

30 April 2021

Voice secretariat

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Dear Committee Members

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission in relation to the Interim Report to the Australian Government: Indigenous Voice Co-Design Process.

About ReachOut

ReachOut, Australia's most accessed online mental health service for young people and their parents, strongly supports reconciliation with Australia's First Nations people. Our vision is for an inclusive, compassionate and cohesive Australia that truly embraces and is proud of its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. We are committed to improving mental health outcomes and reducing suicide rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We strive for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to be happy and well, and able to reach their full potential as emerging elders.

We are providing a submission because we believe it is imperative that both the local and national bodies include and emphasise the voices of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as emerging Elders. In this submission we aim to highlight what can be gained when young people's voices are amplified, by sharing our own experiences of co-designing our service with young people over more than a decade.

ReachOut's reconciliation journey

ReachOut is committed to working in partnership with First Nations peoples of Australia to identify and address the social and cultural determinants of mental health and wellbeing. We are dedicated to developing our capacity to listen to, learn from, and connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples so that we can support and improve social and emotional wellbeing in meaningful ways. Our current work includes an annual presence at Yabun Festival, cultural training for all staff, and a new project in partnership with the Department of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University, creating digital tools around social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.



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Key to this work is connecting with and supporting parents and families, elders, educators and the organisations and communities that support young people and families. We also extend our commitment to becoming an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employer of choice and to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suppliers.

We acknowledge that in our commitment to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people there is a lot more work to do. We are proud of our partnerships with the people and organisations who are supporting and guiding us in this work. Underpinning these goals and actions is our overarching philosophy of learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and engaging in reciprocal partnerships.

ReachOut welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the co-design process. While the Voice and ReachOut's work as a mental health service provider are obviously not directly comparable, we hope that our experiences and the findings from our work may be informative and useful.

Benefits of co-design with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Co-design is vitally important when working with a youth audience as their needs, service preferences, expectations and the way that they will engage with services are starkly different to adult populations. Co-design with the communities and groups that services are intended for has emerged as a key theme in the various reviews and reforms processes, this has been seen in particular at our work at ReachOut, where our co-design with young people emphasise their needs in the mental health system.

Methods that facilitate co-design through ongoing engagement and feedback processes ensure young people are heard, validated and respected. By enabling young people to have their say on the issues impacting their lives, ReachOut is able to ensure that our response is representative of their needs. After all, we must empower young people to take ownership of their experiences, decisions and, in our case, be experts on their mental health.

Youth participation is also a valuable way to build the skills and capabilities of young people. A study of youth participants at ReachOut showed that 69% reported an increased sense of belonging, 62% reported increased problem solving skills, 73% reported increased confidence, 64% reported increased communication skills and over 70% reported they increased their involvement with other civic or sporting groups. Therefore, we believe that having strong youth engagement in an Indigenous voice to parliament should be seen as crucial in the development of future leaders.

Promoting the Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people

The high rates of mental ill-health and suicide amongst young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are unacceptable, and often preventable. The mental health gap

between mental health Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and their non-indigenous peers is alarming. For instance, the rate of psychological distress is much higher for compared to their non-Indigenous peers in Australia (31.9% to 24.2% respectively). It is also intolerable that intentional self-harm is the leading cause of death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 and 34 years old.

The social determinants of health, including respect and resilience, can have a critical impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. ReachOut strongly believes that reconciliation plays a strong part in this, recognising the impact of colonisation and working to empower communities in addressing intergenerational trauma and grief. As connection to land and culture is a protective factor for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, preserving and creating this connection is key to reconciliation efforts and to the ongoing social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

For young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, being part of a Voice will positively influence the social and emotional wellbeing of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the country, as it emphasises that they can speak to national issues that disproportionately affect them.

For these reasons we believe that the Voice would benefit from ensuring youth representation is robust as it will empower young people and ensure that new, emerging views and community leaders are supported and heard.

ReachOut is available to discuss any issues raised or to provide further information. We hope that our experience and expertise as a leading youth mental health service can offer valuable insights on the importance of young people having a voice in the processes that impact them. It is important to note that youth involvement is mutually beneficial for both young people and for the cause. This comes as no surprise to ReachOut as we've been seeing the benefits of this approach for years.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Yours sincerely,

Ashley de Silva

Chief Executive Officer

