribyrnong and Yarra Rivers).

For more detailed information on the Wurundjeri people, see [www.yarrahealing.melb.catholic.edu.au/kulin/about.html](http://www.yarrahealing.melb.catholic.edu.au/kulin/about.html)

Recommended usage and issues for consideration

The term ‘clan’ has a specific meaning derived from non-Aboriginal societies and therefore may not necessarily be applicable to Aboriginal culture. Some Aboriginal people use the term and such usage should be respected.

If unsure, ask your regional Aboriginal Planning Officer or seek guidance from your local Aboriginal community. Guidance can also be obtained from the Koori Human Services Unit.
Community

There are many different perspectives on what is a ‘community’. Non-Aboriginal people often use ‘community’ to refer to a particular geographical locality. For example, the expression ‘Echuca Aboriginal community’ generally refers to all the Aboriginal people living in and around Echuca (including across the Victorian and New South Wales border) or a specific section of that community. It is important to understand, however, that a great many Aboriginal people were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands to live elsewhere. For instance, the traditional owners of Ballarat land are the Wathaurong people. Today the ‘Ballarat Aboriginal community’ comprises Aboriginal people from many areas of Victoria and Australia. Therefore, an Aboriginal person may belong to more than one community; for example, where they come from, where their family is, and where they live or work. Community is about interrelatedness and belonging and is central to Aboriginality.

Recommended usage and issues for consideration

It is generally acceptable to use the term ‘community’ to refer to Aboriginal people living within a particular geographical location while remaining mindful of the diversity of Aboriginal people within that ‘community’.

Country

Description

‘Country’ is a term used to describe a culturally defined area of land associated with a particular culturally distinct group of people or nation.

For example:

✓ Swan Hill is in Wemba Wemba country.

Recommended usage and issues for consideration

Use ‘country’ to refer to a particular culturally defined area of land, such as ‘Kerrup Jmara country’, ‘Dja Dja Wrung country’ or ‘Wathaurong country’. 
Elder

Description
An Elder is an identified and ‘respected’ male or female person within the community who is able to provide advice, offer support and share wisdom in a confidential way with other members of the community, particularly younger members (Forrester & Williams 2003). In some instances, Aboriginal people above a certain age will refer to themselves as Elders; however, it is important to understand that in traditional Aboriginal culture, age alone does not necessarily mean that one is a recognised Elder. It is also important to note that some communities will have very few recognised Elders.

Recommended usage and issues for consideration
The use of Elder (note the upper case “E”) is generally acceptable, but it is important to be aware of the differences in meaning outlined above.

Respected community representative

Description
Similar in definition to an Elder, a respected community representative is an identified and ‘respected’ male or female person within the community who is able to provide advice, offer support and share wisdom, and speak on behalf of the community at events and forums.

Recommended usage and issues for consideration
When negotiating with Aboriginal communities, ensure the recognised Elders or respected community representatives are involved. But while negotiation with these recognised and respected community people is important, it should not replace negotiation with Aboriginal community organisations. Your local Aboriginal organisation should be your first communication point for advice and direction, including the respected Elder contacts it suggests. Aboriginal organisations include local Aboriginal community controlled organisations or an Aboriginal peak body, such as the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation or the Victorian Aboriginal Community Service Association Limited.
**Sister/brother/cousin/uncle/aunty**

**Definition**
The use of the terms ‘sis’, ‘bruz’, ‘cuz’, ‘uncle’ and ‘aunty’ have wide and varied meanings for Aboriginal communities across Victoria. These terms are used as a greeting between Aboriginal people to acknowledge a person as a mark of respect.

**Recommended usage and issues for consideration**
In non-Aboriginal society, your uncle or aunt is usually your mother or father’s sibling. In Aboriginal communities, it is an accepted cultural custom that younger members of the community will refer to adults as ‘uncle’ or ‘aunty’ as a sign of respect. This does not mean people are related. A person’s connection with their family does not necessarily mean they are a blood relative. It means a ‘connection’ exists between people.

Non-Aboriginal people should not use these terms with Aboriginal people unless invited to do so. Do not call someone ‘aunty’, ‘uncle’, ‘cuz’, ‘sis’ or ‘bruz’ unless invited to do so.

**Mob**

**Description**
‘Mob’ is a term identifying a group of Aboriginal people associated with a particular place or country.

**Recommended usage and issues for consideration**
‘Mob’ is an extremely important term to Aboriginal people because it is used to identify who they are and where they are from. ‘Mob’ is generally used by Aboriginal people and between Aboriginal people. Therefore, it may not be appropriate for non-Aboriginal people to use this term unless this is known to be acceptable to Aboriginal people.

**Nation**

**Description**
‘Nation’ refers to a culturally distinct group of people associated with a particular culturally defined area of land or country. Each nation has boundaries that cannot be changed, and language is tied to that nation and its country.

**Recommended usage and issues for consideration**
‘Nation’ should be used to refer to a culturally distinct Aboriginal group and its associated country, noting that the boundaries of some Aboriginal nations cross over state borders. This has important implications for service delivery and provision, as well as negotiation processes.
### Traditional owner

**Description**

A ‘traditional owner’ is an Aboriginal person or group of Aboriginal people directly descended from the original Aboriginal inhabitants of a culturally defined area of land or country and who has or have a cultural association with this country which derives from the traditions, observances, customs, beliefs or history of the original Aboriginal inhabitants of the area.

**Recommended usage and issues for consideration**

Use ‘traditional owner’ to refer to an Aboriginal person or group of Aboriginal people as defined above. For example: *In December 2005, the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagalk peoples were recognised under the Native Title Act as the traditional owners of 269 square kilometres of the Wimmera area.*

### Tribe

**Description**

Like ‘nation’, a ‘tribe’ refers to a culturally distinct group of people associated with a particular culturally defined area of land or country.

**Recommended usage and issues for consideration**

‘Tribe’ has a specific meaning derived from non-Aboriginal societies and therefore may not necessarily be applicable to Aboriginal culture. Some Aboriginal people use the term and such usage should be respected. If unsure, ask the local community for guidance.

### Aboriginal community controlled organisations

In human services, Aboriginal community controlled organisations provide a wide range of health, wellbeing and advocacy services including child care, education, child protection, mental health, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, disability and aged care. Aboriginal community controlled health organisations are primary health care services initiated by local Aboriginal communities and aiming to deliver holistic and culturally appropriate care. Boards elected from the local community plan and manage the services.

**Definition**

‘Each Aboriginal Community needs its own community based, locally owned, culturally appropriate and adequately resourced, primary health care facility. That is our right’ (Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation 2002).
Aboriginal health

Definition
In 1990, the National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS) developed a widely accepted definition of health as perceived by Aboriginal peoples:

‘Health does not just mean the physical well-being of the individual but refers to the social, emotional, spiritual and cultural well-being of the whole community. This is a whole of life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life.

Recommended usage and issues for consideration
‘It is not merely a matter of the provision of doctors, hospitals, medicines. Health to Aboriginal peoples is a matter of determining all aspects of their life including control over their physical environment, of dignity, of community self-esteem, and of justice’ (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party 1989).

3.3 Other terms
Culture

Description
‘Culture’ is defined as the attitudes and behaviour that are characteristic of a particular social group (www.google.com.au 2006).

Recommended usage and issues for consideration
Culture does not remain stagnant; it continually evolves to survive. The important point to remember is that in Aboriginal culture a community is first and foremost about country, (extended) family ties and shared experience. Aboriginal people practice a culture that has strong extended family, social and religious commitments and beliefs.
Colonisation

Description
European colonisation occurred at the time of the landing of the First Fleet in 1788. Although there were between 300,000 and one million Aboriginal people living on the mainland at that time, the British Government asserted a right to sovereignty and ownership of the land. This was accompanied by a drastic decline in the Aboriginal population, and the traditional ways were destroyed as hunting grounds were taken over for grazing and agriculture, causing Aboriginal people to be treated as trespassers on their own land under European law.

Recommended usage and issues for consideration
When discussing the colonisation of Victoria, note that the terms ‘European settlement’ and ‘European arrival’ are highly contentious for Aboriginal people because they suggest a peaceful and benign process. Consider using ‘European colonisation’ as an alternative.

Pre and post contact

Description
‘Pre contact’ and ‘post contact’ refer to the period before and after European colonisation.

Recommended usage and issues for consideration
‘Pre contact’ and ‘post contact’ are the preferred terms for referring to the period before and after European colonisation. The terms ‘pre history’ and ‘post history’ are not acceptable because they imply that Australian history did not begin until the landing of the First Fleet and subsequent European colonisation, and that Aboriginal culture has no history. In fact, Aboriginal people have one of the oldest surviving cultures.

Community control

‘The solution to address the ill health of Aboriginal people can only be achieved by local Aboriginal people controlling the process of health care delivery. Local Aboriginal community control in health is essential to the definition of Aboriginal holistic health and allows Aboriginal communities to determine their own affairs, protocols and procedures’ (National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation 2006).
Women’s business

Women’s business pertains to female-specific health and wellbeing and religious matters that traditionally men must not observe. For example, matters relating to the female anatomy, religious ceremony and the maintenance of women’s sites of significance are considered women’s business and only women should be privy to these matters. In Victoria today it is respected that many women still have strong beliefs surrounding women’s business; however, for others this is respected but they may not practice it.

Men’s business

Similarly, men’s business pertains to male-specific health and wellbeing and religious matters that traditionally women must not observe. For example, matters relating to the male anatomy, religious ceremony and the maintenance of men’s sites of significance are considered men’s business and only men should be privy to these matters. In Victoria today it is respected that many men still have strong beliefs surrounding men’s business; however, for others this is respected but they may not practice it.
4. Building blocks for good communication
4. Building blocks for good communication

An awareness of Victoria’s Aboriginal communities, acknowledgement of the impact of past policy and practice, and use of appropriate language are important first steps in good communication with Victorian Aboriginal communities.

The remaining sections of the guide give practical advice about how departmental staff can work effectively with Aboriginal communities and organisations. We begin with the building blocks of good communication:

• be guided by the principles outlined below
• work through the established departmental structures
• learn about Aboriginal organisations and their concerns.

4.1 Seven guiding principles

1. Demonstrate respect
Demonstrate respect for:
• the right of Aboriginal people to identify as being Aboriginal
• the fact that Aboriginal culture is living and evolving
• the right of Aboriginal people to own, define and control their culture.

Showing an awareness of, sensitivity to and respect for Aboriginal culture is an essential step to building trust. Respecting the knowledge and values of Aboriginal people is integral to good working relationships.

2. Choose the right words
Choosing the right words and forms of address is important in any relationship, but particularly important to Aboriginal people, all of whom have experienced offensive communication. Ask Aboriginal people how they wish to be acknowledged and addressed. Call an Aboriginal person ‘aunty’ or ‘uncle’ only when invited to do so. Check on the acceptability of terms. Ensure consistency and accuracy in all documentation.

3. Take responsibility for learning
Many non-Aboriginal Victorians have had little contact with Aboriginal people. Take responsibility for increasing your understanding of Aboriginal culture and issues. Recognising Victoria’s rich and continuing Aboriginal cultural heritage can be inspiring; learning the history and legacy of colonisation and dispossession in Victoria can be confronting. Remember each individual has their own story and each community its own history. Ask for guidance if you are unsure.

4. Be self-aware
Understand and challenge your own cultural assumptions and prejudices.

5. Demonstrate honesty and integrity
Carry out departmental business with Aboriginal people in an open and honest manner. Honour your undertakings. Make commitments only on matters where you know you can deliver.

6. Provide adequate information
Make sure all relevant information for Aboriginal communities and organisations is accurate, factual and clearly presented.

7. Follow up and provide feedback
Always follow up after Aboriginal community involvement. Provide timely feedback about the outcomes and next steps.

TIP: Seek out opportunities to engage with the community in an informal manner. Taking part in community activities when possible is one way of getting involved, and there are many opportunities to become involved: NAIDOC Week activities, Reconciliation Week and local community events. Attending events such as these would be a good way to show your support for the community.

(Also see Section 1.5, ‘Community events – key dates’).
4.2 Work through established departmental structures

The department has established structures and processes to facilitate working partnerships with Aboriginal organisations and communities. These operate at a range of levels: whole-of-department, programs and regions. At least one of these arrangements is likely to be relevant to your purpose. Build on existing arrangements wherever possible rather than initiating new ones.

Partnership protocol between the department and signatories to the Aboriginal Services Plan

The Victorian Indigenous Peak Agencies and Department of Human Services Protocol builds on the two existing protocols between (a) the department and the health, housing and community services sectors, and (b) the Municipal Association of Victoria. The protocol outlines principles and processes to govern ‘ways of doing business’ between the department and the signatories to the Aboriginal Services Plan.
## Whole of department: Aboriginal Human Services Forum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Membership</th>
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</table>
| The principal vehicle of communication between the department and Aboriginal peak and regional bodies. The forum performs a key role in providing the necessary advice to the department to contribute to the aim of the *Aboriginal Services Plan*: ‘to achieve a demonstrable improvement in the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people in Victoria in line with that of the general population’. It is also the primary accountability mechanism for the department’s commitments to the Aboriginal people of Victoria. There are three forums a year, each themed around one of the key priority action areas of the Aboriginal Services Plan: children and families, young people, and lengthening life. | The forum is chaired by the Secretary, Department of Human Services and includes:  
- the Chairperson or Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation  
- the Chairperson or Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd  
- the Chairperson or Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc  
- the Chairperson or Chief Executive Officer of the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria  
- representatives from regional Aboriginal advisory committees – either the chairperson or the regional Aboriginal advisory committee’s nominee  
- former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission representatives (to be replaced following the development of a new representative structure in Victoria)  
- the Executive Director, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria  
- the Under Secretary, Portfolio Services and Strategic Projects, Department of Human Services  
- Executive Directors or senior delegates of all Department of Human Services divisions  
- a rural and metropolitan regional director |

### When to use the forum

To report on major departmental initiatives
**Whole-of-department: Koori Human Services Unit**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key roles</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stakeholder relationships</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides policy and administrative support for the Secretary’s Aboriginal Human Services Forum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy leadership</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides leadership across the department for development and promotion of culturally responsive services in line with the state’s whole-of-government Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework. This is taken forward by implementing the key commitments in the <em>Aboriginal Services Plan</em>, including supporting a senior officers’ policy group and promoting initiatives by departmental divisions to advance the priority action areas in the plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support for regional Aboriginal Planning Officers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A meeting is convened three times a year, prior to each Aboriginal Human Services Forum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participation in national forums and initiatives</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This includes the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Working Group and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Officials Network (formerly the Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data coordination and improvement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This includes the Key Indicators Report and the <em>Koori Health Counts</em> publications and coordination of departmental input to whole-of-government reporting on Aboriginal affairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When to work with the Unit</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When preparing information or presentations for the Aboriginal Human Services Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To consult with the regional Aboriginal Planning Officers as a group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To seek advice on the range of Aboriginal initiatives and learnings across the department or state government</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Departmental programs

A number of departmental programs involve specific Aboriginal initiatives and employ Aboriginal staff to advise on community needs and issues, to promote access to services and to promote effective liaison with Aboriginal organisations. Many have established consultative structures or reference groups involving representatives from Aboriginal organisations. Examples of departmental programs involving specific Aboriginal initiatives and employing Aboriginal advisors are early childhood services, child protection, juvenile justice, housing, home and community care, drug and alcohol policy, and family violence.

When to seek assistance from program staff:

- To learn from the experience of other programs
- To check on statewide program directions and arrangements with peak bodies as part of planning initiatives at the regional level

Regions

Speaking with the relevant Aboriginal program staff or Planning Officer can provide a wealth of expertise and knowledge about networks and channels for linking with Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal community controlled organisations. The following table indicates the roles and responsibilities of these staff.

| Aboriginal Planning Officers | • Provide strong links to the Aboriginal community  
|                            | • Lead departmental regions in developing their Aboriginal services planning frameworks  
|                            | • Establish and support regional Aboriginal advisory committees  
|                            | • Develop and implement regional Aboriginal services plans |

When to contact regional Aboriginal Planning Officers

- To seek advice on Aboriginal issues at a regional level
- To seek guidance on contacting local Aboriginal organisations
- To request involvement of the regional Aboriginal advisory group in an initiative
- To seek advice, guidance and assistance when developing or implementing programs at a regional level
### Aboriginal Planning Officer contact details:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Contact Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barwon-South West Region</td>
<td>Tel: 5226 4712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gippsland Region</td>
<td>Tel: 5177 2503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grampians Region</td>
<td>Tel: 5333 6043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Metropolitan Region</td>
<td>Tel: 9843 6676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loddon Mallee Region</td>
<td>Tel: 5434 5534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North and West Metropolitan Region</td>
<td>Tel: 94122769</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hume Region</td>
<td>Tel: 5832 1503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Metropolitan Region</td>
<td>Tel: 8710 2832</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Regional Aboriginal advisory groups

Each regional Aboriginal advisory group has evolved differently according to the needs and preferences of each Aboriginal community and region. They:

- are coordinated by regional Aboriginal Planning Officers
- are established in each departmental region to ensure regional Aboriginal services plans are developed and implemented in collaboration and partnership with local Aboriginal organisations and communities
- provide the opportunity for Aboriginal organisations to raise local and regional issues directly with regional staff. Two community representatives from each regional Aboriginal advisory group are invited to attend Aboriginal Human Services Forums

### Aboriginal program staff

Aboriginal program staff are located in each departmental region to advise on statewide, local and regional community needs and issues, to promote access to services and to promote effective liaison with Aboriginal organisations. Aboriginal staff are employed in a variety of program areas, including:

- early childhood
- family violence
- health and aged care
- child protection
- juvenile justice.

### When to contact Aboriginal program staff

To seek advice on Aboriginal program issues at a regional and local level.
4.3 Understand the diversity of Aboriginal organisations and communities

✓ The 'political' environment is important.

There is always a 'political' dimension to any organisation or group in any community, from large private sector companies to local tennis clubs. Aboriginal community controlled organisations are no exception, with family allegiances a significant influence. Departmental officers can be more effective communicators if they are aware that local 'politics' exist and endeavour to learn more about these.

✓ Respect the importance of Elders.

Recognised Elders are highly respected people within Aboriginal communities. An Elder is an identified and 'respected' male or female person within the community who is able to provide advice, offer support and share wisdom in a confidential way with other members of the community, particularly younger members (Forrester & Williams 2003).

✓ Aboriginal organisations are diverse and have a range of relationships with the department.

Numerous Aboriginal organisations exist in Victoria. Those relevant to the department’s responsibilities are identified here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Relationship with the department</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Signatories to the *Aboriginal Services Plan* | Primary relationship with central office  
Funded by the department to provide advice on policy and program development and to undertake particular projects |
| Specialist service providers              | Relationships with central office and regions  
Funded by the department to provide particular services, including drug and alcohol, home and community care, early childhood, mental health, child protection, juvenile justice, disability, and family violence programs |
| Other local service providers (Aboriginal community controlled organisations) | Primary relationship with regions  
Funded by the department to provide a wide range of programs and services |
The many demands placed on Aboriginal community controlled organisations need to be taken into account.

Substantial demands and responsibilities can be placed on Aboriginal community controlled organisations to represent and deliver services to some of the most disadvantaged clients and communities in the state. Often Aboriginal community controlled organisations are faced with balancing two sets of accountabilities: community and government. Family and community are important in Aboriginal life. Aboriginal people are often expected to help their family and community and place them before all others. This can lead to pressures on those who work in or represent Aboriginal communities, and at times perceived conflicts of interest may arise. People who represent or work for Aboriginal community controlled organisations often walk the fine line between meeting the expectations of their community and the legal and statutory requirements that come with accepting government grants.

At times the organisational capacity of the Aboriginal community controlled organisation may not match that of mainstream organisations. In maintaining the important principle of community control, some Aboriginal community controlled organisations find themselves drawing on limited administrative and management resources.

Governments have added pressure to this vulnerable organisational environment by:

- having multiple funding arrangements with separate accountability requirements
- making numerous and overlapping requests for involvement in consultations and projects.

Sensitivity to the impact death and dying have on Aboriginal communities and organisations and Aboriginal staff within the department is of critical importance.

Reflecting their disadvantage, Aboriginal communities experience high death rates, including suicides. This is a heavy load for communities to bear. It is expected that all kin, including extended family, will make considerable efforts to attend the rites associated with death, mourning, funerals and burial. The notion of ‘kin’ within the Aboriginal community is broad and will generally mean the involvement of large numbers of people. These responsibilities can mean that staff from the department, Aboriginal organisations or Aboriginal community representatives may be unavailable at short notice.