



Latrobe Health
Advocate

Engagement Inspiration from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Latrobe





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The Latrobe Health Advocate respectfully acknowledges Aboriginal people as the Original Custodians of the land we walk on today – the land of the Braiakaulung people of the Gunaikurnai nation and passes on respect to their Elders past and present, future and emerging.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned photographs in this report may contain images of deceased persons which may cause sadness or distress.



The Latrobe Health Advocate thanks all the people who shared their time, experience, wisdom and ideas with us. It is their lived experience that we share in this document so that we might all learn to better connect, communicate with and support one another.

Letter from the Advocate

In sharing this report, I want to respectfully acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Original Custodians of the land we walk on today – the land of the Braiakaulung people of the Gunaikurnai nation. I pass on my respect to their Elders past and present, future and emerging.

This report, [Engagement Inspiration](#), captures the voices and aspirations of people in Latrobe, highlighting what enables good health and wellbeing. It also discusses ways to engage with communities who may not usually have their voices heard.

It delivers on my 2019-20 Statement of Intent and commitment to the Victorian Minister for Health which was to listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Latrobe and gain an understanding of what is important to them; to also learn about ways of ensuring this engagement is inclusive, safe and meaningful, from their perspective.

There are approximately 1200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People who live in Latrobe and of these, almost 60 per cent are under the age of 25.^[1] As the Latrobe Health Advocate, I have a responsibility to listen to and support them. I am aware of how important it is for everyone in the community to have their own voice. Our Aboriginal community members must determine their own ways of achieving their health and wellbeing goals, and how they want to access and receive services.

During this engagement process, I have learnt much more about the importance of connection to the land, community spirit, health and healing. I can't help but contrast what Aboriginal people have told me is important to them with the medicalised model of health that dominates how many health services are currently designed and delivered. How much further must our health system go to be more in tune with the holistic approach of Aboriginal communities?

I have been told stories of the efforts many services are making to demonstrate inclusiveness, through cultural awareness training and education. This is making a difference. But more is needed. There is a desire from Aboriginal people in Latrobe for cultural awareness and education to be embedded into every aspect of service design and delivery.

There is also an immediate need to assess how this work is currently being resourced with a view to shifting the weight of cultural responsibility from select individuals to a whole-of-organisation approach.

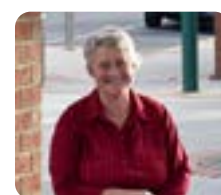
I want to thank all of those who have shared their stories with me and contributed to this work. You have trusted me with your messages, and I will honour this trust. As the Latrobe Health Advocate, I will walk alongside you and continue to learn from you about your culture and experiences.

I will advocate for ongoing system change to ensure the ways of your people are embraced by governments and service to help create the conditions that enable you to achieve your own health and wellbeing goals.

Listening is one thing; taking action is another. Aboriginal people have expressed a view that engagement without genuine and visible action can lead to mistrust and poor outcomes.

I will continue to work alongside our local Aboriginal community, advocating to the Victorian Government and other services operating within the Latrobe Health Innovation Zone for direct action and system change.

This will require a commitment from us all to continue to build and strengthen local relationships and do business in a way that embraces Aboriginal culture.



[Redacted]
Latrobe Health Advocate

^[1] Source: 2016 ABS Census Data. Compiled and presented by DHHS Population Health and Planning Unit.

Themes

Considerations for good engagement

Be there, be yourself and show that you care

We heard that it takes time for things to change and that the mob can be wary of other's intentions. People told us that they want to be able to look us in the eye and read our faces. Our actions had to match our words. We said that our intentions were to ask about what matters and why, and we had to demonstrate that this is what we would do.

Show leadership and facilitate a journey towards self-determination

The people we spoke with talked about the importance of leadership and facilitation. This helped us to clarify our role in helping Aboriginal communities in Latrobe. We were encouraged to have the know-how and judgement to facilitate conversations to bring people out and to step back at the right time to empower others. This requires a degree of skill and ability to understand the needs and readiness of communities.



Put on a feed and acknowledge the contributions of others

We heard that Aboriginal people in Latrobe are often called on to provide feedback and share their views with governments and services. When we asked how we could make engagement activities more meaningful many people suggested that the contribution of communities could be recognised by putting on a feed and providing informal opportunities for people to make chat. Having a cuppa and enjoying some supper together can be more relaxed than a classroom style meeting.

“You need all good people to work together in Latrobe Valley and the place will boom.”

Walk alongside people in their homes, streets and neighbourhoods

Reaching out to people in places where they spend their time, demonstrates a greater degree of care and interest. With the right approach it can be a powerful way to build relationships and understand the context in which people live their lives. Aboriginal people encouraged us, and local services, to do this more and suggested that over time it could lead to a greater understanding of ways to engage with Aboriginal people and to help them to achieve their health and wellbeing goals. We heard from Aboriginal Elders that the community know and see what is happening. People shared their suggestion that mentors and role models could work within communities to help others see the future and to help with the home environment.

“You are down to earth, easy to talk to, not in a suit and tie, not superior, one of the people.”

Different ways for different Koori voices

There is no single way to engage with all Aboriginal people in Latrobe. The people we spoke with had lots of suggestions about different mobs and age groups that we could hear from and the different ways we could do this. People suggested men’s groups, yarning circles, having a chat under a tree, sharing a feed, going for a walk and meeting with Elders. We were encouraged to think about ways to make planned engagement activities such as town meetings and forums, safe and culturally appropriate by using Koori flags, colours and drawings. There was a common suggestion from the Aboriginal people that we spoke with that we don’t use formal surveys and paperwork.

Give space and don’t chase

In reaching out to people inviting them to share their stories with us, we learned that it was better to be informal and flexible in our approach. We needed to manage our own time and work schedules, we had to adjust our way of working to suit the communities that we were working with. We found that it was not always helpful to chase or follow up with people if they were not able to meet with us in the first instance and received feedback that this could lead to feelings of shame for letting others down. Instead we learned to continue to provide informal and casual opportunities for people to connect with us, when their circumstances and readiness allowed for it. We heard that this flexible approach was particularly important during the COVID-19 State of Emergency when people were faced with many challenges. When we talked to Aboriginal People about our approach, we received feedback about the importance of knowing when to step back if someone was not ready to engage and knowing when to be there when someone may need more help.

Barriers and enablers of good wellbeing

Koori friendly health services and places for healing

Local Aboriginal people have shared their aspirations to be able to access health services that are inclusive and offer places where they can heal mentally and physically. We heard suggestions for more cultural awareness and education within local services and for health workers to spend time with people in the community to help services to look more outwardly. We heard suggestions for services to employ Aboriginal people and to offer them a flexibility and support to go to community events and groups to maintain their connection to culture. People shared their aspirations for more Aboriginal controlled health services and a health hub with strong connections to community. We heard about the importance of enabling Aboriginal people to design and manage how their services and programs are delivered.

Cultural connection and mental health comes first

Aboriginal people talked to us about the importance of aligning their spirit, healing from within and taking steps to strengthen their connection to culture. We heard that this needs to happen first before other things can fall into place. We heard that some of the mental health challenges people are facing can be impacted by addictions, low self-esteem, violence, and the justice system.

“Aboriginal culture is the most important thing. It’s about sharing and giving, and respect is earned.”

Take steps to look after your health and other mob will follow

Most of the people that we spoke with acknowledged that Aboriginal people need to listen to their bodies more and to access the supports, health checks and services that can help them to prevent getting sick. Everyone shared their goals to live a healthy life, often for the benefit of their children, family and friends. We heard that if more Aboriginal people start accessing local health services, others in the community will follow.

Working together to achieve equity

Aboriginal people in Latrobe shared a message with us that the solutions to the long-term problems that have impacted their families can be determined at a local level and do not need to be prescribed by governments. We heard about positive steps forward and a desire for more people to work together to address all the social determinants of health for Aboriginal people in Latrobe.

“I have two beautiful black kids who don’t look black. I have a beautiful white wife. My family doesn’t see black or white.”

What really matters

Bringing Aboriginal stories and culture into the future

We heard that Aboriginal culture is the most important thing and that stories and language can help people to understand who they are and where they have come from. Culture needs to be reflected and shared through local schools, health services, aged-care facilities and community services. It needs to be understood and respected by the Police and other authorities. We heard about the important role of Aboriginal Elders who have gained recognition as custodians of knowledge and lore and who have permission to share knowledge and beliefs. Local Aboriginal people have asked for services to be more culturally aware and have suggested that this takes time.

“The Community have trusted you with their messages and believe the document is one aspect, but how you honour the messages of the mob is another.”

Community spirit, health and healing

Aboriginal people in Latrobe talked to us about community spirit and the various aspects of their society that can lead to good health and wellbeing. We heard about the importance of animals and the land, Australian produce, connection to children, grandchildren, family and community. Throughout our conversations there was a common goal for Aboriginal people to work together to help themselves and others to heal and enjoy good wellbeing. We have heard that healing can come about through education, working with young people and parents and supporting communities to understand their past. Hidden trauma can be hard to re-live and services and governments need to be aware of this.

It depends on the hour and the day

When we asked Aboriginal people about what really matters to them, we were faced with the reality that some people and families can be pulled in so many directions that they may not be able to access the basic necessities that everyone has a right to. This can dominate how people spend their time, what becomes a priority and what gets left. We have heard that the road to further empowering individuals and families requires change at an individual, community and systemic level. Aboriginal staff in local organisations talked about the cultural workload they can experience and described this as unpredictable with unseen expectations.

“It depends on the hour and the day for me. It’s like a game really.”

A Latrobe Valley that has no ‘sides’

People talked to us about living in a black and white world. We heard stories about families and friendships that are free from assumptions and built on a mutual respect for different cultures. Some Aboriginal people in Latrobe talked about times that they had experienced racism in the school yard or when they accessed health services. These people shared their aspirations for more tolerance and respect within society and acknowledged that it needs to come from all sides. One person said; “we are people first, we are all the same, see who people are.” We heard about the ongoing impacts and challenges that come with assumptions that can be hard to wipe off.



Insight 1

Letting go to truly hear someone's story

Before we spoke with Aboriginal people in Latrobe, we sat at our desks in our office and made plans for how we would engage, what questions we would ask, what engagement tools we would use and how we would take notes. This is not uncommon for us or other organisations that engage with communities. As soon as we were in the room with community members it was clear to us that we needed to let go of our planned process in order to truly hear the stories that were being shared with us. There was a risk that if we did not let go, or have the skills to adjust our approach, we would have missed out. Our minds may have been closed to what was being shared with us and the people that were giving us their time and stories may have experienced frustration.

In letting go or being more flexible with our process we were careful not to lose our purpose. Our reasons for engaging remained the same, however the journey we took to get there had to adjust and we did this alongside the people that we were listening to. In sharing this engagement journey together, we received positive feedback from Aboriginal people about how some of our tools and techniques helped them to share their story. People enjoyed having a yarn and a cuppa, using our visual tools and the informal approach that we took.

“There needs to be understanding of Aboriginal history, what’s happened.”

The Office of the Advocate is now reflecting on...

How can we build even greater flexibility into our processes and timelines to ensure that we can continue to adjust our approach to suit the people we are engaging with?

If Aboriginal people in Latrobe were to design our engagement process for us what would it look like and how might we integrate this with our existing ways of working?

What if...

Government departments, health and community services looked at their systems and procedures from the outside in, with the aim of discovering what they can 'let go', where they can be more flexible and how it might help them to better connect with and do business with Aboriginal communities.



Insight 2

Show me that I can trust you

Throughout our engagement, we re-connected with Aboriginal people who we have worked with in the past and we established new relationships with others. It was not easy for us to initiate contact with people that we did not know, and it is likely that when people were hearing from us for the first time it was hard for them to agree to share their time and stories with us. Understandably, it was important for people to know who we are and why we wanted to engage with them.

We found that when people had an existing relationship with us, in which trust and rapport had already been established, the conversations quickly went to a greater depth and people were comfortable sharing more of themselves. When we were meeting with people for the first time there was a wariness that we had to work through. This was only possible by demonstrating a willingness to listen, being clear and honest with our intentions. Meeting new people was easier when someone from the Aboriginal community helped to facilitate introductions.

We heard about the impact of short-term funding that goes to mainstream service providers, who are given little time to establish relationships and work with communities before their funding timelines expire. This can lead to mistrust from communities.

“Reconciliation can work non-Aboriginal organisations can do the work, they must build awareness and education first.”

Through hearing people's stories, we came to understand why Aboriginal people might be cautious. Governments and services have been asking to engage with Aboriginal communities for many years and the experience and outcomes are not always positive. We understand that in order to trust someone you need to know that they are reliable and that your experience with them will be safe, physically and emotionally.

The Office of the Advocate is now reflecting on...

What more can we do to strengthen our relationships with Aboriginal people in Latrobe and how might we continue to demonstrate that we can be relied on?

What if...

We reached a point where Aboriginal people in Latrobe could fully trust local health and community services to listen to their stories and respond to their needs?



Insight 3

‘Did not attend’... let’s understand why

By listening to Aboriginal people in Latrobe we have gained a better understanding of why it might not be possible to attend an appointment, come to an engagement activity with us or access local health services. What may appear on a health service record as ‘did not attend’ or ‘did not show’, will always have a story behind it. Aboriginal people in Latrobe have encouraged us to look beyond what can be seen at face value and to understand a person’s experiences, their circumstances, and the underlying reasons that have prevented them from ‘showing up’.

These reasons may be outside the realm of control for an Aboriginal person in the community, however they can have a significant impact on how someone spends their day, what might occupy their thoughts and their overall health and wellbeing. Aboriginal people have shown us that they need to prioritise looking after their children, family and community.

People talked to us about some of the experiences they have had with services and the traumatic effects of racism and exclusion. We heard that it is common for local Aboriginal people to be asked to take a drug test when attending health services. We heard that it is not easy for some Aboriginal people, and in particular men, to talk about their health or take steps to look after themselves.

Some of the people that we met with expressed deep sadness about avoidable and early deaths and the Sorry Business within their community.

The Office of the Advocate is now reflecting on...

What more can we do to ensure that our office and the activities that we organise are safe and inclusive for Aboriginal people in Latrobe?

What if...

Aboriginal communities, health and community services in Latrobe worked together to truly understand and address what lies behind the ‘did not attend’ data in Latrobe? Could seemingly simple solutions such as allowing 15 minutes grace time with appointments become a reality that works for everyone?

“All health services need to be more mindful and have better understanding.”



Insight 4

My Aboriginality comes with me

Everyone we spoke to was carrying with them their own story and the stories of others. These stories were about culture and family and they are important for future generations. Many of the people we spoke with also carry trauma that has built up and been passed on through negative experiences that have impacted Aboriginal people in Latrobe.

People talked to us about how their Aboriginality travels with them through life and comes into every aspect of what they do day-to-day. At school, at work, playing sport, at the shopping centre, they are always Aboriginal. This may seem obvious however, when we started to think about how we all adjust our thinking and our behaviours depending on the setting we are in, we realised the constant struggle that some Aboriginal people may feel as they navigate their way through a world that may not always be understanding or inclusive of their culture and their history.

We came to understand that there is a huge reliance on few individuals to lead change in mainstream organisations and

within institutions. This was described as carrying the weight and responsibility to be culturally competent, something that should be organisation-wide and not up to individuals. These people are constantly negotiating black and white worlds. There is hope that the recent global interest in the Black Lives Matter movement will lead to greater awareness and shared responsibility and commitment to action across all of society.

We heard about the importance of acknowledging that Aboriginal people are not all the same colour, everyone has different shades and experiences.

The Office of the Advocate is now reflecting on...

How might we build inclusivity for Aboriginal people into every aspect of our work and how can we share this with others to encourage them to do the same?

What if...

Aboriginal change-agents in Latrobe were embraced as champions by governments and services and offered even greater support to help others in their community to achieve their health and wellbeing goals?

“It’s history that has been passed on generation to generation.”

Active reflection

Questions that might get you started...

If you are a **decision maker** consider;

- Who are the change agents in your organisation and how can you support them to undertake their role?
- What can you do to enable a whole-of-organisation approach to cultural awareness and inclusion to prevent the responsibility falling onto the shoulders of individuals?
- How do you develop partnerships with Aboriginal organisations and what can you do to strengthen these?
- How do you encourage flexibility in your processes and services?

“I know if the land is sick, then we are sick.”

“There’s generational trauma and poverty and people don’t know where to start.”



If you are a **staff person, **family** member or **friend**, consider;**

- What assumptions do you have or see about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and how can you challenge these?
- What steps can you take to learn more about Aboriginal culture?
- What is an appropriate way for you to reach out to Aboriginal People and how might you ensure a suitable approach of staying in contact to establish relationships and trust over time?

“We’re the most over surveyed, documented race in this country without a fact.”

If you are a **community member, consider;**

- How do you call out assumptions that you come across in your daily travels and what difference can this make for others in your community?
- How can you contribute to a future in Latrobe that is more inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people?

“There are different layers to the community. People need to represent their community and not their organisation.”

If you are an **Aboriginal or **Torres Strait Islander** person, consider;**

- What aspects of your story and culture would you like to share with non-Aboriginal people and why?
- What are your aspirations for the future of your people in Latrobe and what can the Latrobe Health Advocate and others do to help make this happen?

“I live in the middle of the black and white world.”

“You can do all the programs in the world and all the support and all that, but it’s got to come at the healing. It has to start with yourself and addressing what’s hurting you, as yucky as it is.”



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