



NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Regional Alliances

A Step Closer:

A Report with Recommendations from NCARA to
the New South Wales Government following Stage
One of the OCHRE Evaluation

2018

NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Regional Alliances



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Acknowledgements

The NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Regional Alliances (NCARA) respectfully acknowledges Traditional Owners and Elders across New South Wales (NSW).

We pay tribute to Elders past, present, and emerging as our guardians of Country, culture, language, and truth.

We give thanks to the communities that gave their time and insights into the first stage of the OCHRE evaluation. We equally recognise the Aboriginal communities outside of the OCHRE evaluation footprint and their ongoing quest for long overdue recognition and justice.

An Open Letter to the Hon. Minister

The Honourable Sarah Mitchell MLC

Minister for Aboriginal Affairs

Parliament House

SYDNEY NSW 2000



Dear Minister

The NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Regional Alliances (NCARA) is pleased to provide the following report and recommendations to complement, reinforce and improve the first phase of the OCHRE evaluation. At this stage in the OCHRE journey, all parties have an opportunity to stop and reflect upon both progress made, and progress that has stalled. NCARA notes that the evaluation finds both areas of strength, along with areas for further development and improvement.

As OCHRE enters its next phase, NCARA recommends to government an unwavering continuation along a path that empowers communities at local and regional levels, by giving them more say about policy formulation across government services, more involvement in program design across government, and by providing communities with additional resources for desperately needed locally-delivered services. NCARA believes that the model of local decision-making is broadly heading in the right direction, but it is a work in progress and is far from complete. Besides, there are many parts of Aboriginal NSW that remain without such models. In the interests of equity, expanding OCHRE's footprint is pressing.

With regard to the next stage of the evaluation, NCARA implores your Government to afford every opportunity for communities across NSW to be positioned 'front and centre' in its co-design. NCARA remains concerned that too many government sponsored or delivered programs are being designed and delivered unilaterally, when instead they should be co-designed and co-produced with community, including through renewed procurement and tendering processes.

Finally Minister, and most importantly with regard to Aboriginal affairs more broadly (that is, beyond the OCHRE initiative and its evaluation), NCARA's resolute position is that Aboriginal affairs can no longer sit as a sub-branch within the Department of Education. As the First Nations of NSW, we strongly believe that a dedicated department, reporting jointly to a dedicated Minister and the Premier, better reflects both the importance of the portfolio and the respect that should be accorded us as First Nations people, along with the holistic, and by extension whole-of-government, nature of our people's unresolved challenges and unmet aspirations.

We look forward to working with your Government in shifting results a step closer to greater wellbeing among our people.

Yours sincerely

Des Jones

Interim Chairperson

15 August 2018

About this Report

This Report has been developed by the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Regional Alliances (NCARA) in response to the recent independent evaluation of the NSW Government's Plan for Aboriginal affairs called 'OCHRE'.

OCHRE – meaning *Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment* – has been going for approximately five years. The OCHRE Plan was developed and adopted by the NSW Government following the findings of the NSW Ministerial Taskforce on Aboriginal Affairs.

Over the course of 2017-2018, members of NCARA and other key stakeholders have been interviewed as part of Stage One of an independent evaluation of OCHRE conducted by the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of New South Wales.

This Report documents NCARA's response to SPRC's Stage 1 Evaluation as well as providing the NSW Government with recommendations to consolidate OCHRE and improve outcomes more widely for Aboriginal communities throughout NSW in 2018 and beyond.

About NCARA

NCARA is comprised of nominated representatives from each of the NSW Aboriginal Regional Alliances established to have an increased say in government service delivery, exchange ideas and consider common issues, as well as providing leadership and advocacy where and when necessary.

The primary focus of NCARA is to:

- Advocate on issues that relate to the application of policy, program delivery and funding for Aboriginal peoples in regard to basic and essential services.
- Promote discussion and consider common issues.
- Identify risks and opportunities.
- Strategically plan for the future needs of Aboriginal communities.
- Coordinate and collaborate on priorities across the regions.
- Support the aspirations and achievements of regions, including providing mutual support for participating and emerging regional alliances.

NCARA meets on a bi-monthly basis with peak bodies and government stakeholders in an effort to build and strengthen the relationships needed to deliver tangible outcomes for Aboriginal people across NSW.

This report from NCARA reflects our deep interest in OCHRE, especially with regard to its efficacy, implementation and results.

For further information about NCARA, go to:

<https://www.aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/working-differently/local-decision-making/ncara>

What the OCHRE stage 1 evaluation found

The first stage of the independent evaluation of OCHRE provides many observations and findings across a range of OCHRE initiatives including Opportunity Hubs, Language & Culture Nests, and Local Decision Making. There are too many evaluation findings to repeat or analyse in great depth here. However, NCARA notes and broadly supports the following overarching conclusions made by the evaluators in their Synthesis Report:

Key strengths

- There is broad support for OCHRE programs within Aboriginal communities, as Aboriginal Affairs NSW works with and listens to Aboriginal communities.
- OCHRE program staff are a key and critical part of the successful implementation.
- OCHRE is addressing important outcomes for Aboriginal communities.

Challenges and limitations

- OCHRE programs need better data to be collected, including more comprehensive data that focusses on community priorities – such as wellbeing, volunteer participation, and young Aboriginal people's self-esteem.
- OCHRE programs need increased resources, including staffing, and more support for capacity building to properly fulfil the aims and objectives.

The evaluators also found that OCHRE “contributes to the wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples, but does not directly address wellbeing as a key aim or objective”. As such, communities recommended to the evaluators that wellbeing “should be integrated into the aims of OCHRE programs”.

Other *key findings* of stage one of the evaluation include:

- All OCHRE programs require more support and resources to maintain engagement with the diverse views and needs of Aboriginal communities in each area.
- Capacity building for Aboriginal communities to take control of services in their area should be built into all aspects of OCHRE programs.
- Currently there are overly complex governance arrangements, especially for Aboriginal Language and Culture Nests.
- There need to be clearer lines of responsibility between the responsible government department, community governance structures and the OCHRE programs, including accountability, and the role of Aboriginal Affairs NSW.
- Communities should have more input into the design and management of OCHRE programs.
- Governance structures and lines of accountability, including mechanisms for ensuring community ownership, should be clearly set out in program guidelines and policies.
- Data should be provided to Aboriginal communities for use.
- Government procuring processes could further develop capacity with Aboriginal organisations to ensure Aboriginal communities and organisations participate in tenders.

NCARA's Response to the Evaluation

A Step Closer

NCARA believes that OCHRE is showing promising signs and that communities involved in the evaluation are largely supportive of the initiatives contained within OCHRE. In other words, OCHRE represents a step in the right direction and a step closer to placing communities at the heart of their own affairs. That said, the journey ahead is largely uncharted and remains a long one. NCARA is of the view that stronger and longer term investment from government is required to ensure that OCHRE goes from strength to strength, rather than it ending up being just another 'pilot' that disappoints our people. Furthermore, Aboriginal affairs policy needs reinvigoration to better meet the myriad of structural challenges that confront our communities, that is the challenges that are long term and multifaceted in nature.

NCARA shares many of the observations and conclusions made by community and SPRC working in partnership with community. We are particularly concerned by the low level of resources for initiatives that are realistically required to advance Aboriginal community empowerment and wellbeing across NSW.

Holistic wellbeing

NCARA notes that communities consulted as part of the evaluation highlighted 'wellbeing' as a key future focus. We agree. Government needs to urgently consider an expansion of OCHRE given that many parts of Aboriginal NSW are currently one out mind, out of sight. OCHRE is simply not at scale.

NCARA is of the firm view that 'wellbeing' represents much more than conventional Western measures of health or wealth. *Think cultural not clinical.* Equally, we feel that an effective pursuit of wellbeing cannot rest with any single bureaucratic agency, rather it truly reflects a 'whole of government' commitment and 'whole of community' endeavour. And yet existing government programs do not reflect this reality. Instead, agencies are too often working in silos and public sector employees are too often not sufficiently culturally competent nor strategically and operationally geared for co-production with our communities.

We urge government to adopt a holistic, Aboriginal notion of wellbeing to include not just health or wealth, but identity, spirituality, kin, race relations, and connection to Country. To that end, this document cites three models (see *Appendix*) that could potentially guide and provide a conceptual starting point in framing Aboriginal community wellbeing policy, programs and services in NSW.

Co-weaving, co-designing, co-producing

The OCHRE evaluation highlights the importance of government co-designing and co-producing services, policy and evaluation **with** communities. With regard to co-design, NCARA believes that there has to be a stronger embrace of interweaving evaluation, research, policy, programming and service delivery. At this point in time, we believe that these threads are disjointed, frayed, too loose, and too often culturally biased.



Picture of a woven basket from Bundjalung Country
Source: National Museum of Australia

Drawing upon inspiration offered by Aboriginal cultural practices of weaving, it is through the weaving that different threads are brought together to provide strength, enough strength to carry things forward by holding them together.

The First Nations of NSW have been weaving for tens of thousands of years. This provides a powerful metaphor for how government and community can weave Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing together with Western knowledge threads to ensure that policies, programs, and services are co-owned and co-produced by communities and that such threads possess both cultural integrity and public confidence. The following diagram illustrates NCARA's view that co-design and co-production need to be seen as a process toward community wellbeing and empowerment, underpinned by data (both statistical and narrative) that can be truth-tested by communities through data sovereignty. That is, qualitative and quantitative data are co-produced, monitored and owned by community, and are truth-tested against one another.



Languages: respecting cultural authority

NCARA laments the fact that colonisation has caused serious harm and untold damage to the preservation and maintenance of First Nations languages in NSW. In many ways, communities are now left with the post-colonial challenge of trying to unscramble an egg. NCARA is not surprised that the evaluation found significant contestability with regard to Aboriginal languages, including where they should be taught (schools or community settings), who should teach them, and who should learn them. But NCARA's position is clear and unambiguous. Proper cultural authority for the teaching and learning of Aboriginal languages rests with Traditional Owners and Elders at a local level. It is simply not appropriate for a school principal to be making decisions unilaterally about the teaching of languages in schools.

Our position is that languages are central to Aboriginal identity and culture and are therefore not something requiring policy and program action in schools alone. Government needs to urgently consider a long-term investment strategy that results in languages revitalisation and preservation not only in school settings but community settings. We need a strategy that simultaneously builds capability in schools and in community settings, including through locally-driven and owned initiatives such as digitisation, collection, oral histories, community events, and teacher/tutor capability (not only in mainstream curriculum terms, but in cultural terms).

Elevating Aboriginal Affairs in NSW: our business is of state, national and world significance

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. NSW is home to more First Nations people than any other jurisdiction in Australia.

Against this backdrop, NCARA is concerned that Aboriginal affairs in NSW are not receiving the political and policy attention they clearly warrant given our fast growing population, our disproportionately high social needs, and our special status as First Nations people of NSW. As such, NCARA urges government to establish a Department for Aboriginal strategic policy, accountability and oversight headed by a Secretary with direct accountability to both the Premier and a Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. The Department would not only be responsible for the strategic oversight of the next stages of OCHRE, but would also be charged with a whole-of-government remit that holds all government agencies to account for progress in Aboriginal affairs more broadly. Such progress would be measured through an accountability framework underpinned by a holistic, co-designed and balanced scorecard, fashioned along the lines of the following diagram:

Balanced accountability scorecard in Aboriginal affairs in NSW



Accountability toward holistic progress would be simultaneously reported to communities at a local level (through locally devised community wellbeing indexes) and to the Parliament at a State level. Such an accountability approach would be fortified and protected in legislation, not just in policy. In addition, the Department and government more broadly would be given a secure license to act innovatively and creatively in the Aboriginal affairs space, as opposed to being overly risk-averse. The new Department would also be responsible for commissioning an audit of government-sponsored programs and services that could potentially move to greater community control. The new Department would be charged with the coordination of transition strategies to move appropriate public services to community control and local or outreach delivery. Such transitions would be supported by robust, fair, and tailored procurement policies. The transitions would also ensure that services are equitably applied throughout the state, and not just in select patches chosen unilaterally by government.

In conclusion, NCARA believes that OCHRE has been at the cutting edge of some promising developments in Aboriginal affairs in recent years. These have been recognised nationally, and justifiably so. But in 2018 and beyond, it is time to go a step (or better still, leap) further by having government departments 'let go' and by 'giving us [the community] a greater go'.

NCARA's recommendations to the NSW Government regarding both OCHRE and Aboriginal affairs more broadly are outlined on the following page.

NCARA's Recommendations to the NSW Government

In response to the first stage of the OCHRE Evaluation and NCARA's view on the current state of Aboriginal affairs policy more broadly, NCARA presents the following recommendations for the NSW Government's earliest attention and closest consideration.

NCARA recommends that the NSW Government:

1. Establishes a Department for Aboriginal strategic policy, accountability and oversight headed by a Secretary with direct accountability to both the Premier and a Minister for Aboriginal Affairs with a whole-of-government coordination and accountability remit.
2. Works with community in developing legislation, a state-wide overarching agreement with First Nations, and a 10-year investment strategy to fortify local decision making models which includes preferencing of Aboriginal community controlled organisations in service delivery and adopts an affirmative action agenda to government procurement which bolsters Aboriginal community enterprise in key sectors such as health, community services, employment, economic development, and cultural affirmation.
3. Commits to a 10-year investment strategy in Aboriginal languages that simultaneously builds capability in schools and in community settings, including public investment in strategies such as digitisation, collection, recording of oral histories, community events, and teacher/tutor capability (as measured by educational and cultural indicators).
4. Explicitly recognises and reinforces in policy that true authority for the teaching of Aboriginal languages sits with Elders and Traditional Owners.
5. Commissions an independent audit of programs and service delivery to ascertain which public services are appropriate to transfer (or build community capacity to transfer) to community control and direct local delivery.
6. In shaping 'wellbeing' policy, government embraces a wider and more holistic definition of Aboriginal wellbeing to include identity, spirituality, kin, race relations, healing, and connection to Country.
7. Adopts a 'co-design' approach to research and evaluation practice which weaves Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing, and being together with culturally-appropriate Western research and evaluation practices.

Contact Information

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<https://www.aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/working-differently/local-decision-making/ncara>

Appendix: Wellbeing Frameworks

NCARA cites the following three models of community wellbeing that are potentially instructive in shaping a wellbeing framework specifically tailored for Aboriginal contexts in NSW. The three models consider wellbeing at three levels:

- individual,
- community, and
- State.

Measures of wellbeing at an individual level

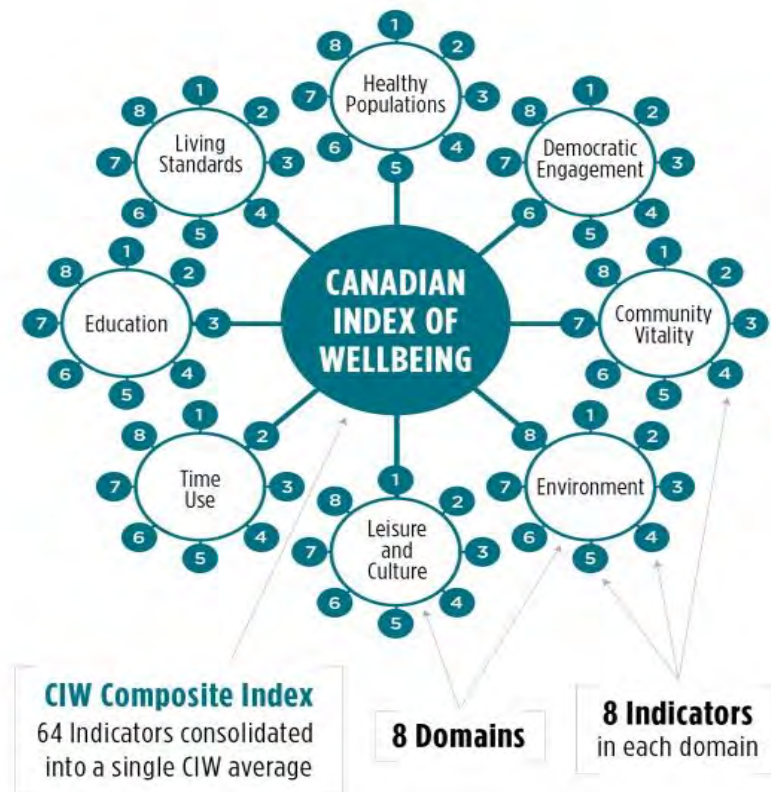
This model (right) features in the *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023*. The model is useful in considering wellbeing at an individual (or 'client') level and highlights the importance of connections between an Aboriginal person to Country, culture, kin, mind, body, and spirit.



Source: <https://pmc.gov.au/resource-centre/indigenous-affairs/national-strategic-framework-mental-health-social-emotional-wellbeing-2017-23>

Measures of wellbeing at a community level

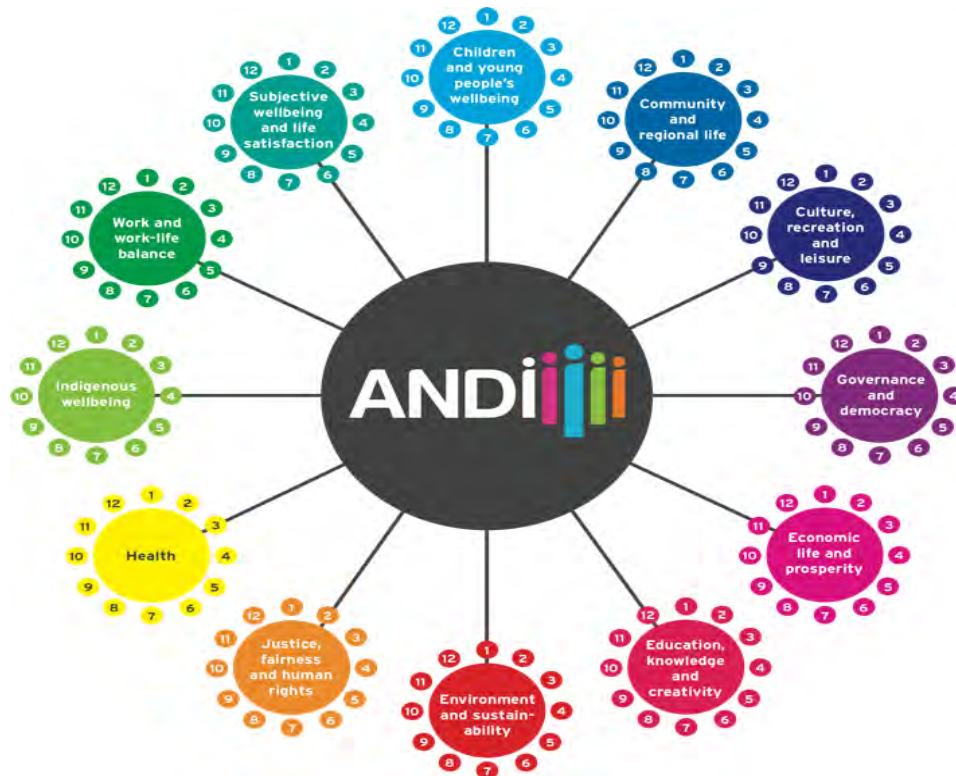
The next model presented here is the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. This framework rejects the idea that wellbeing can only be measured in conventional economic terms (such as Gross Domestic Product or GDP). The model is potentially instructive in thinking about and measuring wellbeing at local and regional levels.



Source: <https://uwaterloo.ca/canadian-index-wellbeing/>

Measures of wellbeing at a state/national level

The final model cited here is the Australian National Development Index (ANDI).



Source: <http://www.andi.org.au>

As with the Canadian model, the ANDI framework challenges the notion that economic measures such as GDP are adequate in measuring the indicators of quality lives and sustainable wellbeing among Australian people and communities. Instead the developers of ANDI identify a suite of social, health, economic, and environmental factors to work toward and measure a more holistic and complete picture of national wellbeing.