



20 April 2021

The Hon Ken Wyatt AM MP  
Minister for Indigenous Australians  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

**RE: Indigenous voice co-design interim report**

**Background**

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia (the Society) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the Indigenous voice co-design interim report to the Australian Government.

The Society is a lay Catholic charitable organisation that comprises over 50,000 members and volunteers and 6,000 employees who provide on-the-ground assistance across Australia.

Our members and volunteers work directly with all those in need by giving them a hand up so that they can forge ahead and change their destinies and local communities. The Society provides assistance by alleviating suffering and promoting human dignity and personal integrity in all their dimensions. This is done by establishing relationships based on trust and friendship.<sup>1</sup>

Visitation is core work of the Society. Members connect with people where they live by providing practical assistance and helping with living costs. Importantly they accompany people through their times of hardship. Professional service programs across the housing, health, disability, social support and emergency response sectors are also delivered by trained staff and volunteers.

The Society's aim is to improve the health, wellbeing, stability, resilience and social connectedness of those we assist. The Society takes a strengths-based approach by listening to people, building relationships, respecting their wishes, providing support and helping them recover their dignity.

Although the Society is not a First Nations organisation, we have been providing assistance to the Australian community for over 165 years. As outlined in one of our Reconciliation Action Plans (NSW), we seek to establish positive and enduring relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and continue to advocate for stronger recognition and respect for culture, community and equal opportunity. We are committed to working tirelessly to communicate this message and fight for social justice for First Nations peoples.

The Society recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First Peoples and respects their cultures, lands, waters, histories, and rights to live in a society free of economic, social, and cultural oppression. All Society members, volunteers, and staff acknowledge and adhere to these values in every aspect of their work. We acknowledge and celebrate the deep, abiding pride that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have in their diverse cultures and we place great value in the contributions they make to the wider Australian society.

We are also committed to closing the gap economically by providing employment and procurement opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and businesses. We must ensure our workforce and supply chain reflect the diversity of the communities in which we work.

A significant number of those we assist in any given year identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Assistance varies and depends on need. It ranges from helping with utility costs, accommodation/rental costs, provision of food vouchers, help with purchasing household items/whitegoods, assistance with health, medical, relocation, storage, travel and transport costs, as well as referrals, advocacy and social support.

In New South Wales, more than one in five (almost 13,500 of the 60,000 people assisted) identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in the last financial year.

In South Australia, 17 percent of people assisted identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

In the Canberra-Goulburn region, around 1,650 people assisted identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, bringing overall representation to 19 percent. This varied significantly by location, from around 13 percent in Goulburn to 24 percent in the Far South Coast of NSW.

In Queensland, representation is around 18 percent each for the youth and child and family programs. For domestic violence services, overall representation was 24 percent, with a range of 10 percent to 32 percent by location. For alcohol and other drug services, overall representation was around 20 percent, with a range of 2 percent to 32 percent by location.

In the Northern Territory, representation varied by the type of assistance provided. 90 percent of people who received emergency relief assistance identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. 95 percent of people presenting to Ozanam House homelessness services identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, while 46 percent of people receiving Commonwealth Home Support Services identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

In Western Australia, representation also varied depending on the type of assistance sought. Around 10 percent of people seeking emergency relief assistance identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander but this increased to one in four people accessing youth engagement hubs. Around 30 percent of people accessing specialist homelessness services (such as Tom Fisher House) and the Housing Plus program identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

### ***Establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution***

We understand that the co-design process was established to respond to the recommendations of the Joint Select Committee (JSC) on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We acknowledge the significant work to date by the three co-design committees jointly led by Professor Marcia Langton AM and Professor Tom Calma AO.

While this co-design process has focussed on the legislative design component, a second process arising from the JSC is constitutional enshrinement. We do not believe that legislative reform and constitutional enshrinement should be decoupled.

### ***National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council***

The Society notes the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council's commitment to "standing in solidarity with the Uluru delegation by echoing calls for substantial Constitutional reform based on a foundation of spirituality and subsidiarity."<sup>2</sup>

The Society supports the position that to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement in decision-making, significant constitutional and structural changes are required.

A National Voice "enshrined in the Constitution" optimises empowerment, self-determination and subsidiarity. Substantial reform to consultation processes and the delivery of programs is also needed.

Any membership, representative or consultative body needs to reflect the fact that communities are unique and constantly changing; and the body needs to be agile enough to respond to localised issues but have the mandate to address national matters.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Support for the From the Heart Campaign - Response to Interim Co-Design Proposals***

The Society supports the *From the Heart* campaign with respect to the interim co-design proposal, namely:

- The National Voice must be representative of the diverse population and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- The National Voice must speak to the Commonwealth Parliament and Government on policy and legislation.
- The National Voice must not be a third chamber of Parliament
- The National Voice must not deliver programs or services
- The National Voice must act and operate independently from Parliament and Government

The Society:

- calls on the Australian Government to honour its election commitment to hold a referendum once a model for the Voice has been settled
- supports the passage of enabling legislation for the Voice to be passed after a referendum has been held in the next term of Parliament, and
- supports a membership model for the National Voice that ensures previously unheard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the same chance of being selected as established leadership figures.

The approach outlined by the *From the Heart* campaign will give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people a say on the policies and laws that impact their lives. It will also ensure that Parliament and the Australian Government are more appropriately informed in their approach to Indigenous affairs policy and law-making. Ultimately, this will result in better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Better outcomes will only be achieved when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are able to “live in dignity, to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions and to pursue their self-determined development, in keeping with their own needs and aspirations” as set out in the United National Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. 4

On a visit to Alice Springs 35 years ago, Pope John Paul II stated that “what has been done cannot be undone. But what can now be done to remedy the deeds of yesterday must not be put off till tomorrow.”

The Society believes that we have waited long enough and now is the time to act and right the wrongs of the past.

In the words of the 2021 Senior Australian of the Year, Dr Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann,

“For years we have walked on a one-way street to learn the white people’s way. Now is the time for you to come closer to understand us.”<sup>5</sup>

We welcome the opportunity provide this submission. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require further information.

Yours sincerely



Toby oConnor  
**Chief Executive Officer**

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<sup>1</sup> The Rule. 7<sup>th</sup> Edition. 2012. Amended May 2014. Accessed at: [https://www.vinnies.org.au/icms\\_docs/168122\\_The\\_Rule.pdf](https://www.vinnies.org.au/icms_docs/168122_The_Rule.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council. 2017. Response to the Uluru Statement from the Heart. Accessed at: [http://www.natsicc.org.au/assets/final\\_draft\\_uluru\\_statement.pdf](http://www.natsicc.org.au/assets/final_draft_uluru_statement.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> United Nations. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, frequently Asked questions. Accessed at: [https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/faq\\_drips\\_en.pdf](https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/faq_drips_en.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> ABC. 7:30 Report. 7 April 2021. Meet our Senior Australian of the Year - Dr Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann. Accessed at: <https://www.abc.net.au/7.30/meet-our-senior-australian-of-the-year---dr-miriam/13292398>