



Expert Reference Panel on Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health (ERPATSIEH)

# ERPATSIEH Action Plan

**2025–2030**

**en**HEALTH



# Overview

The Expert Reference Panel on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health (ERPATSIEH) supports the Environmental Health Standing Committee (enHealth) to deliver its objectives in relation to improving environmental health conditions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. ERPATSIEH works closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community representatives and community-controlled bodies to provide advice and strategic direction on enhancing environmental health in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and develop guidance and resources on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health.

## Key focus areas

The enHealth Environmental Health Strategic Plan 2024–2027 endorses the following strategies to improve the environmental health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia.

- Promote environmental health as part of broader health care responses and build and sustain partnerships with non-health agencies whose activities influence health outcomes – such as healthy housing programs.
- Grow and support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health workforce.
- Collaborate with relevant government and non-government stakeholders to co-design and share resources that support best practices and evaluate service delivery in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Identify preventable health conditions influenced by environmental health standards in communities to better inform environmental health responses and referral pathways.
- Review and advise on national policies and guidance documents that influence the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to ensure environmental health is appropriately considered.
- Review climate change and adaptation information and trends as they relate to environmental health conditions and risk management in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

# Guiding principles

The following principles have been developed by ERPATSEIH to guide the actions and decisions nationally that underpin each strategy and project – and shape the development of environmental health programs, best practices and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- **Access to service**

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should have access to, and benefit from, effective environmental health programs and services. Good environmental health conditions are an essential requirement for maintaining and improving the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- **Cultural respect**

Environmental health programs, policies and services will be developed and delivered with regard to, and respect for, the cultural diversity, rights and values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- **A holistic and collaborative approach**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health policies, programs and services should be holistic in approach and involve cross agency consultation and community engagement.

- **Skilled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be actively recruited, trained and supported to provide environmental health services and be adequately resourced and recompensed commensurate with their skills and experience.

- **Resource allocation and coordination**

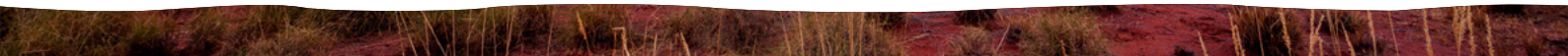
Environmental health programs and services will be evidence-based and delivered with optimal use of resources in consideration of long-term sustainability.

- **No survey without service**

All environmental health surveys, research and data collection must include a service component to address issues as they are identified.

- **Primordial prevention**

Environmental health services and programs should be focused on early intervention and a proactive approach to preventable health conditions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homes and communities.



**Figure 1: Guiding principles for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health**

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# Approach

This Plan seeks to improve the body of knowledge, best practices, resources and workforce skills to better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health programs and service delivery. The Plan aligns with ERPATSIEH and enHealth principles and seeks to inform environmental health actions and behaviours that address the [Closing the Gap priority reforms](#).

ERPATSIEH members commit to support this plan and act in the broader interests of improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The guiding principles underpinning the development of holistic, culturally safe, sustainable guidance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health programs and workforce is provided in figure 1. This commitment is realised through a partnership between jurisdictional health departments providing funding and support for the diverse range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community settings where environmental health programs are delivered.

ERPATSIEH membership includes jurisdictional representation from both health departments and from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioner workforces. It also includes representation from Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. ERPATSIEH is particularly informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates attending the biennial national conference. The importance of this conference as a gathering to share successes and learnings, to yarn and trade ideas, to raise issues for national debate and instill an understanding that environmental health practitioners are not alone cannot be underestimated.

The following priority objectives have been identified by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health delegates through engagement at national conferences and are endorsed by ERPATSIEH. They inform the approach for ERPATSIEH to continue to support at a strategic level as well as specific projects for the next year.



# Strategic intent for ERPATSIEH

Based on agreed objectives

| Advocacy and partnerships   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>Objective 5:</b></p> <p>Influence national strategies and guidance documents affecting the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to ensure they incorporate best practice environmental health</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Review relevant national plans</li><li>• Contribute to Closing the Gap technical groups</li></ul>  |
| <p><b>Objective 7:</b></p> <p>Advocate to strengthen the relationship between housing and environmental health sectors</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Engage with Commonwealth and jurisdictional housing organisations to link environmental health with housing improvements and maintenance services</li><li>• Establish jurisdictional collaboration between environmental health services and housing maintenance and repair programs</li><li>• Work with the housing sector to improve development and implementation of suitable minimum standards for houses</li></ul> |
| <p><b>Objective 9:</b></p> <p>Understand the impact of climate change on environmental health and support adaptation</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Work with partner agencies and organisations to better understand the health impacts of climate change on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people</li><li>• Advocate for climate adaptation strategies that support environmental health risk management and workforce capability</li></ul>   |

## Evidence-based best practice

### Objective 1:

Identify the preventable health issues influenced by environmental health conditions

- Identify International Code of Diseases (ICD-10) codes for acute and chronic environmental health related diseases
- Advocate for the use of these conditions to evaluate health outcomes improved by application and design of environmental health service delivery
- Advocate for the use of these conditions to evaluate health outcomes improved by housing maintenance and refurbishments and initiatives under Closing the Gap Target 9A

### Objective 6:

Include environmental health as part of broader health care responses to managing preventable health conditions

- Collaborate with primary care providers to develop strategies to integrate environmental health responses to clinic generated need
- Develop a referral model for clinics to offer an environmental health response
- Advocate for the uptake of environmental health referrals

## Resources and tools

### Objective 3:

Develop and share resources that support and promote critical personal and home hygiene practices and disease prevention

- Review the range of jurisdictional and international resources available for promoting hygiene in the home environment
- Provide a platform that allows free access to a range of resources suitable for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health workforce to use with the communities they service
- Develop guidance information and resources for the management of house-based risks associated with preventive health conditions and health status

### Objective 4:

Promote and support the Healthy Living Practices (HLPs)

- Support the promotion and use of healthy living practices (HLPs) in environmental health programs
- Encourage the use of HLPs to assess the ability of a home to provide functional health hardware

## Workforce development

### **Objective 8:**

Grow and support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health workforce

- Sustain the biennial national conference as the peak forum for this workforce to gather, exchange learnings and improve programs
- Promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health presentations and participation at national forums for health, housing and health promotion
- Support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health workforce and maintain consultation with them to best inform the shape and direction of future programs and workforce capability
- Engage with the National Aboriginal Community Control Health Organisation (NACCHO) – the Commonwealth Government and jurisdictional health departments, to grow and fund the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health workforce

# Specific projects for ERPATSIEH for 2025/26

| Project   | Rational  | Lead             |
|---|---|------------------|
| <p><b>1. Develop an agreed reference list of ICD10/11 codes (health conditions) that are influenced by environmental health factors</b></p> | <p>An agreed list will provide a reference for research and analysis of programs delivered by environmental health practitioners and allow for an ability to determine the impact these services have on health outcomes. Environmental health related health conditions can affect everyone and are preventable. Environmental health as primordial prevention is recognised, yet remains poorly funded and supported, especially regarding service delivery capability and capacity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and populations. Gathering an evidence base for what is funded and delivered in community against results is important for any future environmental health program.</p> <p>An agreed list of environmental health related health conditions endorsed by ERPATSIEH could be applied more broadly to determine the impact that investments and efforts in primary care, health promotion and housing have on improving health outcomes. The Closing the Gap target 9A (housing) references rates of rheumatic heart disease as a key performance indicator (KPI) yet there are better markers than this single end-stage disease at community clinic and hospital levels that could be used to evaluate changes in health outcomes resulting from investment in housing maintenance and refurbishments.</p> <p>Any list must consider other influencing factors for environmental health related conditions. Causation is broader than any single issue and managing this requires partnerships with other agencies and services that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. However, recognition of health conditions associated with environmental risks is important in the planning of actions and strategies that manage these and improve health status.</p> | <p>ERPATSIEH</p> |

| Project  | Rational   | Lead                          |
|--|--|-------------------------------|
| <p><b>2. Review the enHealth Environmental Health Practitioner Manual and develop resources to support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce working with Indigenous communities to improve health outcomes by primordial prevention</b></p> | <p>The Environmental Health Training Manual is a legacy document that has long been consulted by trainees and trainers in environmental health. It was last reviewed in 2010 and while many parts of the manual remain current and useful, there is an opportunity to improve understanding of the diseases influenced by environmental health and living conditions. The introduction of healthy homes assessments and development of clinic-generated environmental health referrals are more recent practices where there is a more concentrated effort to work with people to improve conditions in the home environment. It means that the workforce responding to these and working with people in their homes should have access to resources to assist disease transmission awareness, prevention strategies and ways of imparting knowledge that will improve health outcomes.</p> <p>Consequently, there is a strong need to prepare supporting fact sheets and information that can be shared via digital platforms for environmental health practitioners in their newer roles. Chapters of the manual that need to be enhanced relate to disease aetiology, identification of health risks in the home environment and promotion of hygiene and the healthy living practices. Review of the manual may not necessarily result in a revised manual, but the development of resources that support the newer best practices of the workforce. The approach for any home-based prevention resource should provide access for the workforce and the home dweller. Focus on cultural safety and appropriateness when making decisions.</p> | <p>Western Australia (WA)</p> |



| Project   | Rational   | Lead             |
|---|--|------------------|
| <p><b>3. Develop a clinic-based model for EH referral and response to environment-related health conditions. The framework should connect primary care services with environmental health practitioners</b></p> | <p>The level of maturity of clinic-generated referrals for environmental health services varies across services and jurisdictions. For many it is a new concept that is being trialed and for others it has evolved into a model that suits the local environmental health service. The concept is universally supported by the workforce and primary care services – both government and community-controlled. However, there is uncertainty as to the required response to a referral and when and how to close them off.</p> <p>Development of an implementation model would assist with its introduction to environmental health service providers and clinics that can generate the request. A standardised model would identify the critical minimal elements that must be met to adequately provide an appropriate response. The model must also allow for local variation so it is adaptive and responsive to local and cultural needs. A longer-term proposal for the referral process is to seek inclusion in the Medicare scheme – something that would require uniform application. Regardless, the need to have guidance for a best practice model of response to environmental health referrals is critical to maintaining the link between primary care and environmental health.</p> | <p>WA</p>        |
| <p><b>4. Map Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health programs in each jurisdiction</b></p>   | <p>The state of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health workforce is understood by each jurisdiction but not beyond. Each state or territory manages the responsibility of running a program for its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. Mapping the workforce by jurisdiction would help establish a strong baseline by identifying actual workforce numbers, employment levels, employer types, expertise and experience, position titles and seniority, pay rates and qualifications.</p> <p>This would allow for comparison of funding, application, outreach and capacity and best inform service gaps and needs. Training needs for the workforce should be identified so the national group can better advocate for workforce growth and training and support initiatives to sustain accredited and job-ready training.</p>   | <p>ERPATSIEH</p> |

