

TRUTH-TELLING AND RECONCILIATION

*A Report on Workshops conducted with Local Councils to support
Truth-telling and Reconciliation at a Local Level in Australia*



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Reconciliation Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures; and to Elders both past and present.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this publication may contain names of people who have since passed away.

Acknowledgements

Reconciliation Australia would like to acknowledge and thank all of the councils, council officers, and panellists that participated in the three Truth-telling workshops held in Sydney, Adelaide and Perth.

The purpose of the workshops was to discuss Truth-telling at a local level, the role that local councils can play in Truth-telling, and to help identify practical resources that would support this work.

We would also like to thank our workshop partners: Reconciliation NSW, Reconciliation SA and Reconciliation WA, as well as The Healing Foundation for participation on our project reference group.

We acknowledge and thank Lila D'souza and Anna Harding from The Purpose Group for facilitating and writing up the workshops.

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Executive Summary

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, much of Australia's colonial history is characterised by land dispossession, frontier violence, and racism¹.

The absence of widespread understanding of this shared history is a source of ongoing trauma for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and a roadblock to reconciliation.

An important way of developing a deeper understanding of our history is through Truth-telling. This can take a range of forms, including truth and reconciliation commissions, historical monuments, community commemorations, and education, and can take place at interpersonal, local, state, national, and international levels.

Truth-telling offers an opportunity for telling the truth of our history to achieve justice and healing². It can be a tool for all Australians to recognise, understand and accept the wrongs of the past and the impact of these wrongs on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. It employs the truth to generate justice and healing and to ensure the wrongs of the past are never repeated.

To develop a framework to measure Australia's progress towards reconciliation across these many dimensions, in 2016 Reconciliation Australia undertook a review of reconciliation in Australia and internationally. As a result of this work, five critical dimensions that together represent a holistic and comprehensive picture of reconciliation were identified: Race Relations, Institutional Integrity, Equality and Equity, Unity, and Historical Acceptance³.

Truth-telling is a central part of Reconciliation Australia's conception of reconciliation through the Historical Acceptance dimension, under which⁴:

- There is an understanding and acceptance in Australia of past laws, practices and policies that have deeply affected the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- There is understanding of the immediate and devastating impact of these actions and the intergenerational trauma they caused, including their effect on the lives of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians today
- Fundamentally, historical acceptance is about telling the truth to achieve justice and healing.

There is now a growing awareness of the need to progress Truth-telling in Australia. Through our research and program work, Reconciliation Australia has identified a strong appetite in the community to better understand and engage in Truth-telling.

¹ The State of Reconciliation in Australia (SoR), 2018. Pg. 6. Available at: https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/ra_stateofreconciliation_report_a4_revised-2018.pdf

² SoR, 2018. Pg. 14.

³ SoR, 2018. Pg. 3.

⁴ SoR, 2018. Pg. 9.

In 2018, Reconciliation Australia's Reconciliation Barometer⁵ found that:

- 80% believe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are important to our national identity;
- 80% of the broader community believe it is important to undertake Truth-telling processes; and,
- 86% believe it important that we learn about past issues.

Truth-telling forms a central and growing part of how reconciliation is progressed in Australia, and Reconciliation Australia will continue to work with the broader community to progress it. This report forms part of that work.

⁵ Australian Reconciliation Barometer (ARB) 2018. Available at: https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/final_full_arb-full-report-2018.pdf

Introduction

Reconciliation Australia's Australian Reconciliation Barometer research shows that nearly a third of Australians do not know or accept some fundamental aspects of our shared history⁶, including the false notion of terra nullius, the occurrence of mass killings, incarceration, forced removal from land and restriction of movement⁷.

Ongoing work by The Healing Foundation has outlined the need for Truth-telling to address the trauma and racism faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This trauma had its genesis in terra nullius and the violent early history of Australia's Frontier Wars and continued through the genocidal policies that followed, including the forced removal of children⁸.

The lack of shared understanding of Australia's shared history serves to perpetuate this trauma.

At a Truth-telling Symposium (the Symposium) held by Reconciliation Australia and The Healing Foundation in 2018⁹, participants recognised the central role of Truth-telling in healing and reconciliation. They noted the importance of local and national engagement in Truth-telling and, alongside consideration of formal national processes, explored the different ways that Truth-telling can take place, particularly at a local level.

The Symposium¹⁰ considered how local organisations and community engagement could inform and drive Truth-telling processes, and highlighted how cultural reinvigoration and renewed cross-cultural engagement can result from these processes¹¹.

In 2019, Reconciliation Australia hosted three workshops on local level Truth-telling for local councils and other community members, in association with Reconciliation NSW, Reconciliation SA and Reconciliation WA. The Healing Foundation engaged in the project through a project reference group.

Each workshop considered:

- The concept and importance of Truth-telling;

⁶ Australian Reconciliation Barometer (ARB) 2018. Pg. 118. Available at: https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/final_full_arb-full-report-2018.pdf

⁷ Truth Telling Symposium Report, 2018. Pg. 4. Available at: <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/truth-telling-symposium-report1.pdf>

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ Truth Telling Symposium. 9 October 2018, Barangaroo, Sydney.

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ The Symposium aimed to ignite a specific conversation about the: importance of Truth-telling; truths that need to be told; different Truth-telling practices that might be applicable to Australia; guiding principles for future Truth-telling processes.

- The challenges and opportunities for local governments supporting localised Truth-telling; and,
- The supports councils/communities need to engage in and drive localised Truth-telling.

This report provides a summary of the themes and issues that emerged at the workshops, and includes discussion from the 2018 Truth-telling Symposium relevant to local level Truth-telling.

The first section considers what Truth-telling can encompass at a local level, and what activities local councils could consider undertaking.

This is followed by discussion of why Truth-telling is important, the challenges of Truth-telling, as well as the opportunities for Truth-telling at a local level. Finally, the report considers what could support local councils to engage in Truth-telling.

Key Themes from Workshops

- There is a growing appetite and interest from local councils to engage in Truth-telling as a means to support reconciliation and harmonious relationships in the community generally
- Truth-telling can result in profound healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the wider community
- 'Truth-telling' is not a term widely used amongst local councils and participants appreciated the opportunity to 'demystify' Truth-telling. Further, many local councils have engaged in Truth-telling without necessarily identifying it as such
- Local councils are well placed to be leaders in Truth-telling in their local community and to provide in-kind and other support to community members who are championing a Truth-telling process
- Meaningful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and developing relationships built on trust is critical, and local councils face several challenges in this regard, including:
 - cultural competency of council staff;
 - time and resources; and,
 - support from executive or Councillors
- Truth-telling activities do not need to be large-scale. There is power in the small
- There is immense value in sharing experiences of Truth-telling and learning from other local councils
- Truth-telling activities and processes should be embedded throughout the work of local councils, rather than viewed as one-off events (such as NAIDOC Week).

What can Truth-telling look like at a local level?

Truth-telling is a broad term that can encompass an activity or process that tells the truth about the history of Australia.

Recognition, acknowledgement, healing and collaboration were themes that arose at each of the workshops. The experiences shared by participants were varied – some highlighted the difficulties in progressing Truth-telling processes in their communities, others shared the relative ease at which it had occurred.

Workshop participants demonstrated a breadth of Truth-telling activities that local councils engaged in, including:

- Recognition of Traditional Owners and Acknowledgement of/Welcome to Country
- Flying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags in Council chambers and Council buildings
- Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share stories as part of council's engaging with an Aboriginal advisory committee or Reconciliation Action Plan Working Group
- Internal cultural awareness training for Councillors and Council staff
- Collaborative history projects to create awareness of local history –Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history websites/apps, print publications, story-telling sessions in libraries, community walking trails and plaques
- Educating the community (including Councillors and Council staff) about the cultural landscape and key features of the area
- Public celebrations, ceremonies, art installations to commemorate significant historical events
- Including education about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history in public library programs
- Memorialisation and/or commemoration of historical events such as massacres or Stolen Generations removal

- Naming or co-naming places of significance with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander names.
- Incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history into the redevelopment of public parks and spaces
- Joint management of Council land to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge in land management

Truth-telling case study: *Kurna history box (SA)*

A children's officer in the local library started a project collecting pieces on Kurna history. Local schools can borrow the history box and its associated learning guide for the term.

To strengthen student and staff knowledge and understanding of Kurna history, culture and contributions, a Kurna educator runs cultural sessions for the students, principal and teachers on local history and the contents of the box.

The use of schools and local libraries as hubs for knowledge sharing and Truth-telling can provide a strong cultural and historical context of the community in which these institutions are set.

Why is Truth-telling important?

Relationships

Workshop participants expressed the benefit of engaging in and undertaking processes of Truth-telling to improve relationships and understandings of the shared history within the community. Local level Truth-telling is particularly powerful in this regard, especially when it occurs in small communities where people are able to develop personal relationships through the process, or build respect and understanding.

The Myall Creek Massacre is an example of this as friendships have been forged between descendants of survivors, as well as descendants of the perpetrators of the massacre.

Panellists and participants agreed that recognition of the culture and history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the area is of benefit to the whole community, which can generate a communal sense of pride.

Truth-Telling case study:

Yarri and Jacky Jacky memorial (NSW)

In 1852, Gundagai (a town on the Murrumbidgee River in NSW) flooded. Two Wiradjuri men, Yarri and Jacky Jacky, rescued close to one third of the town's residents in bark canoes. In recent years the local community has worked to have public recognition of their story of bravery marked in Gundagai.

In 2017, following the campaigning and fundraising work of the Yarri and Jacky Jacky Sculpture committee and the local community, a bronze sculpture was erected in Gundagai to tell the story and remember the significant event.

In 2019 Yarri and Jacky Jacky were posthumously honoured with Australian Government Bravery Awards.

Many current Gundagai residents have connections with the floods – as descendants of Yarri and Jacky Jacky and those who were rescued.

These residents, as well as Traditional Owners of the region feel positive that the commemoration of the event is working towards solidifying an important part of the community's shared history and strengthening relationships within the town.

Reconciliation

Many participants suggested Truth-telling should be an integral element of the reconciliation journey. Local councils with Reconciliation Action Plans highlighted that this is an important tool for supporting their Truth-telling work.

Many also noted that the relationships that develop through a Truth-telling process have led to positive flow-on effects for reconciliation throughout the whole community, particularly where local councils have collaborated with other community groups and organisations.

Truth-telling case study:

Kukenarap Massacre (WA)

A participant in Western Australia worked for decades on uncovering and documenting the true history of the Kukenarap massacre near Ravensthorpe.

After many decades of denial and sadness, the memorial at the site 15km from Ravensthorpe has been incredibly powerful for the local community.

“There will be no more whispering around here. The Ravensthorpe community don’t have anger any more. People are so proud of it, school groups visit, online blogs are writing about it. You get a sense of peace there, it’s called Peace Park.”

Healing

Workshop participants shared their stories of the profound healing that can come from Truth-telling. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants expressed the importance of sharing their experiences and stories on their own terms.

For some people the knowledge of this history has been passed down to them, for others it is information that may be acquired as a Truth-telling process progresses. But it is by sharing the truth about these stories that everyone is given the opportunity to acknowledge, work through, and accept the realities of Australia’s confronting colonial history, and uncover histories that haven’t been part of a shared historical narrative. Doing so can have an impact on communities, and how we relate to one another.

For example, the memorialisation of massacre sites can have social and emotional responses within communities. The importance of understanding these responses and creating a safe environment to undertake such initiatives was a theme for many in discussions.

Similarly, in commemorating an act of bravery which had historically gone unmarked - in the case of the heroic lifesaving acts of Yarri and Jacky Jacky in Gundagai in 1852 – workshop

participants in NSW spoke of the pride that local Aboriginal people felt when these Aboriginal men were finally publically honoured.

Pride and a sense of peace can also develop individually and within a community when dedication to uncovering the truth comes to fruition. This peace can facilitate the healing process within a community and progress reconciliation.

Truth-telling case study:

Myall Creek Massacre (NSW)

The Frontier Wars were conflicts between Europeans and Aboriginal people including battles, acts of resistance and massacres from 1788 to the 1930s¹². In New South Wales, frontier violence had become so widespread by the 1830s that despite British law stating it was a crime punishable by death, the murder of Aboriginal people by British colonial convicts, settlers and stockmen was widely accepted¹³.

In 1838, armed stockmen at Myall Creek in Northern NSW massacred 28 Wirrayaraay people of the Gamilaraay nation. Seven of the eleven men responsible were sentenced in the NSW Supreme Court to public hanging – the first British subjects executed for the crime of massacring Aboriginal people. It is the only known case of convictions following a massacre of Aboriginal people in Australia.

The Myall Creek site preserves the memory of this particular historical event, but is also representative of many more massacres that took place across Australia which are yet to be memorialised, or even widely known. The Myall Creek Massacre Memorial site, and associated annual memorial service, acknowledges an extremely traumatising and difficult shared history.

In 2000, a memorial was dedicated to commemorating the massacre by the Friends of Myall Creek Memorial Committee - a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, in an act of reconciliation and as an acknowledgement of the truth of the area's shared history. Significantly, many of the people involved are descendants of survivors, as well as descendants of the perpetrators of the massacre. *An annual commemorative service is now held on 10 June.*

In a 2013 SBS interview, Gamilaraay Elder Aunty Sue Blacklock, a founder of the memorial site and annual service said, *"It has lifted a burden off my heart and off my shoulders to know that we can come together in unity, come together and talk in reconciliation to one another and show that it can work, that we can live together and that we can forgive. And it really just makes me feel light. I have found I have no more heaviness on my soul."*¹⁴

¹² Andrea Booth (2016) 'What are the frontier wars?' *Guardian Australia*. 17 April 2017. Available at: <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/explainer/what-were-frontier-wars>

¹³ National Museum of Australia (2020) 'Defining moment: Myall Creek Massacre'. Available at: <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/myall-creek-massacre>

¹⁴ 'Myall Creek: A massacre and a reconciliation' *SBS News*. 26 August 2013. Available at: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/myall-creek-a-massacre-and-a-reconciliation>

Learning from the past

Historical Acceptance is a principle that envisages all Australians understanding and accepting the wrongs of the past that occurred and the impact of these wrongs.

Workshop participants discussed the importance of learning from the past to ensure mistakes are not repeated and how shared learning is linked to building, healing and moving forward together.

By learning about the past through involvement in a Truth-telling activity in their community, many participants observed a significant improvement in the progress of reconciliation and the healing of historical wounds within the community.

Considerations for *local* Truth-telling

Truth-telling is a process that takes time

Many workshop participants noted that Truth-telling processes can take a long time to progress. Depending on the scale of the Truth-telling activity, the research, levels of participation, as well as the sensitivities involved, it may take years.

While some Truth-telling initiatives may be progressed with a pre-determined endpoint or goal in mind, participants noted that it is important to allow for the process and outcomes of Truth-telling which may be fluid and ongoing. As such, a level of adaptability and flexibility is required.

The relationships that may be built throughout Truth-telling processes can play an integral role in forging positive relationships throughout the wider community and help facilitate healing and reconciliation within the community.

Workshop reflection (WA)

“You have to allow it to happen how it happens – you can’t reverse engineer it. Otherwise you don’t get an agreed outcome, you get an enforced outcome.”

Relationships built on trust are critical

A critical element of Truth-telling that shone through at all workshops was that of relationships built on trust. Councils cannot approach Truth-telling in the same way they approach ordinary council business.

A local council’s role is not necessarily to design or drive a Truth-telling process, but instead to engage meaningfully with, listen to, and learn from, the communities around it.

Truth-telling is an extremely sensitive process. Most workshop participants agreed it is likely mistakes will be made throughout Truth-telling processes, particularly when it is the first time a council or community has engaged with such activities.

It is essential for local councils and community members to listen respectfully and learn from those mistakes. This is how trust grows.

Workshop reflection (SA)

In a specific local government area in South Australia, a lengthy process to negotiate joint land management agreements occurred between local council representatives and local Aboriginal Elders. At one meeting an Elder expressed their trust in the local council and the process that was occurring. A council member at the workshop observed that, “the energy and positive feeling that comes from that is very powerful. That’s a precious thing.”

There is no ‘one size fits all’

Truth-telling can occur differently in different communities. Many workshop participants noted that their local councils had engaged in more Truth-telling activities than they had realised. Some had occurred organically or without being earmarked as a designated Truth-telling activity.

Truth-telling activities do not need to be a ‘big’ project or activity in scale or cost– they may be, for example, small actions that show the historical and ongoing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence in, and cultural connection to, the area.

For example, something as simple as flying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags on the local council building every day, instead of a few times a year on specific dates, sends a strong message to the wider community that the local council acknowledges the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and values engagement in reconciliation.

Similarly, engaging in dual naming of significant places or ensuring that a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgment of Country is part of ‘business as usual’ has an educative function, but also shows that local councils respect the long history and connection of First Nations peoples to the lands on which the council area is located.

Workshop reflection (NSW)

“Don’t underestimate the power of the small! Once you know the story, you can share the story. Everything doesn’t need to be in a committee. Elders don’t want to be on committees but they do want to be heard. Step back from all the structures and bureaucracy – grassroots is where real stuff happens.”

The scale and nature of Truth-telling activities workshop participants were involved in had generally been determined by the history of the local area, the input of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and the capacity, resources and willingness of the local council. Larger Truth-telling activities (such as memorialisation projects) were often led by community champions or local reconciliation groups, external to the local council, but which the council was able to support and engage with.

Truth-telling can take place within the Council

Most workshop participants acknowledged that Truth-telling could be broader than an externally focused project or activity. Truth-telling can also be an element of the internal business and operations of local councils, so that Councillors and staff members are given the opportunity to reflect on their historical and cultural perspectives. This might occur through cultural awareness training or opportunities to engage meaningfully with representatives on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory committee.

What are the challenges of local Truth-telling?

Meaningful engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community

A common theme throughout the workshops was the need for *meaningful* engagement by local councils and community groups with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Several participants noted that local councils may have a committee or working group it engages with, but if this is undertaken in a tokenistic way, any trust or goodwill in the relationship will be undermined. It also means that the Truth-telling activity may be misdirected, or cause offence or harm.

Several challenges were identified by workshop participants as potential obstacles to meaningful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities:

- *Knowing who to engage with:* Local councils may have several Aboriginal groups in their council area but the council may not be aware of who speaks for which parts of Country or which cultural perspective matters. It is important for local councils to know who to build relationships with, and to know what the cultural protocols are for an area.
- *'Burn out' for community members:* Often it is the same Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people volunteering their time in community. This can result in people feeling overloaded and burnt out.

A common concern raised in the workshops was consideration of appropriate remuneration and respect for the knowledge and information that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people share in these community processes.

Strong emphasis was also placed on the need to be cognisant of 'cultural loading' – the pressure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff can feel if they are constantly sought out for, or relied upon to have information and 'solutions'.

- *Council timeframes and processes:* This broader issue is discussed separately below, but has implications for the ability of local councils to engage in with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities in ways that are flexible and culturally appropriate.

Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be approached differently to other council stakeholder engagement. The priority should be developing a relationship of trust and respect.

- *Listening, not teaching:* Council staff or Councillors may be used to being in a position of teaching, advocating or advising. In this instance, it is critical to focus on listening and learning, and to approach engagement with an open mind.

Workshop reflection (WA)

“Relationship building takes a long time. It’s not always about local government projects and short term gains.”

Participants noted that, all parties, especially local councils, must consider the language used to ensure that the words used to talk about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture are not condescending, paternalistic nor patronising.

For example, what term does the Council use to describe the invasion/colonisation/settlement of Australia? Active listening and awareness of language are key to Truth-telling – and people need to be ready for this.

Workshop reflection (WA)

“Truth-telling is about listening and understanding, not about responding. It’s about sitting down, having a conversation. Mob can tell whether someone is telling the truth or not by non-verbal communication. As a nation we need to be grown up enough to have an uncomfortable conversation. We’re still trying to deal with the inherent human rights issues in our own country. What we should be doing is getting our own conversations right so we can go out into the world and show people how it’s done.”

Council timeframes and processes

All participants who had engaged in Truth-telling agreed that these activities can be a long time in the making, but that the process itself is part of the Truth-telling.

Not only can the information gathering process take a significant amount of time, space must be made for people to share their truths. Given the sensitivity of the material being dealt with, these processes cannot be forced, rushed, nor confined into a rigid timeframe.

Expectations about Truth-telling need to be managed and kept realistic to allow for unforeseen expansion of timeframes and plan changes.

Workshop participants identified that internal council processes can at times be lengthy and bureaucratic, making it difficult to get the approvals required to commit to Truth-telling activities, and to engage council staff in a Truth-telling process.

Dealing with sensitive material and hard conversations

Many participants spoke about the need to create a safe space for Truth-telling and to ensure any stories or other information shared are dealt with respectfully and in accordance with any relevant cultural protocols.

The fear of saying or doing the ‘wrong’ thing can be a significant barrier to engaging in Truth-telling for council workers. Truth-telling requires some hard conversations and not everyone knows how to have those conversations. Truth-telling is about listening and understanding, not always about responding.

Workshop participants observed that some of the stories and truths shared as part of Truth-telling processes can be highly confronting for non-Indigenous people, because it may challenge the core beliefs about their history and their ownership of land.

Strong support was expressed for cultural awareness and cultural competency training as a mandatory component of any induction or training and development plan for councillors, senior executive and staff in councils. It is especially important for senior decision makers to have this training, as their support is critical for the success of any Truth-telling process.

Inadequate resourcing

Limited, inadequate or non-existent resourcing were identified as significant barriers for local councils in undertaking Truth-telling activities. In particular, participants noted, it is often the staff resources and capacity available for Truth-telling that are very limited and spread across a range of other council activities. Local Councils may also be unaware of the local appetite for Truth-telling and therefore don’t allocate funds towards potential activities.

A related challenge is the need for local councils to create safe spaces for Truth-telling and to consider how equipped they are to respond to information they receive as part of Truth-telling, and how they will respect and keep this information safe. If the resources to do this are inadequate, the Truth-telling, and the relationships that support it, may be undermined.

Lack of ownership or ‘buy in’ across the organisation

Buy-in from council executives, councillors and other business units, was considered a significant challenge by many workshop participants. Instead of longer-term, ongoing Truth-telling projects, there was often a propensity for councils to focus on higher profile, once a year events like NAIDOC Week or National Reconciliation Week.

Staff turnover was another barrier in progressing Truth-telling activities in local councils. When staff leave they take with them their corporate knowledge and their passion for Truth-telling, and councils can lose their internal champion for Truth-telling. This resulted in progress already made falling by the way side if the role is not picked up in subsequent staff recruitment.

For local councils with Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs), this sometimes manifested as the RAP being the responsibility of one person or team and not a priority for elected members, executive team and other staff.

What are the opportunities of local Truth-telling?

Workshop reflection (NSW)

“Local Government needs to realise that we own such a long history in Australia – they can gain a lot of pride from that. If they can understand the true nature of the knowledge of Aboriginal people they can gain from that. They are co-owners of that.”

Local Councils’ role and position in the community

Councils are physically located in a local landscape amongst local landmarks – this can be a powerful starting point to develop Truth-telling resources for the local community about local history. Councils can be in good position to use their resources to facilitate research into local history.

Several workshop participants observed that often various versions of local history are publicly documented, but may have not been widely shared or sought out in the broader community.

Councils are well placed to collaborate with local organisations and play a leadership role in the local community. Several workshop participants reflected on involvement in activities where Council did not lead the project, but instead partnered with other organisations or supported a committee.

Some participants felt their Councils’ Truth-telling activities had led the way for other organisations in their community to take similar steps (e.g. Acknowledgement of Country, flying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flag, supporting the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to secure their artefacts or cultural knowledge).

There are many ways in which councils can provide in-kind support for Truth-telling initiatives, including publicising events, allowing use of council land, using council resources to maintain land, providing safe spaces (if appropriate) and providing leadership in the community for people to speak about hard truths.

Councils can also show innovation and leadership by thinking about which local businesses they engage with, how they use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and other intellectual property, as well as by displaying an ‘Acknowledgement of Country’ in their buildings, spaces and signage, as well as educational signs to explain the history of an area.

Workshop reflection (NSW)

“The local council supported a community group that wanted to create a memorial to recognise some of the Aboriginal and colonial history of the local area. The council’s support of the project made it easier for the wider community to embrace the memorial project and gave ‘permission’ for non-Aboriginal residents to share their oral history of the area.”

The council also provided practical support such as maintaining the land the memorial was set on, printing brochures about the project and providing staff to undertake traffic control for the memorial service. The contribution by the council cemented its role as part of the local community and showed it could have a role in community relations and local level Truth-telling.”

Integration across Council’s business and operations

Many participants were frustrated that local councils often saw Truth-telling activities as limited to certain days or weeks in a year (e.g. NAIDOC, National Reconciliation Week). They noted that there can be many opportunities for Truth-telling across all of a council’s work, and council’s should be encouraged to embed local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture across their business and activities.

Many local councils were already taking this approach, for example by incorporating education about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture into redevelopment of public spaces, artwork and signage, marketing, land management, library / school holiday activities, pre-school and out of hours school care, and in Acknowledgements of Country or a Welcome to Country.

Integration across core business: *Aboriginal Interpretation Strategy (NSW)*

Campbelltown City Council’s (NSW) Social Plan identified 10 key social strategies of focus to strengthen and improve the local community. From the Social Plan the development and implementation of an ‘Aboriginal Strategy’ occurred as a way to address and respond to identified priorities for action to improve areas of disparity between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people in the local community.

The council’s Aboriginal Interpretation Strategy was developed in response to specific issues identified in the Social Plan, as well as issues identified in state, national and international documents on Aboriginal people.

It was created in consultation with Aboriginal communities to demonstrate how Aboriginal cultural values are to be integrated into the city in future. *The aim of the strategy is “to provide a clear pathway for engaging with the Campbelltown Aboriginal community to inform how their cultural value is integrated into the built form.”*¹⁵ It was developed to:

¹⁵ *Our Voice Our Place – Draft Aboriginal Interpretation Strategy* August 2019 Campbelltown City Council. Available at: <https://www.campbelltown.nsw.gov.au/HaveYourSay/HYSAboriginalInterpretationStrategy>

- Increase Aboriginal perspectives in public spaces and their management to create awareness and acknowledgement of the importance of the Aboriginal residents in the community and the rich local Aboriginal history and culture.

- Create a welcoming environment and encourage use of public spaces by the local Aboriginal community. There is a limited Aboriginal perspective in Council's buildings, leisure centres and other public places. Developing an Aboriginal perspective will support public awareness and Aboriginal engagement in these spaces.

The strategy was developed through research, demographic analysis and consultation with Aboriginal individuals, families and the local community. The contributions of the Aboriginal community are acknowledged and further opportunities to contribute are identified in the strategy.

This document promotes positive attitudes to Aboriginal people in Campbelltown, as well as identifying the council's role in recognising the cultural connection Aboriginal people have to the landscape. The document addresses where Council can support closing the gap in areas of disadvantage for Aboriginal people compared to the general population. The strategy also provides a basis for policy and action by government, business and non-government sectors.

Existing consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Many participants noted that local councils already have to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through various existing processes (e.g. culture and heritage processes, co-management arrangements). This means the infrastructure is already in place to support engagement which can be used to explore and develop Truth-telling processes. If engagement with these committees or working groups is meaningful and respectful, this is a significant opportunity to support Truth-telling. Many participants had experienced this engagement as a form of Truth-telling in itself, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of a committee had developed relationships and shared their stories with non-Indigenous members of a committee.

Participants also observed that creating a space for engagement between Elders and Councillors is a very powerful force to support Truth-telling with a local council.

Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs)

A Reconciliation Action Plan is a strategic document that supports an organisation's business plan. It includes practical actions to drive an organisation's contribution to reconciliation both internally and in the communities in which it operates.

To advance the five dimensions of reconciliation, Reconciliation Australia's RAP program supports organisations to develop respectful relationships and create meaningful opportunities with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Each of the four RAP types (Reflect, Innovate, Stretch, Elevate) set out the minimum elements required from an organisation to build strong relationships, respect and opportunities within the organisation and wider community.

Several councils participating in the workshops found a RAP to be an important tool to identify opportunities for Truth-telling across their work and to build in accountability for following through on Truth-telling activities that were adopted.

For those councils with a RAP, it was agreed it was important to identify the RAP as a priority and send a message internally and externally about the value of Truth-telling. It was also considered that the RAP allowed Truth-telling to be viewed as 'core business' of the council's work, rather than it being seen as something additional.

Whether or not a council has a RAP, or is considering engaging with Truth-telling, another important consideration for workshop participants was to use this mechanism as an opportunity to consider their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment was identified as a means to embed cultural awareness and a different cultural lens within the business, as well as to enhance employment opportunities and economic development within the community.

What could support Local Councils to engage in Truth-telling?

Workshop participants in SA, NSW and WA considered what would support them to drive Truth-telling in their local councils, with a particular focus on practical resources that would be of assistance.

A key suggestion was that Reconciliation Australia develop a national online portal accessible to all local councils. The portal could include a range of Truth-telling resources such as an online toolkit, clearinghouse and supporting resources that could provide a range of information and guidance including Frequently Asked Questions.

These resources could communicate the importance of Truth-telling for local councils, as well as specific and in-depth examples of Truth-telling projects around the country.

The portal could also include an online network for council officers engaged in or interested in Truth-telling activities to connect with each other

Further workshops on Truth-telling including how to ensure engagement is meaningful and culturally appropriate, and how to create safe spaces to ensure stories are treated with respect and in a culturally safe way; was also proposed as something that would assist local councils.

Developing resources that would assist a local council to hold a workshop on Truth-telling with other councils or community organisations or stakeholders could be considered as part of that.

Participants also noted that Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) are a good tool for achieving reconciliation objectives, including Truth-telling. Councils with RAPs could be supported to explore how the RAP framework can be used to support Truth-telling. Councils without RAPs could consider developing one and including Truth-telling in that process.

It was also proposed that Reconciliation Australia undertake research and development of detailed case studies of local level Truth-telling from around the country, particularly those involving local councils. This would assist local councils to learn from those examples and act as a starting point for the development of a local council Truth-telling 'best practice guide'.

Participants also discussed the possibility of Reconciliation Australia and/or state reconciliation councils considering whether/how they can be available to provide assistance to local council staff who are involved with Truth-telling activities.

Conclusion

As momentum builds on progressing Truth-telling across the country, the three workshops held in NSW, South Australia and Western Australia demonstrated an enormous appetite among the council participants, for councils to play an active role in Truth-telling in their communities.

Discussion also highlighted the many ways that councils are starting to play such a role. It was clear too, that there is a need to develop further understanding and capacity regarding how councils can best support truth telling, and what resources they might need to do that.

The workshops and the report offer strong suggestions for actively supporting Truth-telling at a local level, with involvement from local councils. As local councils continue to consider how best they can play a role, these will help inform initiatives to support that work.

Such work at a local level can ultimately help build stronger relationships within the community, and between the community and council, and progress towards a reconciled nation.

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