

West news

Connecting and partnering
with Aboriginal communities

Issue 7 – Summer 2021



*Aboriginal Community
Home Connect
ambassador and
AFL football player
Marlion Pickett*

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Welcome to *West news*

The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and pays its respect to the ongoing living cultures of Aboriginal peoples.

This edition of *West news* includes updates on major initiatives taking place across the state that will have significant impacts on our Aboriginal communities; profiles a high-achieving Aboriginal barrister; and, reports on projects that are helping people stay connected to culture and community.

We check in with one of the West's representatives at the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, Uncle Michael 'Mookeye' Bell, about the assembly's progress in setting the groundwork for Treaty.

Matthew Duggan, the Director of Aboriginal Housing at Housing Victoria (the new agency set up to manage Victoria's social housing system) talks to *West news* about the work being done under one of the \$5.3 billion Big Housing Build program's funding streams to create a dedicated Aboriginal social housing system, as well as increase culturally safe housing options for Aboriginal people through mainstream providers.

There is more good housing news from

Aboriginal Housing Victoria, which is spearheading the rollout of the government's Aboriginal Rapid Housing Response program. This program will see \$35 million spent on improvements to Aboriginal community housing.

We spend a fascinating five minutes with Linda Lovett, a proud *Bunurong* and *Trawlwoolway* woman. Linda, who now works in Child Protection, was Victoria's first Aboriginal barrister. You'll be even more impressed by her career success after reading her story.

Ballarat & District Aboriginal Cooperative is using Burron Guli Lore to teach boys what it is to be a man through a successful program that emphasises love, respect,

safety and responsibility.

A new support service funded by the Victorian Government, Aboriginal Community Home Connect, is helping Aboriginal connections are also being fostered by a new support service funded by the Victorian Government. The Aboriginal Community Home Connect service aims to help Aboriginal social housing tenants maintain their links with community, as well as check on their wellbeing. AFL football player Marlion Pickett, who features on the cover of this edition, is an ambassador for Aboriginal Community Home Connect.

We trust you enjoy this edition of *West news*.

Deputy Secretary's message

Dear Readers

Greetings from Dja Dja Wurrung Country.

In this edition of *West news*, it is with regret that I must share the news that West Division's Aboriginal Engagement Unit (AEU) Manager Marcus Clarke has resigned to take up the position of CEO at Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation, a role he was first seconded to in 2019.

I'd like to acknowledge the major impact Marcus has made during his three years with the AEU specifically, and the department more generally. A proud Gunditjmara-Kirrae Whurrong man, Marcus came to the department following his stint as the CEO of Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative. It was under his leadership as the inaugural manager of the AEU that the unit

first became the valued resource for West Division and the department it is today; ensuring the Aboriginal voice is heard and represented at a senior level. Marcus played a key role in developing the department's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety Framework – a framework which continues to shape our work today.

West news was one of Marcus's innovations and this summer edition continues its tradition of keeping you up-to-date with some of the fantastic initiatives taking place across West Division. As we begin the process to replace Marcus, we wish him well in his role at Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation.

In other news, we are looking forward to enjoying greater freedoms

across the state as we reach key vaccination milestones. It has been a long journey to get to this stage and I am incredibly proud of the work of our ACCOs, Traditional Owner organisations and our workforce in supporting Aboriginal communities throughout the last 18 months.

In the West, we continue to focus on improving cultural safety and facilitating self-determination. We recognise and celebrate the cultural knowledge that Aboriginal people bring to our workforce to support this journey. With that in mind, on 15 September 2021, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing launched a new Aboriginal Workforce Strategy. The West achieved the 3 per cent target in the previous strategy, and we



are demonstrating our commitment to achieving the new 4 per cent target by 2026 by establishing a range of Aboriginal Special Measures positions over the next few months.

The department also launched a new child protection recruitment campaign, *Go Where You're Needed*. Growing our child protection workforce means greater opportunities to recruit Aboriginal Child Protection Practitioners to provide guidance and help foster culturally safe practices that keep families together, children safe, and meet the objectives of the

Shane Cumming message

Kaya (Noongar greeting) everyone,

Firstly, I'd like to support Deputy Secretary Paul Smith's comments about the strong legacy that Marcus Clarke leaves the West Division's Aboriginal Engagement Unit (AEU) in the wake of his permanent move to Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation. Marcus has been a great role model for Aboriginal staff within the department and, through his support of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety Framework, his legacy will be an increase in participation by Aboriginal employees in mainstream Victorian health, human and community services.

Wungurilwil Gapgapduir Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement, Roadmap for Reform: Strong families, Strong Children and Closing the Gap policies.

I am often heartened by good news stories from across the West that demonstrate the importance of the cultural knowledge of our staff in exploring options and securing good outcomes for Aboriginal children.

We will continue to foster a supportive and respectful workplace culture that values the expertise and perspectives of all Aboriginal employees and strives to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal people, families, children, and communities.

I hope you enjoy this edition of *West news*.

Paul Smith
Deputy Secretary
West Division

It's ironic that the news of his move is being announced in the *West news*, a publication that was one of Marcus's many innovations. Marcus launched *West news* four years ago, with a brief to showcase best practice, connections and partnerships between the department and the local Aboriginal communities in the West.

Whilst Marcus will be sorely missed within the department, I look forward to continuing to work with him in his new role, where I have no doubt he will be an asset to the Eastern Maar people in West Victoria.

In other department changes, our esteemed and respected colleague, Syd Fry is currently taking some 12 months well-earned leave. We wish Syd all the best for a relaxing and peaceful break.

I'd also like to welcome Jodie Rantall to the team. Jodie has been seconded from Child Protection in Wimmera South West and is making a valuable contribution to the AEU team with her knowledge and work experiences.

An important focus for the AEU throughout 2020/21 has been supporting the work of the West Division Aboriginal Governance Committee (WDAGC) and Koori Caucus, which ensure the Aboriginal voice is involved in the creation of divisional priorities, as well as providing oversight and evaluating outcome measures.

The WDAGC has now met eight times and the Koori Caucus is now firmly established. Jason Kanoa chaired its fifth meeting in October. The main priorities for the WDAGC and Koori Caucus are to:

- Set the division's funding options process for the \$2.2 million current and future funding for the Korin Korin Balit-Djak: Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety framework (KKBD), with monies now to be allocated equally from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and the Department of Health.
- Establish other funding opportunities for KKBD from 2022–23 and beyond.
- Develop a 'collective voice' for West Division Koori Caucus members and ACCOs, especially in terms of the work of the Aboriginal Children's Forum and the development of the upcoming Aboriginal Health Strategy and related activities.
- Engage community members in the development of the Aboriginal Governance and Accountability Framework (AGAF), the Community Conversations/ Consultations Forums and as representatives



on Area Aboriginal Governance Committees, similarly to our Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees and Dhelk Dja Chairs.

- Support collaborative efforts at the divisional and area level to improve outcomes for vulnerable Aboriginal young people and those in out-of-home care.

Of course, our work in assisting communities in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic continues.

Vaccinations are vital to keep our mob safe. You can make a time to get the jab at your local Aboriginal Health Service or call 1800 675 398 to find a vaccination centre near you.

Please, stay safe.

Shane Cumming,
Acting Manager,
Aboriginal Engagement
Unit, West Division

Creation story

We would like to thank and acknowledge Lindi Dietzel, the artist behind the stunning new *West news* cover artwork, 'Creation Story'.

'It depicts the story of the creation of our family, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal in conception surrounded by the lands, waters and the deep connection to our ancient country,' Lindi says.

Lindi is a proud Aboriginal woman, born on Boonwurrung Country and now living on

Wadawurrung Country. As part of the Stolen Generation, Lindi picked up the pieces of her mother's story and her ties back to the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans and the Yorta Yorta Nation. Art for Lindi has been at times a means of therapeutic expression, at times a way to connect to culture and, at all times, a connection to her mother.

In addition to being an artist, Lindi is a Senior Adviser with the West Division's Aboriginal Engagement Unit.

Pouring foundations of Aboriginal hous

As part of the Victorian Government's \$5.3 billion Big Housing Build, work is underway to deliver more homes and a more culturally safe housing system for Aboriginal Victorians.

News of the \$5.3 billion Big Housing Build (BHB) in November 2020 was timely for Aboriginal Victorians. Just months earlier, the Victorian Government launched the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework, *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort* (Gunditjmara for every Aboriginal person has a home). With a vision of ensuring Aboriginal Victorians achieve quality housing outcomes in a generation, the framework set out a roadmap to overcoming the barriers that Aboriginal Victorians face in accessing affordable and appropriate housing, including home ownership. The framework outlined the shocking reality of housing for Aboriginal people in Victoria with the number in need of a homeless service growing by 34 per cent over four years and one in five Aboriginal families living in social housing as cost and apparent racism locks many out of the private

market. The framework made it clear targets were required to increase the amount of secure social housing available to the Aboriginal community, a recommendation that was taken on board by the government with the BHB committing to allocate 10 per cent of new social housing stock to Aboriginal renters. 'All homes will be allocated to people on the Victorian Housing Register (VHR) — which is the combined wait list for public and community housing throughout Victoria. While Aboriginal communities are overrepresented on the VHR, fortunately the Big Housing Build and the framework will go some way to addressing this issue by providing Aboriginal Victorians with the safety, security and dignity of a home,' says Matthew Duggan, the Director of Aboriginal Housing at Housing Victoria (the new agency set up to manage Victoria's social

housing system). Matthew also says the BHB has provided an opportunity to tackle some of the framework's more ambitious goals of creating an Aboriginal housing sector.

develop an Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework and has been rolling it out to its member organisations since mid-last year. 'What we're seeing is a whole range of community

Fast facts

1 in 10 social housing applicants are Aboriginal

10% of homeless Victorians are Aboriginal

1 in 5 Aboriginal households live in social housing

43% of Aboriginal Victorians own/are buying a home compared to 68% of the general community

Source: Victoria's Big Housing Build and *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort*, The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework

Of particular significance is the work on the *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort* governance arrangements, which is being guided by Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations (ACCOs) and Traditional Owner Corporations (TOCs). These arrangements enable Aboriginal organisations to both participate in the BHB and grow the Aboriginal housing sector, including the establishment of ACCOs as registered housing providers. At present, Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) is the only registered Aboriginal community housing provider in the state.

Ensuring the mainstream community housing sector is more accessible for Aboriginal renters is also key. The community housing peak body, the Community Housing Industry Association Victoria (CHIA Vic), has worked with AHV to

housing organisations that are really leaning into this process and being supportive and making sure they are doing the right thing by Aboriginal clients. So, it's a whole-system approach,' Matthew says. Other positive steps for Aboriginal people are being taken across the continuum of housing pathways. These include a review of the homelessness service system that will identify the systematic barriers faced by Aboriginal communities and refine

Helpline supports social housing tenants

A support service for Aboriginal Victorians in social housing has assisted more than 280 tenants since it was launched in March by Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency. AFL footy player Marlion Pickett is the

ambassador for the Victorian Government funded program, Aboriginal Community Home Connect, which is providing regular wellbeing check-ups to tenants who opt in to receive support or just to have a yarn.

The Aboriginal Community Home Connect number is 1800 313 030.

Explainer

Social housing is an umbrella term for subsidised housing provided to people on low incomes. It includes public housing, which is owned by the government, and community housing, which is managed and/or owned by not-for-profit organisations.

ing system

the system to better meet the needs of Aboriginal people.

'The need is clear,' Matthew says.

'By 2036 we have to create an additional 27,000 homes to meet the demand of new Aboriginal households in Victoria. The Big Housing Build has really given us a positive foundation to set the sector up in a way that will meet this demand and improve the lives of many Aboriginal people,' Matthew says.



Aboriginal Wellness Foundation dancers at the launch of Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort

Tenants to benefit from housing upgrades

Aboriginal renters in Melbourne's west will soon see the benefits of a multi-million-dollar package of housing improvements and upgrades, with auditors currently evaluating homes to prioritise the funding rollout.

The Victorian Government announced the funding last year as part of its Aboriginal Rapid Housing Response Program (ARHRP); allocating \$35 million to improve Aboriginal community housing. Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) led a successful consolidated bid for

the funding with 18 other Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) that have housing portfolios, including eligible Traditional Owner

'We've hit the ground running in rolling out the program, with property condition assessments providing a wealth of information about our collective properties' needs. We're looking forward to working with our contractors over the coming months to complete the recommended upgrades,' Darren says.

groups and eligible Aboriginal Trusts.

AHV has more than 1,550 properties in its portfolio, with 28 per cent located in the western region of Victoria. AHV's CEO, Darren Smith, says despite delays caused by COVID-19, an audit of AHV properties is well underway and some improvement works have already begun.

'The ARHRP is also allowing us to restore previously uninhabitable properties. We're delighted to have already welcomed our first new family into a vacant property, which received a complete refurbishment as part of the ARHRP.'

A total of about 400 dwellings are expected to receive substantial upgrades and hundreds more will benefit from improvements. Works are expected to include heating and cooling upgrades to improve household energy efficiency, insulation upgrades, cyclical

SPM Assets is completing property condition assessments for AHV



Social housing Frank Scerri is looking forward to seeing the ARHRP's benefits for the community

maintenance, and new deadlocks and master key installations.

The success of the consortia approach to the funding bid has also provided organisations with a self-determination led model for future funding partnerships across the Victorian Aboriginal community sector.

'I'm proud that Aboriginal organisations have led the development of an economic stimulus package of this scale. Given the success of the process, I'm confident it won't be the last time,' Darren says.





Big hearts not big fists

A family violence prevention project targeting Aboriginal boys, or boys with Aboriginal relatives, is challenging stereotypes about what it means to be a man.

The Ballarat & District Aboriginal Cooperative (BADAC) project is called *Burron Guli*, which means Boy to Man in Wadawurung language. BADAC piloted the project in five primary schools in 2019, before extending it to include high school students.

'Underpinning the whole project is Burron Guli

Participant feedback

'Big hearts, not big fists.'

– Student

'I've found out we were family.'

(about another student in the group) – Student

'We've seen a much more settled student, and he has engaged in class a lot more.'

– Teacher

'He has loved the group, talks about it all the time. He has really enjoyed it.'

– Mum

Lore: love, respect, safety, responsibility – that's what it means to be a man,' says Ash Egan, BADAC's Family Violence Project and Justice Manager.

'It's a great project to be involved in because it's preventative, therefore the facilitators get to talk about the way we should be through healthy ideals and pro-social modelling. It's challenging masculinity and gender stereotypes from a young age.'

The project facilitators are local Aboriginal community members Peter Shane Rotumah and Jayden Lillyst, who kick off the sessions by asking the boys to talk about superheroes to reevaluate the stereotype that masculinity is about muscles, violence and aggression.

'It focuses on the idea of what a warrior looks like through a cultural lens, guided by Burron Guli Lore,' Ash says.

Burron Guli includes cultural education and modelling through building positive relationships, increasing emotional intelligence, problem solving and promoting positive attitudes towards women and children. A key message is that being an

Assembly on track

A representative of the First Peoples Assembly of Victoria, which is doing the groundwork for Treaty negotiations with the State Government, is urging Aboriginal people and Torres Islanders living in Victoria to ensure they stay informed and participate in this historic opportunity to secure self determination.

Proud Gunditjmara man and former CEO of Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation, Uncle Michael 'Mookeye' Bell was one of 31 Aboriginal people elected to the assembly in 2019. Uncle Mookeye says he decided to become involved after being inspired as a young fella by the passion of Aunty Sandra Onus and Aunty Christina Franklin who fought for the rights of his mob 40 years ago.

Uncle Mookeye was just a teenager when the women were successful in their High Court action against the multinational company Alcoa, launched to protect the culturally significant Lake Condah – an area that has since been recognised by UNESCO as one of the

world's most extensive and oldest aquaculture systems. The women's success led to the Victorian Government buying back Lake Condah to return it to the Gunditjmara – a decade before the Mabo decision.

We can bring a lot of solutions to those issues in a way that is culturally appropriate for our people and many of the other mobs who live in our societies

Uncle Mookeye is hopeful the assembly will be equally as successful in tackling historic and current injustices facing Aboriginal Victorians. The assembly is working to create a Treaty Negotiation Framework that will set out the ground rules for Treaty talks between the Aboriginal community and the State Government, including who can take part.

The assembly will also establish a Treaty Authority to be an independent umpire and oversee a Self-determination Fund that will level the financial playing field for Aboriginal

Aboriginal man is about what you do.

'One young person wrote that his little brother had made a mess in the living room, and he didn't want to clean it – he wanted to play on his Xbox – but it was his responsibility because mum was cooking and dad was at work, so he cleaned up because he loves his family.'

Ash says the participating schools have been very supportive of the

project and the positive behavioural changes it is able to achieve over six sessions.

'Some of the kids have actually met relatives in the project and one of the big things for us is not just the emphasis on connection to culture, but the link between cultural connection and the sense of community and family.'

Those connections will help ensure the project's messages stick, Ash says.

to Treaty

Victorians during the process.

Whilst the details are yet to be thrashed out, Uncle Mookeye is a strong believer in the need for a Treaty that will mandate the self determination that is essential for Aboriginal Victorians to be able to improve their lives.

'We know that a lot of our mob are over-represented in the criminal justice system, they are over-represented in the out-of-home care system and have quite significant intergenerational trauma. We can bring a lot of solutions to those issues in a way that is culturally appropriate for our people and many of the other mobs who live in our societies. But we want to have Aboriginal leadership in the decision-making processes because right now we're not part of the Treasury that makes the decisions on budgets for Aboriginal people.

'That's what a treaty needs to bring. It needs to include that representation in government, and for that Aboriginal voice in government to be seen equal.'

Uncle Mookeye is calling on Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders to get involved in the consultations that are happening around the state and, for those who have lived in Victoria for three of the past five years, to register with the Aboriginal Electoral Roll. Only those on the roll will be able to vote for their assembly candidates at the 2023 election.

'You won't get a fine if you don't participate in the elections, but it's a



First Peoples' Assembly of
Victoria representative
Uncle Michael
'Mookeye' Bell

very important part of your voice. It's something that we've always asked for and it's a great way of demonstrating your self determination,' Uncle Mookeye says.

The impact of the assembly's work is already being felt with the government acting on its request for a truth telling commission along the lines of those held in countries such as post-apartheid South Africa, which is something that the Aboriginal community has long called for.

The government and the assembly announced the creation of the Yoo-rrook Justice Commission in March, with a mandate to hear First Peoples' stories, establish an official record of the impact of colonisation and make detailed recommendations about practical actions and reforms.

The commission will

inquire into, and report on, the historical systemic injustices perpetrated against First Peoples' since colonisation, including massacres, wars and genocide, as well as ongoing systemic injustices, such as over-representation in the justice system and out-of-home care, and exclusion from economic, social and political life.

'The honesty of the stories is going to be hard on everybody because there's some really brutal things that have taken place inside Victoria over the generations, but it's very important that they're heard...because until everyone gets a good understanding about what went on, we can't move forward,' Uncle Mookeye says.

The commission's interim report is due in June 2022 and a final report is due in June 2024.

Assembly representatives covering the West Division

Uncle Michael 'Mookeye' Bell

Proud Gunditjmara

Jacinta Chaplin

Proud Wadi Wadi

Aunty Charmaine Clarke

Proud Gunditjmara

Dylan Clarke

Barengi Gadgin Land

Council representative

Proud Wotjobaluk

Jordan Edwards

Proud Gunditjmara,

Arrernte and

Wadawurrung

Sean Fagan

Wadawurrung

Traditional Owners

Aboriginal Corporation

representative

Proud Wadawurrung

Raylene Harradine

Proud Latja Latja and

Wotjobaluk

Jason Kelly

Proud Mutthi Mutthi and

Wamba Wamba

Melissa Jones

First People of the

Millewa Mallee

representative

Proud Latje Latje and

Wotjobaluk

Jamie Lowe

Eastern Maar

Aboriginal Corporation

representative

Proud Gunditjmara

Trent Nelson

Dja Dja Wurrung Clan

Aboriginal Corporation

representative

Proud Dja Dja Wurrung

and Yorta Yorta

Aunty Donna Wright

Gunditj Murring

Traditional Owners

Aboriginal Corporation

representative

Proud Kerrupmara of the

Gunditjmara Nation and

Kamilaroi

For more information, or to register on the Aboriginal Electoral Role, go to <firstpeoplesvic.org>

Five minutes with Linda Lovett

Linda Lovett is Victoria's first Aboriginal barrister and helped establish the Indigenous Law Students and Lawyers Association. A proud *Bunurong* (Victorian) and *Trawlwoolway* (Tasmanian) woman, Linda now works in Child Protection in the Wimmera Southwest Area. Child protection is a field that is close to her heart, given her parents' efforts to keep her family together when she was young.

Who is Linda?

I am a *Trawlwoolway* and *Bunurong* Aboriginal woman from Werribee and surrounding areas. I have three adult children, who are *Trawlwoolway*, *Bunurong* and *Gunditjmara* people, and I am proud of my seven grandchildren.

How did you come to work for the department?

I previously worked alongside the department in a number of roles. It became clear to me that if we want to support our community, children and families, we need to start



where we believe we can make a difference.

Who, or what, has been the biggest influence in your career?

I have worked across several Aboriginal communities, including regional and remote areas of Australia where English is a second and third and sometimes a fourth language. It is clear that we, as Aboriginal people, are resilient and self-determined, while at the same time

we are one of the most vulnerable members of the community.

What has been the highlight of your career to date?

Working alongside community to achieve changes that support the future of our people.

What would people be surprised to learn about you?

As a child, my two brothers, sister, mum, dad and the family dog lived in a car for a number of years. This was due to past government policies that sought to remove Aboriginal children from their families. Dad removed the back seat and put everything we owned in the car, and we stayed one step ahead of removal and maintained our connection to our culture and our family.

What advice would you give young Aboriginal people who see you as a role model?

Knowledge can be a powerful tool and may come from your family or academically. How you succeed in life may depend on how you use your knowledge and what you learn on your journey.

Contact details

SHANE CUMMING Acting Manager – Aboriginal Engagement	Footscray P: 03 9275 7364 M: 0436 128 047 E: shane.cumming@dffh.vic.gov.au
JULIE JOSE Senior Adviser – Barwon Area Lead	Geelong (Monday to Thursday) M: 0419 535 264 E: julie.jose@dffh.vic.gov.au
JODIE RANTALL Senior Adviser – South West Area Lead	Warrnambool P: 03 5561 9458 M: 0400 746 448 E: jodie.rantall@dffh.vic.gov.au
LINDI DIETZEL Senior Adviser – Brimbank Melton Area Lead	Geelong M: 0408 425 798 E: lindi.dietzel@dffh.vic.gov.au
JULIAN HARVEY Senior Adviser – Central Highlands Area Lead	Ballarat P: 03 5333 6014 M: 0409 351 567 E: julian.harvey@dffh.vic.gov.au
RHIANNON SMITH Senior Adviser – Western Melbourne Area Lead	Ballarat M: 0401 914 838 E: rhiannon.smith@dffh.vic.gov.au
SANDY HODGE Senior Adviser – Wimmera Area Lead	Horsham P: 03 5381 9719 M: 0439 837 014 E: sandy.hodge@dffh.vic.gov.au

Editor: Kate Robertson,
Icebreaker Communications

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This publication may contain images of deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Where the term 'Aboriginal' is used it refers to both Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Indigenous is retained when it is part of the title of a report, program or quotation.

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Contributions may be forwarded to: Manager Aboriginal Engagement Unit, West Division email AEU Manager <AboriginalEngagementUnit.West@dffh.vic.gov.au>