



Designing Culturally Safe Aged Care Homes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

A complementary resource to the National Aged Care
Design Principles and Guidelines



Designing Culturally Safe Aged Care Homes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

A complementary resource to The National Aged
Care Design Principles and Guidelines

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The development of the *Designing Culturally Safe Aged Care Homes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: A complementary resource to the National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines* brings together knowledge and lessons generously shared by older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their families and carers, aged care providers, peak bodies, governance groups and design experts. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and experiences have been at the heart of its development. Please refer to Appendix 1 for a full list of those involved.

Project team: The collaborative design process to develop this resource was coordinated by David Kaunitz and supported by Jasmine Jahani of Kaunitz Yeung Architecture.

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Acknowledgments

The project team would like to thank the numerous stakeholders who contributed to the development of this resource for their time and valuable insights.

We gratefully acknowledge members of the Design and Dementia Support Team at the Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing for their contribution to and guidance throughout this project.

A comment about language

Through this report we have endeavoured to use language that is accurate, respectful, inclusive, empowering, culturally safe and appropriate and non-stigmatising. We regret any use of language that does not meet this standard or causes offence, whether written by the authors, captured through consultations or included in citations.

Suggested citation

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Content warning

Please be advised this resource discusses sensitive topics around trauma and Sorry Business.

Contents

Acknowledgement of Country

Introduction

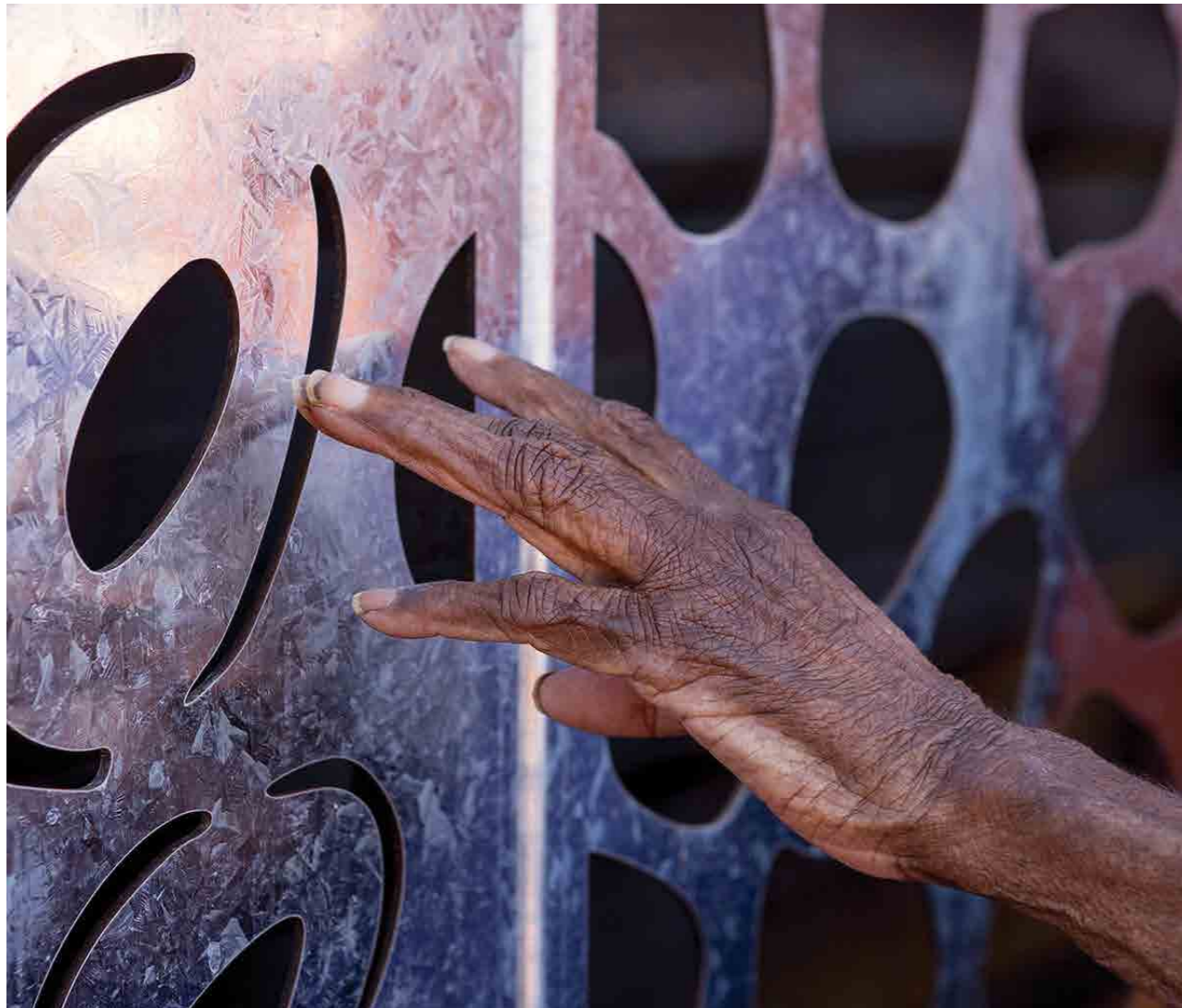
Overview	2
Background and development	3
Structure	6
Application	8
Principles and Guidelines at a glance	10
Design Principle 1 Country and Island Home	12
Design Principle 2 Culture	24
Design Principle 3 Community	46
Glossary	56
Photo Credits	57
References	58
Appendices	
Appendix 1 Contributors	60

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea, sky, culture and community. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, cultures and Elders past and present and honour the intergenerational leadership provided by Elders to their communities.

We particularly acknowledge the generous contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who shared their stories and experiences related to aged care home

design. The knowledge shared derives from the sophisticated custodianship of Country, community and culture that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have practised for millennia. Their knowledge and experiences have provided the voice and foundation of this resource, which seeks to compile the views shared. Their generosity is fundamental and humbling; our hope is that this document will begin to work towards their ambition of culturally safe aged care design.



Introduction

Overview

This complementary resource to the *National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines* provides practical, non-prescriptive guidance for designing culturally safe aged care home environments in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This resource offers guidance for designing more culturally safe aged care homes that reflect the values, traditions and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It promotes the design of environments that are deeply connected to Country and Island Home, culture and community, while also being trauma-aware and healing-informed places to live. Through collaborative and culturally safe design, these homes can support older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to age with dignity, connection and holistic wellbeing.

This resource is designed to be used alongside the *National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines*. It expands on the *Design Principles and Guidelines* by offering design guidance to help support cultural safety.

It is primarily intended to guide aged care home providers and the design professionals they engage to build or renew their aged care homes. It is also for:

- older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their families and advocates
- health care professionals
- staff delivering services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and
- regulators and policymakers across government.

It was developed in partnership with a range of individuals and groups who bring lived experience, cultural knowledge and community leadership to aged care services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This resource is underscored by the importance of collaborating and partnering with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities when building, refurbishing or undertaking minor works in aged care homes.

Overarching principles and flexible, practical guidelines are offered for culturally safe design. Through collaborative design processes, it is essential that local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people self-determine which design considerations discussed here are culturally appropriate and most relevant for their community. This resource is not prescriptive but serves as guidance and inspiration for what might be considered.

Background and development

This resource has been developed in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living or involved in aged care homes across Australia.

Why was this resource developed?

Aged care homes must be culturally safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. While the *National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines* promote home-like, supportive and de-institutionalised design, additional guidance was needed to support cultural safety. This complementary resource to the *Design Principles and Guidelines* was created in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, focusing specifically on supporting more culturally safe design.

Who was involved?

This resource was developed nationally in genuine partnership with older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their families, communities, aged care providers, health and care professionals, peak bodies and advocacy groups. Appendix 1 provides a list of those involved. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, experiences and aspirations for culturally safe aged care homes have been at the heart of its development.

Cultural safety

This complementary resource is focused on supporting cultural safety in the design of aged care homes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Cultural safety is defined by the **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council (NATSIAACC)** as follows:

Cultural safety in aged care for older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, is understanding one's own culture and the impact that your culture, thinking and actions may have on the culture of others through ongoing critical self-reflection. Gaining such truthful insight about oneself is critical for ensuring access to a culturally safe, respectful, responsive and racism free aged care system providing for the optimal safety, autonomy, dignity and absolute wellbeing of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Elders and older people and their families. Only the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person who is the recipient of a service or interaction can determine whether it is culturally safe.

Aged care service providers and workers must take responsibility for building trust and relationships with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander service users and their families and for creating a new aged care system which centres on their living

experience, cultural and ageing needs, as determined by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander service users themselves. The implementation of a trauma aware, healing informed approach to professional practice and facilitating a greater understanding and respect for individual and collective cultures, histories, knowledges, traditions, stories and values of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander service users, their families and communities, will greatly support the delivery of a quality and culturally safe aged care system. Aged care service providers must also passionately commit to continuously measure and improve structures and behaviours necessary for cultural safety and quality support to remain embedded in the Australian aged care system.

Trauma-aware and healing informed design

There is a need for survivor-centred residential aged care design. Entering and living in aged care homes can be re-traumatising for Stolen Generations survivors who experienced forced removal from their families as children and trauma in institutional settings.

In 2018–19, there were an estimated 33,600 Stolen Generations survivors nationally.¹ About 21% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people born before 1972 and still living were removed from their families.² Stolen Generations survivors are more likely to develop dementia because of the trauma they experienced.³ They are also more likely to be living in non-remote areas (81%)⁴, highlighting the importance of this resource being applied in all aged care environments.

Design considerations to avoid triggers of childhood trauma and support de-institutionalised, healing informed aged care home environments are provided throughout this resource. Stolen Generations survivors and advocacy organisations are the voices behind these considerations.

It is important to recognise that certain environments and care practices can unintentionally trigger traumatic memories for Stolen Generations survivors. This may include institutional looking spaces, locked or restricted areas, shared or dormitory-style rooms, loud noises or alarms, staff uniforms, loss of privacy, unfamiliar personal care practices or any situation where a survivor feels a loss of control, is moved without consultation, or is unable to keep personal belongings close.

These environments and practices can also impact descendants of Stolen Generations survivors through intergenerational trauma and may contribute to distress for family members visiting or working in aged care homes. Trauma-aware and healing informed design can also help reduce vicarious trauma and burnout for staff, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, by supporting safer, more predictable and culturally grounded environments for everyone.

It is important to remember there are many ways older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may be living with trauma. Trauma may also have been experienced because of Exemption Certificates policies, police violence, or employment and health discrimination. It is paramount that both the process and outcome of designing aged care homes be trauma-aware and healing informed.

Living with dementia

Designing for cultural safety in aged care homes requires understanding how dementia is experienced across cultures. For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, dementia is accepted as a natural part of life and not necessarily a medical issue to be addressed.⁵

Dementia is estimated to be 3 to 5 times higher in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than in the general population.⁶ Rates of dementia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote and rural communities are estimated to be among the highest in the world.⁷

There are known enablers that help support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with dementia to live well, which have been reflected in this resource. These include policies and services that:

- incorporate cultural perspectives of dementia;
- support family and communities to care for loved ones with dementia on Country and Island Home; and
- are controlled by the community and delivered in a culturally safe manner.⁸

Previous work

This resource builds on the experience of design experts over several decades working to develop health and aged care facilities tailored to unique and diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and communities. In particular, the *Indigenous Aged Care Design Guide*⁹ stands as a valuable complementary tool, particularly in the context of remote locations.

Policy alignment

This resource is underpinned by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples¹⁰ and international principles that affirm the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to self-determination, practice culture and make decisions on matters that affect their lives and communities.

It is aligned with the Australian Government's commitment to a new era of partnership and shared decision making under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Priority Reforms.

This resource also complements the strengthened *Aged Care Quality Standards*¹¹, in particular:

- standard 3 which ensures providers deliver care that is culturally safe and appropriate for individuals with specific needs and diverse backgrounds; and
- standard 4 which ensures people receive services in an aged care home that is safe, comfortable and meets their needs. Aged care homes should have a comfortable environment that optimises older people's sense of belonging, interaction and function.

Structure

This resource provides core principles and flexible guidelines to support culturally safe and locally tailored design.

Principles

Designing Culturally Safe Aged Care Homes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People is centred on three principles that seek to reframe the design approach around cultural values:

Principle 1 – Country and Island Home

Principle 2 – Culture

Principle 3 – Community

The principles seek to support culturally safe design for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in aged care homes, while recognising each Country and Island Home, culture and community is distinct and dynamic. The principles also strengthen alignment between cultural considerations for models of care and design.

Guidelines

Each principle comprises a set of guidelines that present design considerations for achieving the values embedded in the principle. The guidelines are not prescriptive but serve as guidance and inspiration for what might be considered. Through collaborative design processes, it is essential that local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people self-determine which guidelines are culturally appropriate and most relevant for their community.

Some design considerations presented may be contradictory, reflecting the rich diversity in cultural practices and need for locally tailored design solutions.

Scenarios

Scenarios accompany each guideline to help illustrate the benefits of implementing that guideline. These scenarios help readers understand diverse cultures, needs and perspectives. Many are based on real accounts shared during the development of this resource.



Application

This resource is to be used alongside the *National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines* when building, refurbishing or undertaking minor works in aged care homes. It should be applied flexibly, collaboratively and in genuine partnership with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

As with the *National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines*, this resource applies to minor and major refurbishments as well as the construction of new aged care homes. It presents an opportunity to make the design of your aged care home more culturally safe, trauma-aware and healing informed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents and staff.

Collaborative design

At its core, this resource promotes collaborative design through genuine partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Design approaches and responses should be led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who best understand their communities.

Collaborative design ensures culturally safe solutions that respect unique local connections to Country and Island Home, culture and community. Processes must uphold cultural safety, support local determination and enable communities to define what matters most.

Working in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people during the design process should be considered fundamental to the outcome. Above all, the process should support determination of design solutions by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, enabling them to define the values of their place.

The collaborative design process will be different for each design project, but it is essential to carefully identify and genuinely partner with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and organisations, including local Elders and knowledge holders. Cultural governance across the design cycle and clear decision-making processes should be ensured. Sufficient time should be allowed for these important processes and ways to encourage and support engagement considered.

Creating familiarity

Aged care home design should foster familiarity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents, including those living with dementia, by reflecting their positive lived experiences.¹² Cultural safety is strengthened when the environment reflects a deep understanding of local cultures and the diverse backgrounds of residents. The diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and different geographical locations means there will be great diversity in how a familiar environment can be created from place to place.

Operating Model of Care

Operational models of care should be considered from the design stage. It is ineffective to build first and then plan operations. Designs should also allow flexibility for changing operational needs.

Thoughtful planning can enhance environments for both residents and staff, balancing resident needs and supporting operational efficiency. Discussing specific operational models is beyond the scope of this resource.

Types of aged care home

This resource aims to help all aged care homes create culturally safe, trauma-aware and healing-informed environments. This includes those managed by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and other providers (mainstream providers) who support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents.

The practical steps in this resource will help aged care homes bring in the values of Country, Island Home, culture and community. There are many elements of this resource that can be easily applied. This can complement existing efforts to improve the cultural safety of aged care homes across Australia. It is recognised that partial implementation of this resource will be appropriate in many locations.

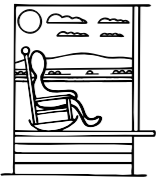
Applying this resource will help support all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in aged care homes to age with improved dignity, connection and holistic wellbeing. When aged care homes are designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people front of mind, everyone benefits. These inclusive approaches create environments that support people from all walks of life, and even small changes can make a positive difference.

Keeping responsive to change

As with the *National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines*, this resource is a living document and is recommended to be reviewed and updated periodically to ensure it responds to changing evidence and cultural expectations and aspirations. Inherent in its definition, cultural safety is fluid, and users of this resource should be mindful of this.

Principles and Guidelines at a glance

Principle 1 – Country and Island Home



1.1 Inside/Outside



1.2 Country and Island
Home-Centric Landscape

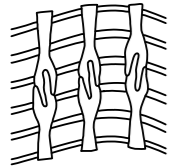


1.3 Local Seasons



1.4 Local Materials

Principle 2 – Culture



2.1 Cultural Protocols



2.2 Cultural Integration



2.3 Sorry Business



2.4 External Kitchens



2.5 External and
Cultural Sleeping



2.6 Fire Pits



2.7 Bedroom
Configuration



2.8 Sensory Rooms

Principle 3 – Community



3.1 Community
Integration



3.2 Community
Spaces



3.3 Security

Country and Island Home



Design Principle 1

Objective

To design aged care home environments that enable residents, staff and visitors to maintain their connection to Country and Island Home.

What is Country and Island Home?

Country [or Island Home] encompasses everything. It includes both living and non-living elements. It holds everything within the landscape, including Earth, Water and Sky Country, as well as people, animals, plants and the stories that connect them.

Country [or Island Home]... has specific and significant meaning for Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] peoples. Country [or Island Home] relates to the nation, cultural group and region that Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] people belong to, yearn for, find healing from and will return to. Country [or Island Home] is the literal place of origin for Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] peoples.

Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] peoples' deep and personal relationships with Country

[or Island Home] are expressed in multiple ways. The lore of Country is expressed through songlines, stories, art and ceremony. Language, including the names of Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] groups and placenames, are another means of expressing relationships with Country [or Island Home].

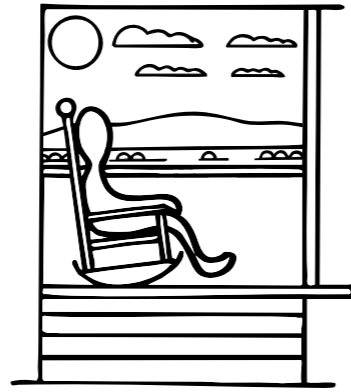
There is no universal way of defining Country [or Island Home]. Descriptions of Country [or Island Home], particularly traditional associations, will differ from individual to individual, depending on the associations passed down through the family and community.

Source: Government Architect New South Wales, Connecting with Country Framework¹³



Guideline 1.1**Inside/Outside**

Support harmonious integration of indoor and outdoor environments.

**Opportunity**

The integration of indoor and outdoor environments provides an opportunity to foster connection to Country and Island Home and interaction with nature. Indoor areas can be designed to 'bring nature indoors', including access to fresh air, natural light and views of nature. Immediately accessible outdoor areas, supported by a model of care that promotes access to the outdoors, can contribute to cultural safety and maintaining deep connection to Country and Island Home. Thoughtful design can transform living areas into adaptable, serene and inspiring settings that promote both mental and physical health.

Considerations

- ① **Seamless transitions:** design indoor and outdoor spaces to flow into one another, removing barriers and encouraging movement and interaction.
- ② **Natural connections:** incorporate large windows, wide doors and open spaces to maintain visual and physical connections to nature.
- ③ **Clear and accessible design:** ensure outdoor areas are easily reachable, with level surfaces, clear signage and minimal obstructions.
- ④ **Comfortable places:** provide shade, comfortable seating and weather protection to support prolonged use of outdoor spaces in all seasons.
- ⑤ **Flexible spaces:** create adaptable spaces that can be tailored to individual preferences, offering flexible indoor/outdoor configurations.

Related National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines

- 1.11 Nature Indoors
- 3.1 Dedicated Outdoors
- 3.2 Garden Connections
- 3.3 Garden Verandahs
- 3.4 Garden Destinations

Scenarios

Aunty One of the things I love most about my aged care home is how easily I can step outside. My room opens straight onto my own little patio where I sit each day, feeling the sun, listening to birds and watching little creatures move about. That simple connection to the outdoors helps me feel grounded and free.

The inside and outside flow together so naturally, making the whole place feel open and welcoming. Being able to move between the two gives me a sense of independence and peace. It reminds me of the gentle parts of my childhood on my Country and brings a real feeling of comfort and belonging to my home.

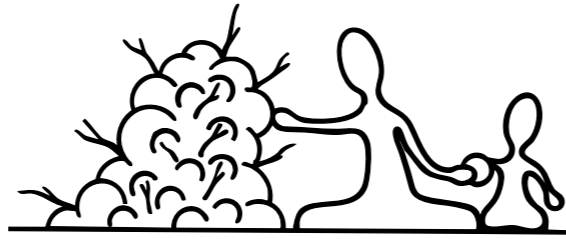
Staff Working here fills me with pride, not just as a carer, but as an Aboriginal man myself. The indoor – outdoor design isn't just beautiful; it creates a space where our residents and staff feel connected to Country and Island Home. The large sliding doors and shaded patio allow everyone to enjoy the garden, whether inside or out. Wide doors, level paths and natural light make the place open and uplifting and make it easier for me to help residents spend more time outdoors. I love sitting with them under the patio, listening to stories that echo my own heritage. These moments remind me why I do this work; to honour culture, dignity and wellbeing.

- ⑥ **Sustainable design:** maximise natural ventilation and light to reduce energy consumption and enhance comfort.
- ⑦ **Seasonal design:** design paths and gathering areas with thoughtful placement for shade and sun, avoiding windy areas. Consider the height of shade structures and where shadows fall in summer. Ensure winter sunlight reaches building edges and outdoor spaces.

Guideline 1.2

Country and Island Home-Centric Landscape

Create and support landscapes that reflect, honour and regenerate connection to Country and Island Home.



Opportunity

Culturally appropriate landscape design provides residents with an opportunity to integrate and connect with Country and Island Home. This connection can foster a sense of belonging, familiarity and purpose. Ongoing, meaningful collaboration with residents, Elders, families and communities on landscape design can foster a deep cultural and personal connection to the aged care home. The design can enrich the resident's life and reduce institutional characteristics.

Considerations

- ① **Community-centred engagement and ownership:** partner with residents, local Elders, families and cultural knowledge holders to co-design and care for meaningful outdoor spaces. Engage community gardening teams to strengthen connections, celebrate culture and build pride and ownership in aged care home environments.
- ② **Integrating Country and Island Home:** design landscapes that represent, enhance and restore the local environment, connecting residents to their cultural heritage.
- ③ **Dynamic landscaping:** design landscaping that evolves under the custodianship of residents, Elders and community members, supporting self-determination and cultural involvement.
- ④ **Meaningful planting:** plant endemic species, culturally significant plants and vegetable gardens for aesthetic, medicinal, bush tucker and practical value. Providing habitat for non-human kin should be considered.

Related National Aged Care
Design Principles and Guidelines

3.1 Dedicated Outdoors

Scenarios

Aunty I've always felt most like myself outdoors, surrounded by the traditional landscapes of my Country. Being queer in community hasn't always been easy, but in the cultural garden, I feel seen and safe. Designed with Elders and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents, it's open, welcoming and deeply connected to Country and Island Home. Sometimes I sit quietly under the shade and share my journey with younger mob that come to visit; other times I join in singing or storytelling. This space lets me belong without explanation. It brings people together without judgment. Here, culture holds us all — no matter who we are or who we love.

Uncle I love sitting in the courtyard at my aged care home, listening to the water feature trickle. It is not the ocean, but it reminds me of my Saltwater Country, where tides told stories and sea breezes carried the voices of Elders. Growing up, I was taken far from my family, language and Country, and for a long time I felt disconnected from who I was.

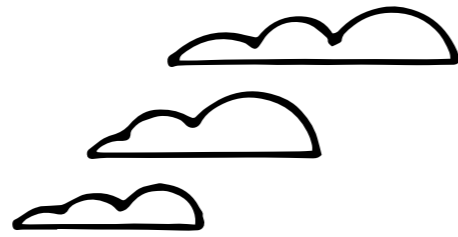
Here, the cultural garden is helping me reconnect. Coastal grasses grow, shells line the garden and there is a mural of sea and sky. Planting with community, learning which plants heal and feed, and sharing stories in the gathering space gives me a sense of pride and belonging. This place is more than buildings. It holds memory, Country and care.

- ⑤ **Shady places:** create spaces that offer shade such as trees with grass or a shade structure / traditional structures that are inviting for residents. Visibility from key communal areas and clear access should be considered.
- ⑥ **Employment and community building:** employ local community members to maintain and evolve external spaces, strengthening ties with the community.
- ⑦ **Amenities:** visibility and access to toilets and drinking water fountains from gathering and sitting areas.

Guideline 1.3

Local Seasons

Design spaces with a focus on local seasons to support connection to Country and Island Home.



Opportunity

Local seasons are the natural rhythms of Country and Island Home. They provide an opportunity to mark time for residents, staff and community interactions. Designing spaces with a focus on local seasons helps facilitate a deep connection to the rhythms of Country and Island Home and de-institutionalises the care environment.

Considerations

- ① **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led design:** engage Elders, older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their families, communities and cultural knowledge holders to incorporate the characteristics of local seasons.
- ② **Seasonal rhythms and cycles:** incorporate seasonal rhythms and cycles into the design to enhance residents' connection with Country and Island Home. This includes Sky and Sea Country.
- ③ **External environments:** orient internal spaces to prioritise external environments, maximising ecological and environmental integration.
- ④ **Seasonal connection:** design spaces that allow residents to connect with endemic non-human kin, flora, celestial arrangements and climatic conditions.
- ⑤ **Cultural interaction:** provide opportunities for cultural, family and community interactions tied to local seasonal transitions.
- ⑥ **Comfort away from Country and Island Home:** design spaces to support residents living away from their homeland, Country or Island Home, offering comfort and familiar ecological rhythms.

Related National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines

1.9 Clean Air

1.10 Comfortable Temperatures

Scenarios

Aunty I'm living with dementia and far from my homeland now, but the local seasons still feel familiar. Even here inland, I can feel the shift in the air, see the change in the grasses and notice when certain birds return. Those little signs settle me, helping me mark time the way I always have, by watching Country change around me.

I sometimes feel low in mood and am finding it harder to make new memories, but the local seasons bring comfort. Sitting outside, feeling the warmth deepen or the cool winds return, I'm reminded of my own Country's cycles. This aged care home could have felt institutional, but its design celebrates local seasons, keeping me grounded and connected to the rhythms I know.

Uncle Living here, I pay close attention to the changing winds and the way the skies shift through the seasons. Back on my Island Home, the winds, stars and sea told us everything, when to fish, plant, gather and celebrate. Even away from the saltwater, I still read the seasons in the trees, the humidity and the direction of the breezes.

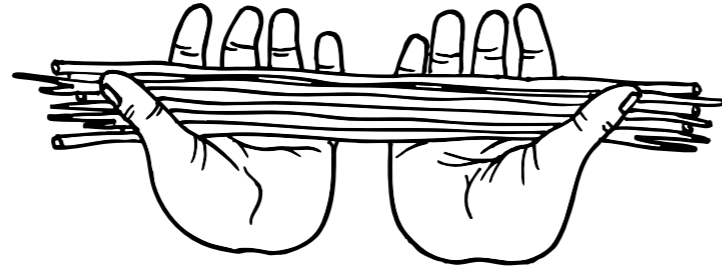
When I notice those changes, I call my family to visit. We sit together and I share stories about how we read the winds and the tides. It feels good to pass that knowledge on. These moments keep me connected to my saltwater identity and help my grandchildren understand the rhythms that shaped my life.

- ⑦ **Cultural knowledge sharing:** design environments that encourage residents to share cultural knowledge, particularly with visiting family members.
- ⑧ **Memory support:** support potential disconnection from Country and Island Home by integrating local seasons into daily activities to mitigate confusion, agitation and disorientation, especially for those living with dementia.
- ⑨ **De-institutionalised design:** use design strategies that reflect local seasonal cycles to reduce institutional characteristics while promoting cultural connection and familiarity.

Guideline 1.4

Local Materials

Create environments that reflect cultural identity, connection to Country and Island Home, and sustainability using local materials.



Opportunity

The use of local materials reflects the natural environment and cultural history of a region, creating spaces that resonate on a personal and communal level. By using resources that mirror the changing seasons and honouring Country and Island Home, aged care homes can nurture residents' connection to place while maintaining sustainable practices. Material choices that minimise environmental impact and support local industries contribute to the care of Country and Island Home and the wellbeing of communities.

Considerations

- ① **Connection to Country and Island Home:** select materials sourced from the local area to support residents' connection to Country and Island Home and honour the land.
- ② **Natural landscapes:** choose materials that reflect the colours, textures and essence of the surrounding land and local seasons.
- ③ **Sustainable design:** select materials that are responsibly sourced and reduce environmental footprint. Consider their embodied energy, operational impact and long-term maintenance. Choices should reflect a commitment to sustainable custodianship of Country and Island Home.
- ④ **Cultural identity:** incorporate materials that tell the stories, heritage and identity of the region and its people, fostering a sense of belonging.
- ⑤ **Local employment:** engage local organisations, artisans and businesses to contribute to the design and supply of materials.

Related National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines

1.11 Nature Indoors

4.4 Integrated Building Forms

Scenarios

Aunty When I first moved here, I worried it would feel like the institutions I grew up in – cold and hard, nothing of home. But the use of local materials creates a different feel. The natural timbers, clay walls and soft earth colours calm me in ways I didn't expect. They feel familiar and safe, nothing like the places I was taken to as a child.

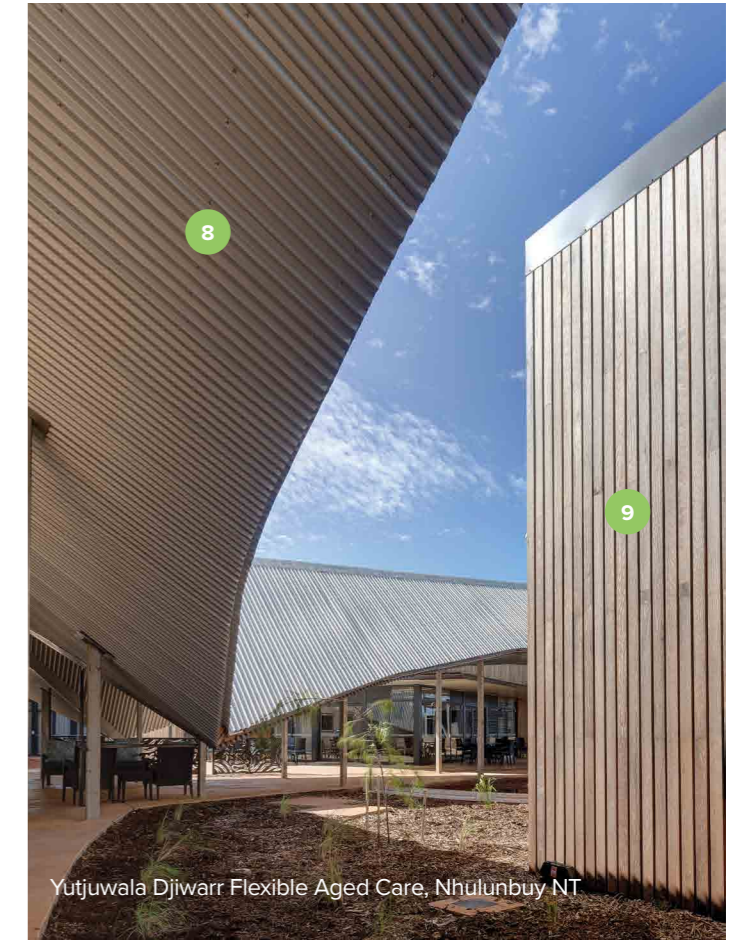
Running my hand along the timber rail reminds me of walking on Country with my family, something I lost for so long. Having these materials around me helps ease old memories instead of triggering them. It feels less like a facility and more like somewhere I can finally exhale. It feels like a home, not a reminder of what was taken.

Design professional When I was asked to design a refurbishment to make an aged care home more culturally safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, I knew it had to start with deep listening and collaboration with the local community. Elders, families and cultural knowledge holders guided design decisions, sharing stories of Country, community and culture that hold meaning. As a result of this collaborative design process, we decided to use local materials – timber posts, stone paths, handmade textiles and earth-toned walls, to create a space that feels familiar and grounded in the local context. Artwork by local artists and natural textures soften shared areas, while a timber verandah blends inside and outside, honouring connection to land. I'm proud I could help make this aged care home a place of culture and belonging.

- ⑥ **Flexible design:** select adaptable materials that can be seamlessly integrated across diverse design contexts, ensuring cohesion and versatility.
- ⑦ **Trauma-aware environments:** avoid materials, sounds or lighting that may trigger traumatic memories, creating safe and supportive environments.
- ⑧ **Memory support:** include memory evoking materials that may not be local or natural but may positively resonate with residents' personal histories and lived experience.

Built examples and concepts

- 1 Timber screening provides weather protection and privacy.
- 2 External covered spaces: minor works additions.
- 3 Natural light.
- 4 Insulated roofing.
- 5 Connection to the garden.
- 6 Endemic species.
- 7 Lush grass for sitting. Not endemic but nevertheless enables residents to enjoy external living safely.
- 8 Corrugated metal reflects familiar, locally used building materials for residents.
- 9 Locally milled timber.





Objective

To design aged care home environments that enable residents, staff and visitors to maintain their connection to culture.

What is culture?

By culture, we mean the collective beliefs, values, rules and customs that inform a group's way of life. At its most basic level, culture is shared knowledge and practice. Members of a group use this knowledge as a guide for how to understand and behave in the world around them.

Every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group has a unique culture. But there are some important cultural features that they all share, including:

- Networked systems of kinship and family support
- Deep connection to Country (lands and waters)

- Value of ceremony, traditions and ritual
- Respect for law and the authority of Elders
- Respect for women's and men's areas of knowledge
- Mutual responsibility and sharing of resources.

Culture is not static. It is a living system of beliefs, values, practices and understandings. This system evolves in response to changing circumstances. As the needs, lifestyles and characteristics of a group change, so do their worldviews and behaviours.

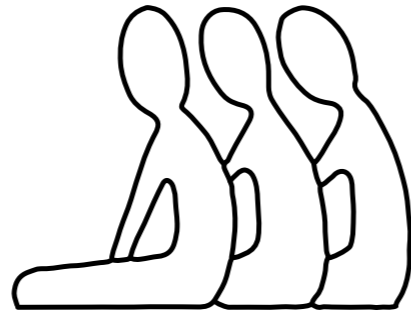
Source: Australian Indigenous Governance Institute Centre, Your Culture Toolkit⁴



Guideline 2.1

Cultural Protocols

Support residents to flexibly self-organise as required by cultural protocols.



Opportunity

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have cultural protocols that are important to community harmony and cultural integrity. These may include separation by gender, skin or family groups. It is paramount that spaces are created that support residents to practice cultural protocols and self-organise accordingly. Multiple, adaptable, non-deterministic spaces can flexibly accommodate practice of cultural protocols, including as they evolve over time.

Providing diverse, adaptable communal spaces – such as multiple lounges, dining rooms and outdoor areas – gives residents choice and autonomy to self-organise according to cultural protocols. Resident rooms should provide flexibility and allow for self-organisation according to cultural protocols, including facilitating residents to seek connection or separation from others as required.

Cultural cohesion is essential; limiting self-determination of cultural protocols can cause trauma and exclusion, and negatively affect how families and communities view aged care homes.

Related National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines

- 1.7 Supportive Seating
- 2.1 Personalised Home
- 2.5 Room Clusters

Considerations

- 1 **Flexible spaces:** create adaptable spaces that support diverse cultural protocols and can evolve.
- 2 **Non-deterministic layouts:** create layouts that empower residents to shape their own spatial relationships, connecting or separating as needed, to honour cultural practices and personal autonomy.
- 3 **Discreet observation:** enable residents to observe their surroundings, fostering comfort and control. This supports cultural protocols without specific design features.
- 4 **Cultural protocols:** design spaces that allow residents to self-organise according to their cultural traditions, fostering mutual respect and harmony.
- 5 **De-institutionalise:** design environments that respect cultural protocols and personal and community traditions to support cultural safety.

- 6 **Trauma-aware environments:** design areas that address trauma triggers to ensure the comfort and security of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents.
- 7 **Privacy and security:** offer options for gender-specific spaces and a balance between privacy and visibility to help maintain cultural protocols and personal safety.

Scenarios

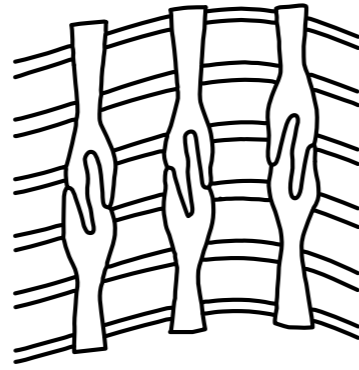
Aunty I share a deep kinship with the women of my culture, and this connection is central to my sense of cultural safety. Unspoken cultural protocols shape my daily routines, understood collectively by those around me. When a new resident arrives, our patterns and spaces adjust naturally, preserving harmony without words. The multiple spaces, subtle separations and freedom to come and go allow me and others to create daily rhythms that honour our cultural ways. These options make it easy for us to maintain respect for protocols while feeling at home.

Uncle I've always followed cultural protocols, including gender separation, which is central to who I am. Much of my time is spent with other men from my cultural group, while staying deeply connected to my wife. When I moved into my new aged care home, staff worked with me and my wife to respect both needs. I could continue practising gender separation while sharing a room with my wife in the women's area. This flexibility and thoughtful bedroom arrangement honoured my culture and family bond, making the transition smooth while respecting my cultural needs.

Guideline 2.2

Cultural Integration

Embed local culture in all spaces to strengthen connection to Country and Island Home and residents' identities.



Opportunity

Integrating culture into care homes presents an opportunity to transform spaces into culturally enriching and empowering sanctuaries. By embedding local culture into the physical and emotional fabric of aged care homes, environments can be created that honour the identities and traditions of residents while supporting their dignity and well-being.

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents and their families may have been forcibly detached from culture. They may have been confronted with significant barriers to engaging and practising culture. This may be a source of trauma. Integrating culture in the design of aged care homes offers residents connection to culture and can help to reduce trauma triggers associated with institutional settings.

Considerations

- ① **Self-determination:** involve residents and their communities in the creation and design process to empower individuals and ensure their needs and voices are reflected in the spaces.
- ② **Resident collaboration:** engage residents and their communities in the selection and placement of art, décor and architectural elements ensuring cultural authenticity and empowerment.
- ③ **Integration of art into the building fabric:** integrate cultural art elements directly into the structure, such as murals, carvings or mosaics reflecting residents' traditions and stories.
- ④ **Dedicated spaces for cultural ceremonies:** design indoor and outdoor areas that support cultural gatherings, ceremonies, artistic expression or inviting cultural performers and storytellers.
- ⑤ **Connection to Country and Island Home and culture:** shape environments that nurture vital connections to residents' home culture and Country and Island Home, fostering comfort and sense of belonging.

Related National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines

2.1 Personalised Home

Scenarios

Aunty All my life, art and culture have been my way of teaching, healing and keeping our stories strong. When I walk through my aged care home and see my artwork woven into the walls and shared spaces, I feel a deep sense of recognition. It reminds me that my journey, history and voice still matter here. The young ones who visit sit with me to yarn about the pieces and even other residents ask about the stories behind them. Having my culture openly respected and displayed gives me strength. It makes this place feel alive – more like a community than a facility – and it encourages me to keep creating and sharing what I know.

Uncle Out here in the outdoor cooking area, I feel close to my Island Home and my Saltwater Country. When I prepare the food I grew up with – the smells, smoke and way people naturally gather – it brings back the rhythm of life by the sea. I love cooking outside, sharing a yarn and seeing others enjoy the flavours and stories that shaped me. The building holds pieces of my culture too, woven into the spaces so it feels familiar and warm. Having these reminders of home helps me stay grounded in who I am. It gives me pride to share my saltwater knowledge with residents, staff and visiting families, keeping those connections alive.

- ⑥ **Enable cultural expression:** alleviate barriers to cultural expression by thoughtfully integrating cultural elements into the space, enhancing the experience for residents, families and communities.
- ⑦ **Trauma-aware environments:** de-institutionalise design to help reduce trauma triggers. Remain person-centred and offer individual choice – some survivors may have been disconnected from culture or be at different points in their healing.

Guideline 2.3 Sorry Business

Design spaces that support culturally safe palliative care and Sorry Business practices.



Opportunity

These moments are pivotal and sensitive in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents, their families and their communities. Historically, cultural expression was frequently restricted, and barriers still exist today. Sometimes spaces or amenities in an aged care home are insufficient to fully support the required cultural practices.

Culturally supportive environments should ensure cultural continuity. Missteps can cause friction in communities, while respectful approaches empower residents to practice their culture and enable self-determination.

The period of Sorry Business and palliative care are defined by rich cultural practices that strengthen cultural connection at life's most pivotal time. Providing space for these practices requires serious consideration and collaboration with local knowledge holders, Elders and others. Done well, it upholds dignity and fosters harmony.

Considerations

- 1 **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led:** ensure Sorry Business protocols and practices are led and determined by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, supporting their cultural authority and decision making.
- 2 **Connection with Country and Island Home:** create humane and culturally grounded spaces that support the resident staying connected to Country and Island Home. Consider external spaces including fire pits and natural elements that reflect local tradition and ecological rhythms. Consider the ability to view and connect with Sky Country.
- 3 **Family/community presence:** provide spaces and amenities that allow immediate family and community members (possibly interchanging) to stay close, including overnight stays.
- 4 **Community connections:** design access, gathering spaces and amenities for extended family and community to be close to and visit the resident.
- 5 **Respectful viewing:** include facilities that allow for respectful viewing of residents after passing, aligned with cultural customs and family wishes.

Scenarios

Niece We had to take Aunty away from community for palliative care because we need extra support to look after her. We know this care is necessary and we value the dignity and comfort that proper end-of-life support can provide, but we are also worried about cultural barriers. It is important to us that close family members can take turns staying with her and that other family and community members are able to visit or stay nearby.

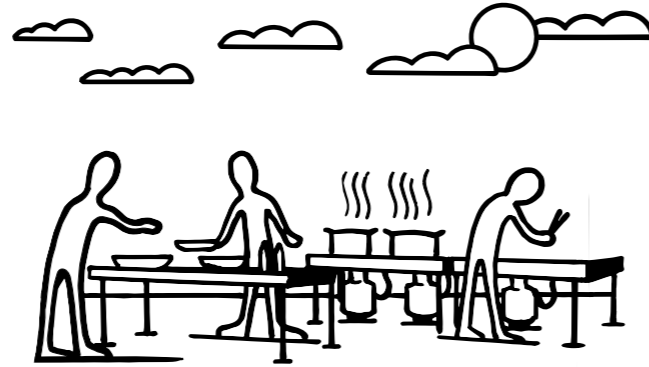
The space didn't easily support this, but staff have helped make it feel like home. They allowed us to bring in her belongings, including her plants, and found a room for us to be present and provide comfort. Through their respectful, community-led approach, Aunty's dignity is upheld.

Uncle My cultural practices require that key members of my family come together to participate in Sorry Business. However, the morgue at the local hospital has strict timeframes and there are no facilities at the aged care home for my family to carry out these practices. Over the years family members have been forced to break cultural protocols and experience cultural stress when they are unable to visit the morgue in time. But my aged care home has been talking to us lately and is better understanding the practices involved with Sorry Business in our community. They are working with the morgue to adapt their processes to allow time for Sorry Business. They are asking us what facilities would be needed to best support Sorry Business here at the home too.

- 6 **Morgues:** carefully assess the need for spaces to hold the deceased for an appropriate period to support local culture. Carefully assess viability and compliance.
- 7 **Spaces for cultural transitions:** evaluate how palliative care areas, mourning spaces and other aged care home spaces interact. How to effectively incorporate practices such as cultural cleansing and protocols for room turnover after a resident passes should be carefully considered in partnership with the community.
- 8 **Safety protocols:** assess the feasibility of temporarily isolating fire detection systems in designated areas to safely accommodate smoking ceremonies, ensuring compliance with the National Construction Code, Australian Standards and any other relevant codes/standards.
- 9 **Impact on residents:** plan the placement of spaces to ensure minimal disruption to other residents and aged care home operations. Consider appropriate connections where cultural protocols support this.
- 10 **Culturally respectful departures:** provide options for ceremonial or private departures, reflecting diverse cultural protocols and supporting dignity in transition.

Guideline 2.4 External Kitchens

Create safe and durable outdoor kitchen spaces that support residents to prepare meals in a safe, functional and culturally appropriate environment.



Opportunity

It is common for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents to express a desire to prepare meals outdoors and participate in shared traditional and outdoor cooking. These environments can also serve to deinstitutionalise living spaces, offering an inviting alternative to indoor settings. Facilitating the preparation of local foods, these spaces reflect cultural heritage and culinary traditions.

Considerations

- 1 **Functional and integrated kitchen spaces:** design outdoor kitchen environments that are functional, durable and seamlessly integrated with the aged care home.
- 2 **Inclusive and accessible design:** ensure all residents can access and use outdoor kitchen spaces comfortably, accommodating varying physical limitations.
- 3 **Hazards and ensuring safety:** incorporate protective features such as screened cooking spaces and stable setups to prevent hazards and vermin intrusion. Consider half height doors with keypad, swipe card or magnetic lock and install benchtops with up-stands to prevent spills and accidents.
- 4 **Resident safety and autonomy:** apply discreet access controls that protect residents while maintaining safety, dignity and independence.
- 5 **Culture through shared cooking spaces:** design spaces that support culture, incorporating communal areas for shared cooking and eating.

Related National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines

- 1.10 Comfortable Temperatures
- 2.4 Domestic Kitchens
- 3.4 Garden Destinations

Scenarios

Uncle I always look forward to using the outdoor kitchen. It reminds me of my younger days working as a Jackaroo; simple cooking, real heat and the smell of the fire. I prefer the low cooktop over the big BBQs; it feels familiar and easy to clean. My favourite spot is the screened cooking area under the deep verandah, where I can cook even during the wet. Making a pot of stew or grilling local ingredients brings back memories and keeps me connected to my culture. Out here I feel independent and comfortable, doing things my way, with plenty of room for others to join if they want.

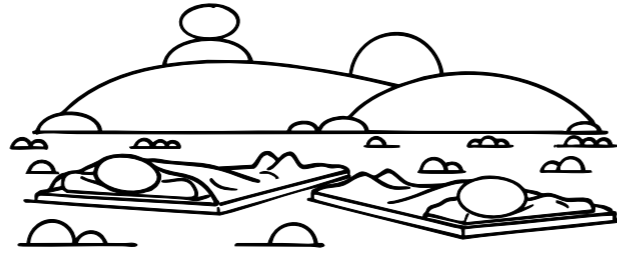
Daughter When we come to visit Mum, we always head straight for the outdoor kitchen. It feels relaxed and familiar. The kids play nearby while we help Mum prepare a simple meal, cutting vegetables together or stirring a pot on the low cooktop. Being outdoors makes it easier for her to join in, and the whole space feels safe, sheltered and welcoming. Sharing food this way brings us together as a family, just like we used to. The smells, fresh air and chance to cook local ingredients help Mum stay connected to her culture and to us. These visits feel warm, natural and full of belonging.

- 6 **Cleaning and maintenance:** select surfaces and alternatives to BBQs that are easy to clean and maintain.
- 7 **Cooking local foods:** equip kitchens with tools and storage that supports the preparation of local bush tucker and traditional foods.
- 8 **Safe use of electrical appliances:** design kitchens with power isolation options so all residents can safely access and use kitchen spaces, even when electrical appliances are restricted.
- 9 **Safe access to knives and appliances:** install lockable draws and appliance cupboards with restricted access and integrated power control switches tailored to the risk rating of each location.

Guideline 2.5

External and Cultural Sleeping

Facilitate cultural sleeping practices including creating safe and comfortable outdoor sleeping environments that blend seamlessly with the aged care home.



Opportunity

In some communities and locations, sleeping practices such as sleeping outdoors have important cultural significance. Supporting cultural sleeping practices and outdoor sleeping environments can reduce isolation and offer emotional benefits by reconnecting residents with Country and Island Home. It can act as another layer of de-institutionalisation by avoiding potential distress caused by modern indoor settings for some people.

Incorporating external sleeping options for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in aged care homes should be supported and encouraged as part of culturally safe and person-centred care; however, this must be carefully considered in terms of safety, appropriateness and compliance with relevant Australian aged care regulations and standards.

Related National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines

- 1.10 Comfortable Temperatures
- 3.2 Garden Connections
- 3.3 Garden Verandahs

Considerations

- 1 **Safe and comfortable outdoor sleeping spaces:** design outdoor sleeping environments that are safe, comfortable and seamlessly integrated with the care home.
- 2 **Inclusive and accessible design:** address diverse mobility and accessibility needs so all residents can confidently and comfortably access outdoor sleeping areas.
- 3 **Secure sleeping environments:** incorporate elements that prioritise resident safety, such as mosquito protection, screened verandahs, security screening and stable sleeping arrangements.
- 4 **Cultural traditions and privacy:** create spaces that respect cultural traditions and preferences, ensuring appropriate separation and privacy.
- 5 **Connection to Country and Island Home:** create spaces that allow residents to feel grounded in Country and Island Home, attuned to its seasonal rhythms, natural elements and spiritual significance.

- 6 **Climate-appropriate design:** design sleeping spaces that accommodate seasonal changes, such as protection from rain, wind and temperature extremes, while maintaining comfort.
- 7 **Personal preferences:** explore detailed requirements for outdoor sleeping, such as use of swags, height of mattresses and companionship of dogs.
- 8 **Diverse sleeping and social preferences:** offer communal spaces for residents who prefer to sleep or relax outdoors in groups, while also providing options for solitude.

Scenarios

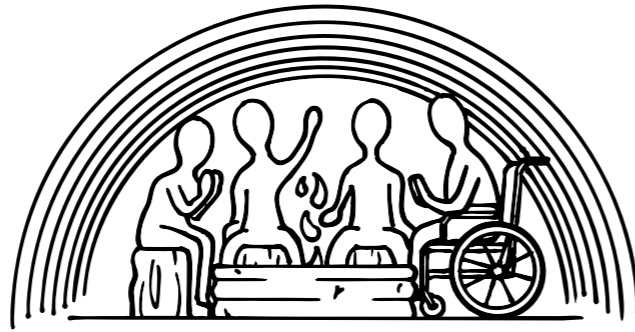
Staff I watch Aunty and the other women relax on the verandah as the sun sets and birds sing. Her dog is curled beside her and she sometimes drifts off, feeling comfortable and safe among the women around her, before returning to her room later when she's ready. I'm proud that our home respects culture and choice, letting residents decide where they feel most at ease. These quiet moments remind me why I love working here, helping to honour their cultural journey.

Uncle I maintain a strong connection to Country, shaped by a lifetime of working as a Jackaroo and sleeping in a swag around the campfire. I find comfort and safety sleeping alone on a screened verandah, low to the ground, away from air conditioning and high beds. This space protects me from mosquitoes, respects my privacy and supports my preference not to sleep near other men. It upholds cultural protocols by ensuring I'm not sleeping in view of the women. The deep verandah allows me to sleep outside year-round, even in the wet season. Being able to sleep here maintains my cultural identity and autonomy while giving me privacy and comfort that aligns with my lifestyle and cultural values.

Guideline 2.6

Fire Pits

Include safe and accessible fire pits that enable community connection and cultural engagement.



Opportunity

Fire pits can play an integral role in fostering community connection and cultural engagement, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents. These spaces should be designed to accommodate safe and comfortable gatherings, allowing individuals to reconnect with traditional practices such as storytelling, communal cooking and cultural connection. Thoughtful design can ensure the fire pits are accessible and cater to the varying needs of residents, including protection against the elements and adaptability for different seasons.

Aged care home operators must know their responsibilities when it comes to ethical and legal fire safety requirements and comply with national and relevant state or territory fire safety regulations and standards.

Related National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines

3.4 Garden Destinations

Considerations

- 1 **Clear supervision:** design fire pit areas to be easily accessible and clearly visible, ensuring staff can always supervise fires discreetly and respectfully, without disrupting residents' experience.
- 2 **Hazards and ensuring safety:** protect residents from fire-related risks by maintaining secure screens, clear surroundings and eliminating trip hazards. Avoid screens that are flimsy, hot to touch or easily removable.
- 3 **Seating options:** design seating that supports both communal gatherings and solitary reflection, respecting individual preferences.
- 4 **Connection to Country and Island Home and culture:** incorporate elements that reflect cultural traditions, such as locally sourced materials or designs grounded in heritage.
- 5 **Seasonal change:** design fire pits to suit seasonal conditions, providing shelter in wet weather, wood storage, ventilation in heat and position to manage direction of smoke.
- 6 **Practical placement:** position fire pits near communal areas to encourage frequent use.

Scenarios

Staff When our residents gather around the fire pit, I see how much it strengthens their sense of belonging. As staff, we make sure everything is safe and ready – clear paths, solid screens and seating arranged so everyone can join comfortably. But once the fire is lit, we step back and let the space work its magic.

I love watching the Elders yarn together, share stories or simply sit quietly with the warmth of the flames. The design makes it easy for me to supervise without intruding, and the cultural elements help residents feel connected to Country or their Island Home. Spending time around the fire pit, hearing stories shared, has also deepened my cultural knowledge and understanding. Whether it's a small group cooking damper or a big family visit, the fire pit becomes a place where everyone feels welcome and grounded.

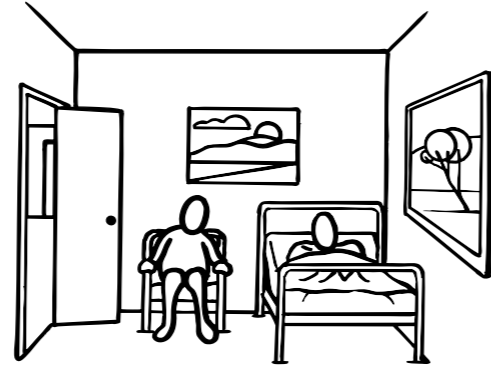
Aged care provider As the operator of an aged care home with only a few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents, I've seen how the fire pit has become a shared space that everyone enjoys. What began to support cultural practices now brings residents of all backgrounds together. When the fire is lit, people gather for warmth, storytelling or simply to sit quietly in company. Families join in and our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents share knowledge when they choose, which others deeply value. I've watched new friendships form around the fire. It's become a place where everyone feels included, connected and part of the same community.

- 7 **Inclusive and accessible design:** ensure fire pits are fully accessible, accommodating for physical limitations of all residents. Offer options for adjustable lighting and fire intensity to cater to varied sensitivities and needs.
- 8 **Traditional cooking:** offer options for campfire cooking. Ensure visibility from the dining room and maintain clear, safe paths between the two areas.

Guideline 2.7

Bedroom Configuration

Design bedrooms that facilitate and support culturally safe living arrangements.



Opportunity

It is critical aged care providers and their design teams are responsive to the cultural needs of residents, and this can include the need to explore different bedroom configurations that support cultural safety.

Flexible and adaptable bedroom configurations can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents to self-determine living arrangements in line with cultural practices. Twin rooms, adjoining rooms or other connected spaces can offer residents options to organise themselves according to their comfort and cultural traditions.

Deviation from single rooms with their own ensuite (as set out in the National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines) must be carefully considered in collaboration with residents, Elders, community and knowledge holders.

Future-proofing twin rooms for conversion to single rooms should be considered as part of culturally appropriate design. Alternatively, adjoining rooms or other connected layouts could offer similar benefits while maintaining personal and cultural preferences.

Related National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines

- 2.2 Small Households
- 2.7 Private Bedrooms
- 2.8 Ensuite Bathrooms

Considerations

- 1 **Adaptable layouts:** single rooms with dedicated ensuites, as set out in the *National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines*, are usually most appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents. Explore this with residents, remaining responsive to cultural needs and open to different bedroom configurations that support cultural safety.
- 2 **Shared rooms:** offer residents the ability to utilise twin rooms for couples or residents from cultural groups who prefer shared accommodation.
- 3 **Flexible sleeping arrangements:** where twin rooms are being used, consider a third temporary bed to support flexible arrangements. This may include mats, rugs, bean bags or mattresses on the floor used in a compliant and safe manner.
- 4 **Future-proofing:** design twin rooms with individual bathrooms to support privacy and allow for future change in room configurations.

- 5 **Adjoining rooms:** use connecting layouts to foster relationships while maintaining privacy and space.
- 6 **Flexible spaces:** design spaces that can be adapted to changing resident needs and cultural protocols.

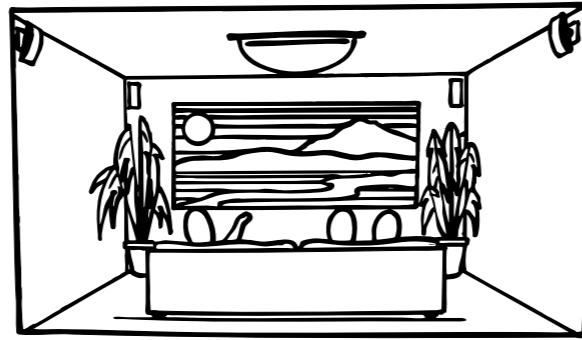
Scenarios

Aunty I enjoy the comfort, connection and security of sharing a twin room. When my roommate temporarily leaves, I feel unsettled sleeping alone. I choose to sleep in the lounge room near the staff office while I wait for her to return. This flexible arrangement helps me feel safe and supported, with a smooth transition back to my shared room when the time is right.

Uncle I share a close bond with my wife and value having adjoining rooms that give us both privacy while still maintaining our connection. This arrangement gives us balance, allowing us to share moments together and have independence, all within one cohesive living space.

Guideline 2.8 Sensory Rooms

Provide purpose-built sensory spaces to reduce distress and support residents' connection to Country and Island Home in a safe and comfortable environment.



Opportunity

Sensory rooms can offer support for residents experiencing distress. Recognising the myriad of causes, including living with dementia, memory loss or trauma, these spaces can provide relief and reassurance through thoughtful design. Community and family members can actively contribute by engaging in the creation of audio-visual content and by providing input or materials for interior design elements. This collaboration enables the space to reflect shared cultural values and personal stories, fostering a deeper sense of connection and inclusion.

Considerations

- 1 **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led design:** engage Elders, older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their families, communities and cultural knowledge holders to co-design sensory spaces, using meaningful elements, such as cultural artifacts, household items or locally significant objects. Encourage participation in decorating to reflect shared values and experiences.
- 2 **Diverse sensory experiences:** ensure sensory experiences include audio, visual, tactile and scent components at an appropriate level of immersion, avoiding overwhelming stimuli. Carefully plan sensory stimulation activities to benefit people living with dementia.
- 3 **Adaptable lighting:** use adjustable lighting and audio-visual displays to create adaptable environments for various needs.
- 4 **Practical placement:** design spaces with proximity to relevant residential areas to encourage effective and frequent use.

Related National Aged Care
Design Principles and Guidelines

2.1 Personalised Home

Scenarios

Uncle Living with dementia, I find solace in the sensory room, where sitting in a saddle reminds me of my days on Country as a proud stockman. The accompanying audio-visual was produced by our mob. These meaningful experiences bring me comfort and help ground me, especially when I feel confused or restless. By engaging with these familiar sensory elements, I maintain a strong sense of who I am, supporting my emotional wellbeing and my connection to myself throughout my dementia journey.

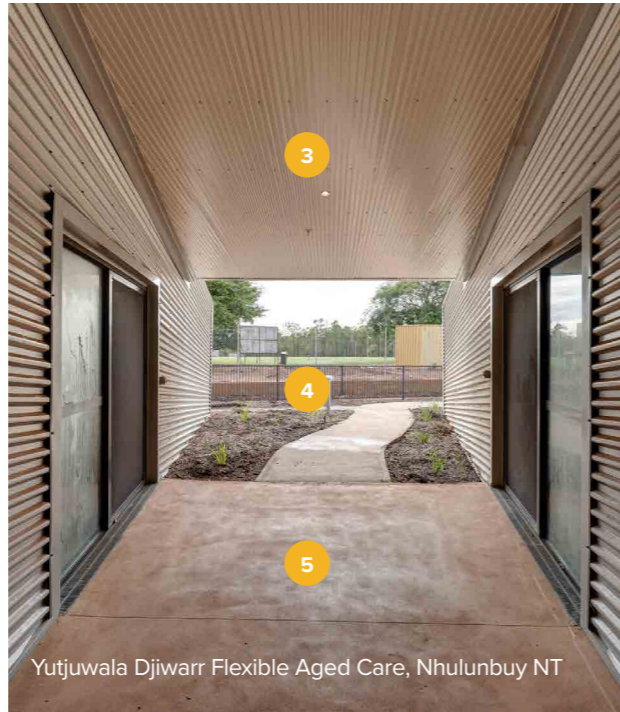
Aunty I spent decades weaving intricate baskets and sharing stories under the shade of a eucalyptus tree. I now find peace in the sensory room, where the scent of eucalyptus oil and a basket I once crafted surround me. These familiar elements bring back the gentle rhythm of my weaving and the warmth of community gatherings, grounding me in moments of joy and serenity amidst life's transitions. Through these meaningful sensory experiences, I maintain a strong sense of identity and emotional wellbeing, and I feel connected to myself and my culture.

- 5 **Familiar materials and objects:** incorporate familiar props, such as furnishings or objects tied to the residents' past, like Uncle's stockman saddle.
- 6 **Resident led design:** allow residents to personalise their sensory experiences, supporting diverse preferences and sensitivities.
- 7 **Community partnerships:** invite community and family members to contribute ideas, objects and multimedia presentations that resonate with residents' cultural and personal histories.
- 8 **Trauma-aware environments:** design spaces that support healing, with layouts and experiences sensitive to those living with trauma.

Built examples and concepts

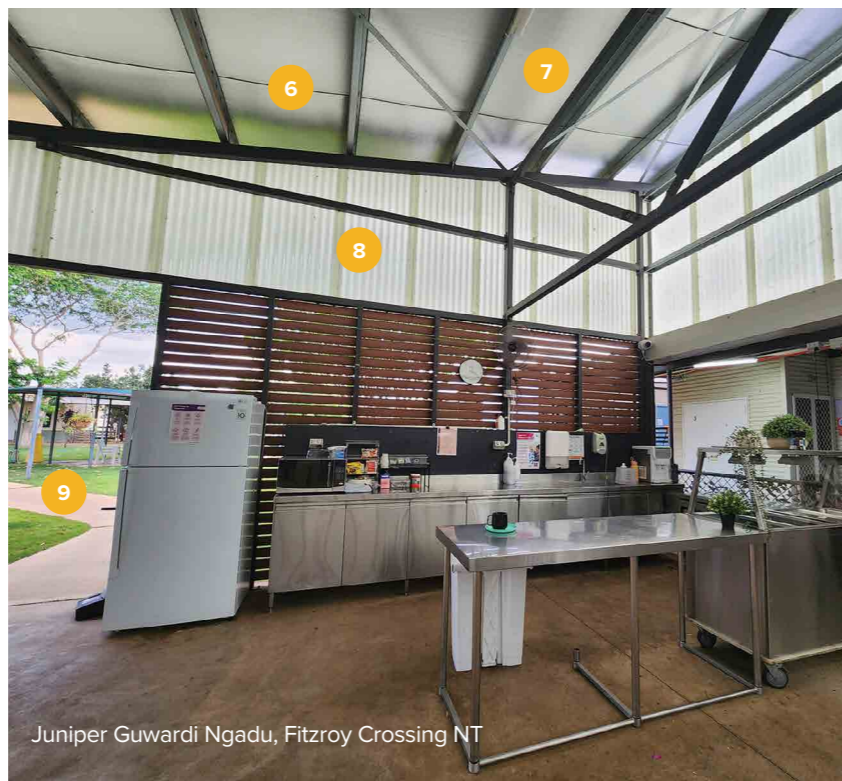


Yutjuwala Djiwarr Flexible Aged Care, Nhulunbuy NT

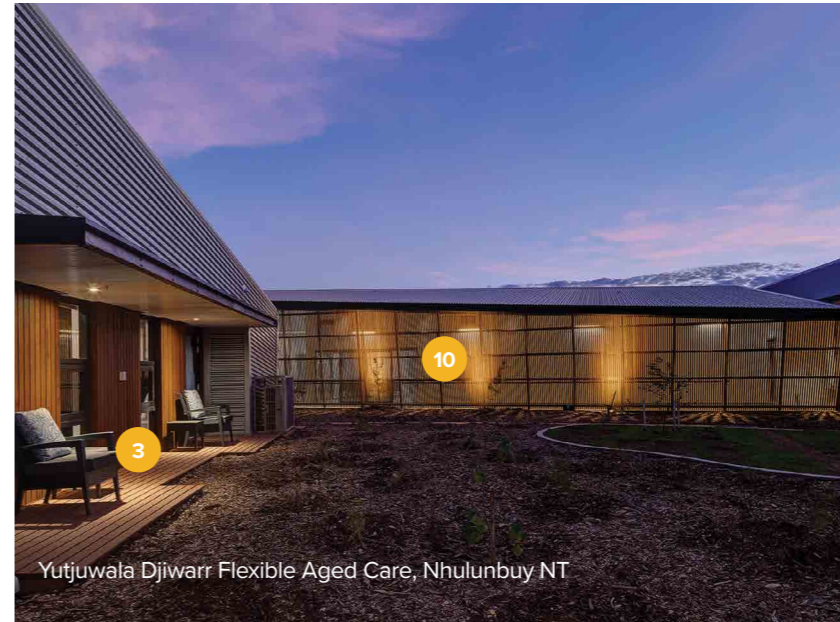


Yutjuwala Djiwarr Flexible Aged Care, Nhulunbuy NT

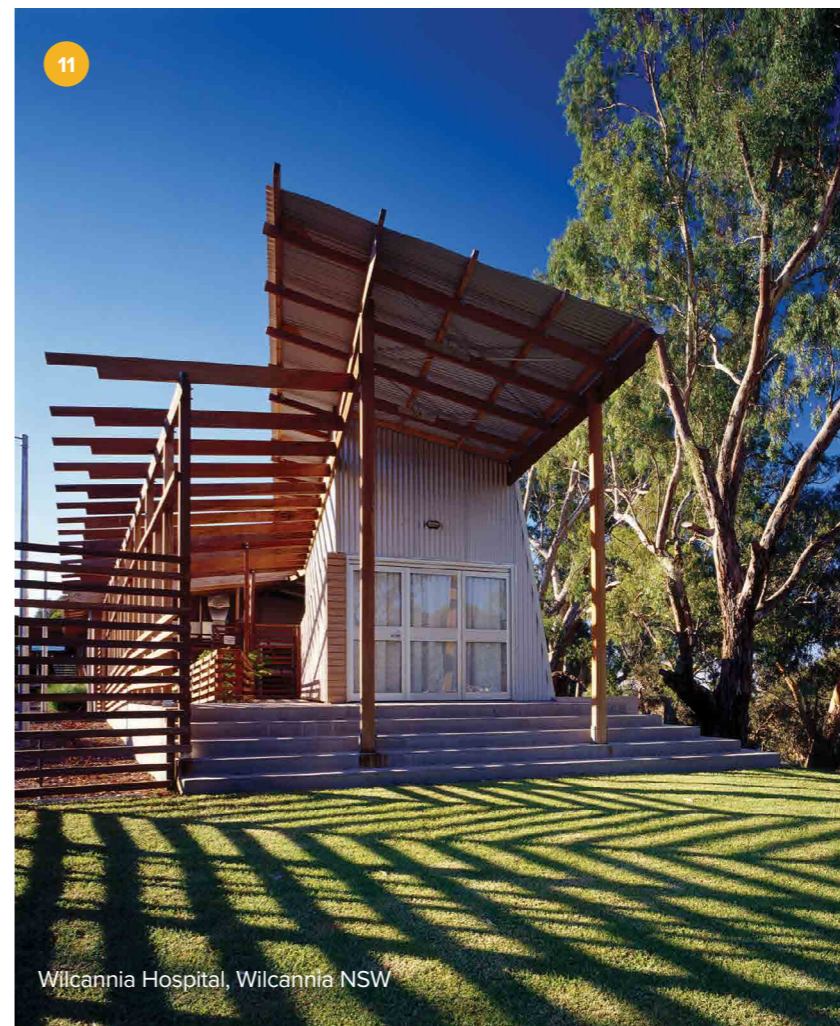
- 1 Locally milled timber cladding.
- 2 Art screen utilising local school children's art.
- 3 Deep verandah for sleeping in all weather.
- 4 Possible insect screening.
- 5 Durable slip resistant flooring.
- 6 External covered spaces.
- 7 Insulated roofing.
- 8 Natural light.
- 9 Connection to the garden area.



Juniper Guwardi Ngadu, Fitzroy Crossing NT



Yutjuwala Djiwarr Flexible Aged Care, Nhulunbuy NT



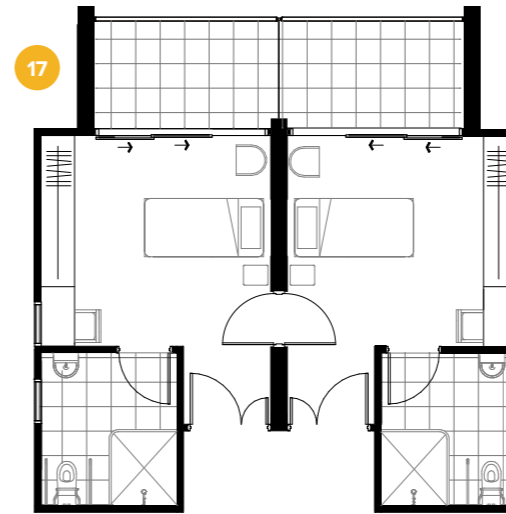
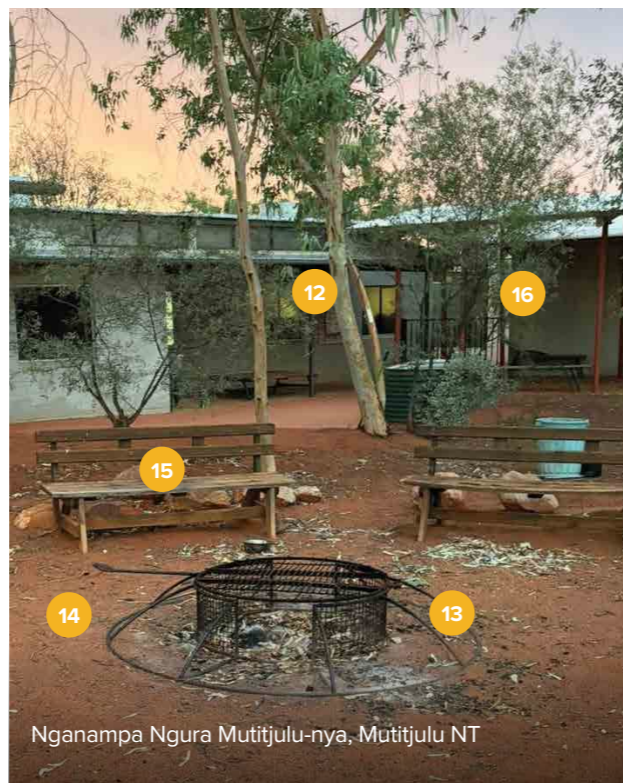
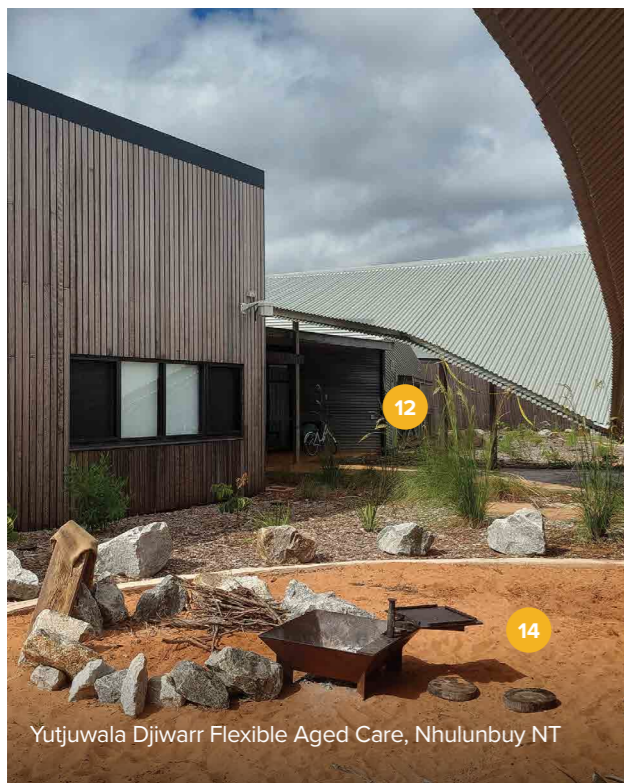
Wilcannia Hospital, Wilcannia NSW

- 10 Locally milled timber screening using natural materials that create a warmer and more welcoming environment, with the building envelope forming the security line.
- 11 Design that supports local protocols, provides meaningful connection to Country and balances private settings and communal spaces.

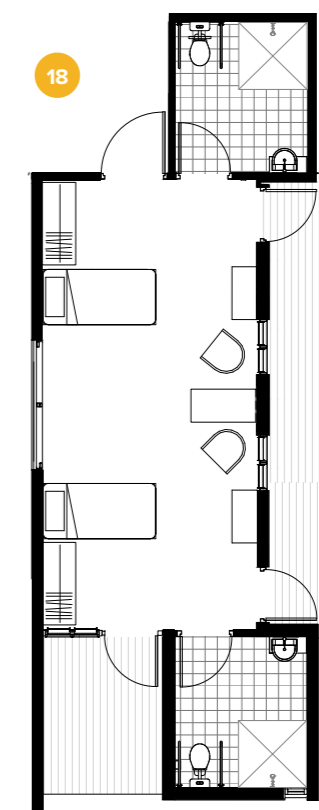
Built examples and concepts



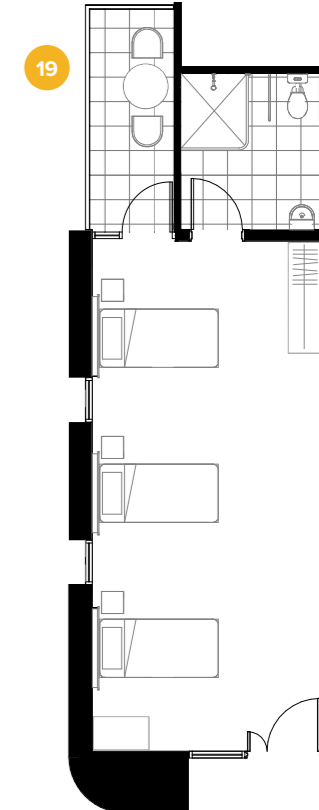
- 12 Fire pit easily visible for discreet supervision.
- 13 Fire pit safety screens.
- 14 Safe fire pit location.
- 15 Fire pit seating options.
- 16 Informal natural setting.



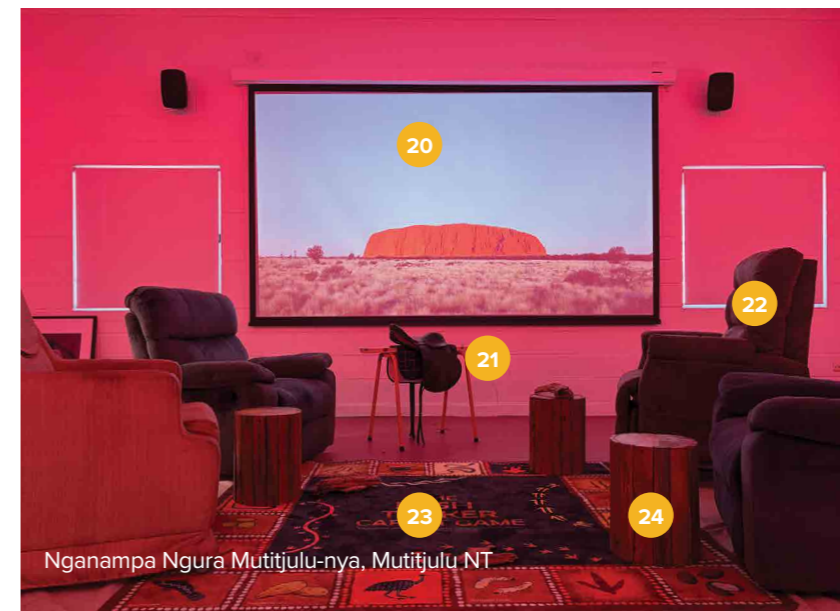
Wami Kata Old Folks Home, Port Augusta WA



Yutjuwala Djiwarr Aged Care, Nhulunbuy NT

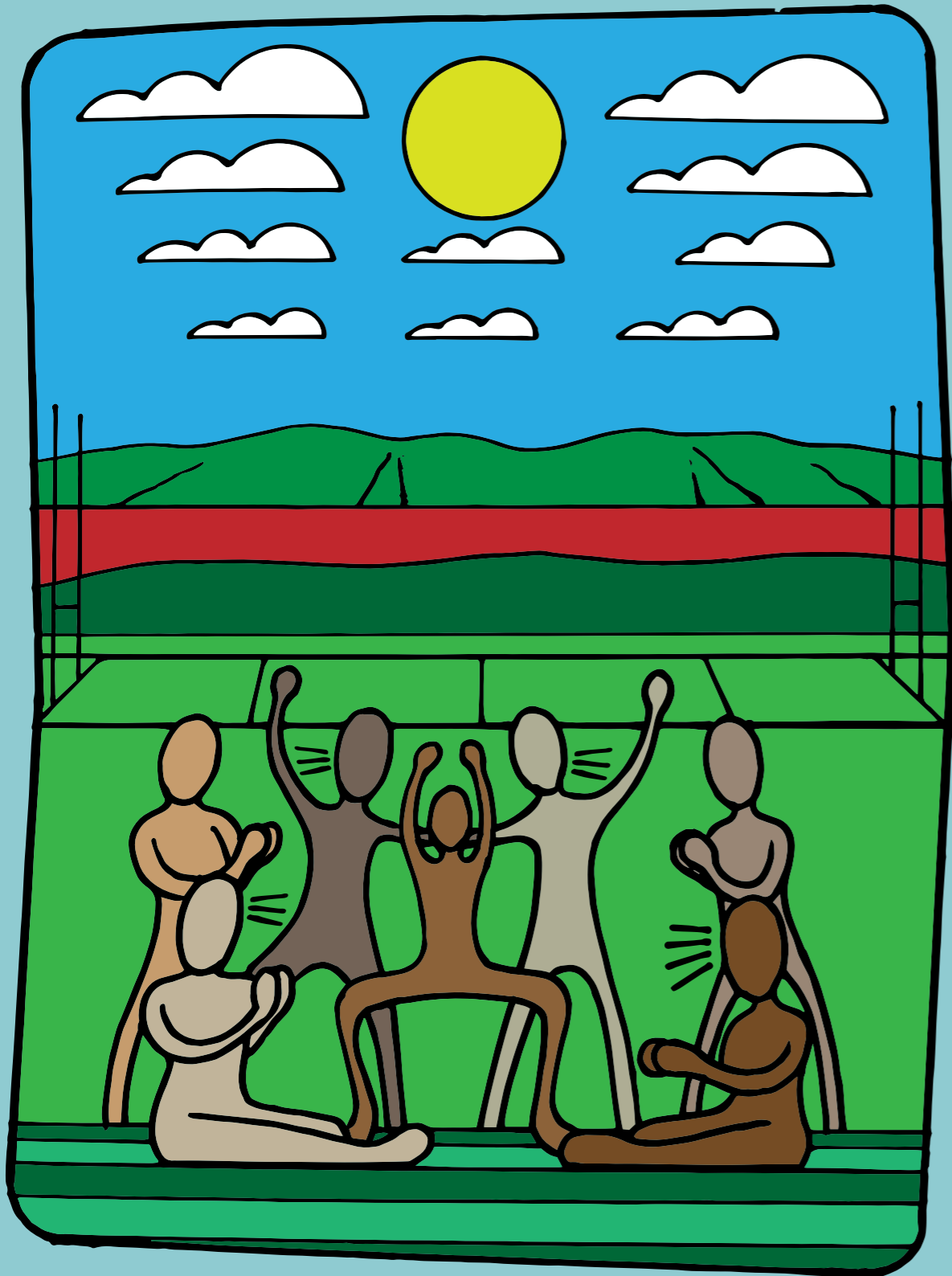


Kaltukatjara Docker River Aged Care, Kaltukatjara



- 17 Example layout – single bedroom layout.
- 18 Example layout – twin bedroom layout.
- 19 Example layout – triple bedroom layout.
- 20 Audio visual display produced by the community.
- 21 Cultural items such as a saddle for former Jackeroos and woven baskets.
- 22 Comfortable seating.
- 23 Seating on the floor.
- 24 Natural furniture.

Community



Design Principle 3

Objective

To design aged care home environments that offer two-way connections between residents and community, cultivating a place of living culture.

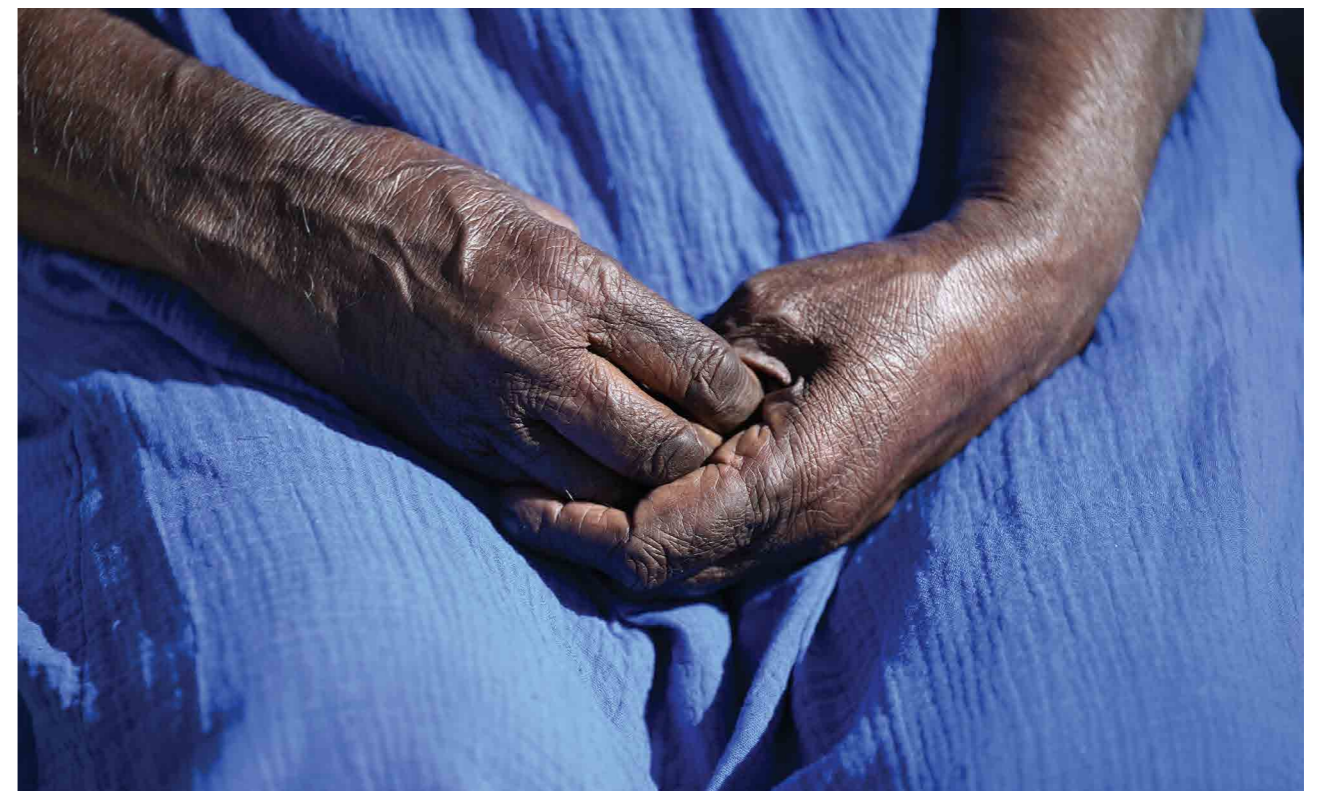
What is community?

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, knowing and being part of particular Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities is an important part of identity.

As well as being important to identity, communities can be sources of support and resilience, and this support can enhance and promote an individual's SEWB [social and emotional wellbeing]...

Communities that are empowered and cohesive are best able to support the SEWB [social and emotional wellbeing] of individuals and families. Self-determination, community control, cultural revitalisation and community healing have been identified as crucial strategies for empowering and strengthening communities.

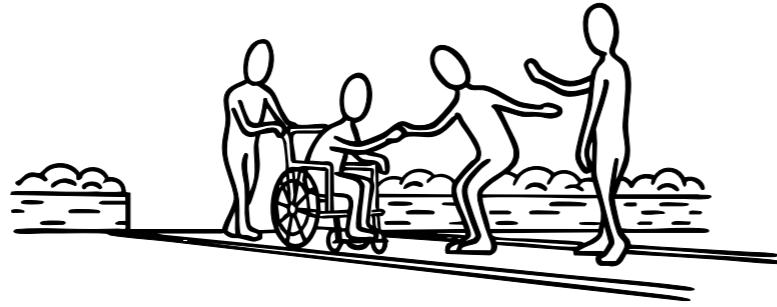
Source: Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, Family, kinship and community¹⁵



Guideline 3.1

Community Integration

Design spaces that support a positive connection between residents and their community.



Opportunity

Aged care homes can have an institutional stigma for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is important to overcome this stigma and for residents to benefit from environments that encourage connection and partnership with community. It is important Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in aged care retain their vital roles within their families, communities and cultural practices. This supports emotional and psychological wellbeing by reducing feelings of isolation and fears around re-institutionalisation.

The architecture and design elements of aged care homes should reflect integration into the community, promoting positive perception and accessibility. This includes thoughtful use of public architecture elements, signage and materials to create a welcoming atmosphere.

Considerations

- ① **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led:** engage older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their families, communities and cultural knowledge holders to understand and reflect resident needs and preferences.
- ② **Inviting design:** use welcoming architecture, clear signage and culturally appropriate materials that enhance community integration.
- ③ **Inclusive and accessible design:** create seamless and intuitive pedestrian and vehicle access for residents, families and visitors.

Related National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines

- 2.5 Room Clusters
- 4.1 Neighbourhood Access
- 4.2 Community Hub
- 4.3 Garden Destinations

Scenarios

Aunty I love knowing what's happening in the community. Most days you'll find me out on the front verandah with the other residents, watching people come and go, seeing the young ones run around and catching bits of local news as the mob stop for a yarn.

Sitting there helps me feel connected and part of the community, still playing my role as an Aunty and keeping an eye on everything. Even if I'm not out walking around like I used to, being able to see and hear my community every day helps me feel grounded, valued and close to my people.

Community member When I visit the aged care home or see it from the street, I feel proud of what our community has created. It doesn't feel like an institution – it feels like part of us. The design makes it easy to drop in, wave to the Elders or stop for a quick yarn at the fence or verandah. I often see Uncle walking to the shop or catching the local bus, and every time he comes back he carries himself with confidence, knowing he still has his independence and place in community life.

For me, this home isn't separate from our town – it's woven into it. The Elders aren't hidden away; they're still here with us, contributing, watched over and respected.

- ④ **Community interaction:** design spaces that give residents the choice to engage with the community or observe privately. Use flexible areas like balconies, lounges and courtyards to support both interaction and quiet reflection, adapting to evolving preferences and needs.
- ⑤ **Trauma-aware environments:** design with sensitivity to trauma. Minimise potential triggers, such as sounds, particularly near sleeping areas or shared spaces, to ensure residents feel safe and comfortable. Ensure spaces feel safe and predictable for staff and visitors that may have experienced intergenerational trauma.

Guideline 3.2

Community Spaces

Ensure inviting, fit-for-purpose communal spaces for use by both residents and the community.



Opportunity

Building, renovating or refurbishing an aged care home offers an opportunity to create inviting and inclusive community spaces. An effective way to increase community interaction and reduce stigma for residents is to provide spaces useful to both residents and community members. Bringing them together enriches the lives of both groups. These spaces should encourage positive relationships between residents, families and visitors through thoughtful architecture and planning.

Considerations

- ① **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led design:** engage Elders, older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their families, communities and cultural knowledge holders to understand and reflect resident needs and preferences.
- ② **Family spaces:** provide dedicated spaces for families to celebrate and gather privately without disturbing other residents.
- ③ **Areas for performance:** design performance areas to host events by residents, community groups and visiting organisations, creating a lively atmosphere.
- ④ **Safety protocols:** assess the feasibility to safely accommodate smoking ceremonies, ensuring compliance with the National Construction Code, Australian Standards and any other relevant codes/standards.
- ⑤ **Integrated landscape:** incorporate landscaped areas that support diverse activities and suit different preferences.
- ⑥ **Intergenerational visits:** create integrated play areas for children, fostering intergenerational bonds during family visits. Include access to baby change facilities.

Related National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines

- 1.7 Supportive Seating
- 3.2 Community Spaces
- 3.4 Garden Destinations
- 4.1 Neighbourhood Access
- 4.2 Community Hub

Scenarios

Aunty I feel more comfortable coming into the main part of the home when the spaces around me are calm and welcoming. I love sitting in the sun, hearing kids play or watching a small performance. When there is space for my family to gather, or places where community can visit, I feel part of things again. I don't always have the words these days, but when a space feels right – peaceful, familiar, connected to Country – I'm more likely to join in. These thoughtful community areas make it easier for me to stay involved, enjoy company and feel like I still belong.

Son I want to help Mum stay connected to the things she enjoys, and the right community spaces make that so much easier. We can choose a quiet family room when she needs calm or head to the gardens where she relaxes in the sun. Her grandkids love the dedicated play areas, making everyone feel welcome and I see the joy that brings her. Sometimes we share a meal outdoors or listen to music together. Clear pathways and comfortable seating give me confidence to take her out, knowing there are many gentle options that suit her needs. These warm, inclusive spaces help Mum stay engaged and help me and my family feel welcome here.

- ⑦ **Open gatherings:** provide a place for a community gathering or religious service outside the care home restricted areas.
- ⑧ **Trauma-aware environments:** create safety and comfort by addressing potential triggers like excessive noise or crowded spaces. Consider sound control near sleeping areas.
- ⑨ **Spaces for visitors:** design spaces that support family presence with dedicated rooms or ensuring resident bedrooms are spacious enough to comfortably accommodate overnight stays with a loved one.
- ⑩ **Multi-use spaces:** design community spaces to serve multiple purposes, such as areas for family celebrations, performance venues and landscapes that support diverse activities.

Guideline 3.3 Security

Establish robust, trauma-aware and healing informed security measures ensuring residents and staff feel protected and valued.



Opportunity

Different aged care home locations have distinct risk profiles. Each location should be evaluated based on the local context.

Security for aged care homes in remote areas requires special attention due to unique geographic and social factors. They often face limited access to emergency services, healthcare support and reliable infrastructure, making them vulnerable to safety and security risks. Security measures must address both physical and cultural safety, including protection from exploitation and abuse.

While appropriate security is vital, for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have experienced trauma in institutional settings, certain security practices can trigger distress and feelings of confinement. It is critical that the process and outcome of designing security measures is trauma-aware and healing informed.

Appropriate security measures contribute significantly to the safety and holistic wellbeing of residents and staff. They also make aged care homes approachable and trusted hubs for community connection.

Related National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines

- 1.5 Simple Circulation
- 3.1 Dedicated Outdoors
- 4.1 Neighbourhood Access

Considerations

- 1 **Location-based risks:** evaluate the location of each aged care home and its risk profile to address unique challenges such as local hazards, access to emergency services and infrastructure reliability.
- 2 **Robust physical security:** where required, install continuous and well-maintained fences that are at least 1.8m high and designed to prevent climbing both in and out.
- 3 **Gate security:** where required, use lockable gates and provide controlled entry and exit systems that remain accessible to residents and staff.
- 4 **Climbing hazards:** avoid fence designs with openings or horizontal pieces that could be used as footholds. Ensure plants near fences are not climbable.
- 5 **Community integration:** design welcoming and accessible facades of aged care homes, avoiding fencing in front of building entrances.

- 6 **Double fencing:** where required, use double fencing with smaller human-scale fencing internally separated from high-security fencing by landscaping.
- 7 **Safe landscaping:** design landscaping to prevent climbing and soften the visual impact of fencing.
- 8 **Visual impact:** integrate fences with the landscape or screen with vegetation to reduce their visual impact.
- 9 **Trauma-aware environments:** ensure security design is trauma-aware and healing informed as certain security practices can trigger distress and feelings of confinement for people who have experienced trauma in institutional settings.

Scenarios

Aunty Those running the home have been talking with us residents, the staff and people from around the community to understand what makes everyone feel safe. They listened to our stories and past experiences, and took seriously what we said about safety, for both us living here and staff working here.

For our families, knowing we're protected is important. The aged care home has put in strong security fencing, but in a way that still respects Country and avoids triggering past traumas. They've blended the fences into the gardens and added artwork, so it doesn't feel harsh or shut in. It means we can live here feeling safe, while still having a place that looks and feels like our own.

Uncle I like to walk down to the local shop and wander around the neighbourhood, just taking in the day. Having my own swipe card means I can come and go when I want, and that freedom is important to me. But there are times of the year, and especially at night, when I'm glad for the safety this aged care home gives me. I know I can rest easy here. Even if I drift off to sleep outside in the cool air, I feel protected. It's a place where I can still live my way, with my independence, but also with the security I need.

Built examples and concepts



Rumbalara Elders Facility, Shepparton VIC

- 1 Culturally appropriate natural materials to provide a softer finish.
- 2 Entries designed to feel welcoming and not imposing.
- 3 Changes in form and setbacks to reduce visual bulk.
- 4 Natural light.
- 5 Integration with landscape areas.
- 6 Multipurpose communal areas that are divisible.
- 7 Natural materials.
- 8 Consider fireplaces where appropriate.



Rumbalara Elders Facility, Shepparton VIC

- 9 Locally milled timber screening using natural materials that create a warmer and more welcoming environment, with the building envelope forming the security line.



Yutiwala Djiwarr Flexible Aged Care, Nhulunbuy NT

Glossary

This glossary only covers terms with a general meaning, which are given a specific meaning in this document. Terms are listed in order of frequency, rather than alphabetically.

Spatial terms

Aged care home: an organisation, together with its facility, which is a permanent home for older people, once they cannot be cared for at home.

Home: a place where someone feels they belong and which in some sense belongs to them, a place where they have agency and a sense that all is well.

Cultural safety: as defined by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council, provided under Background and development (see page 3).

Trauma-aware design: an approach to creating physical environments that integrates a trauma-aware and healing informed perspective to promote safety, wellbeing and healing.

People terms

Resident: a person living in an aged care home.

Visitor or family member: people from outside the aged care home who come to visit a resident.

Staff: the people who work at the aged care home.

Photo Credits

Acknowledgement of Country

Brett Boardman

Page 13

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Pages 22–23

Juniper Guwardi Ngadu, Adam Roebuck

Yaandina Community Services

Juniper Guwardi Ngadu, David Kaunitz

Juniper Guwardi Ngadu, David Kaunitz

Yutjuwala Djiwarr Flexible Aged Care, Brett Boardman

Page 25

Wayne Quilliam

Pages 42–45

Yutjuwala Djiwarr Flexible Aged Care, Brett Boardman

Yutjuwala Djiwarr Flexible Aged Care, Brett Boardman

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Wilcannia Hospital, Brett Boardman

Ngarluma Elders Village, Bruno Alahakone, BA Architects

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Nganampa Ngura Mutitjulu-nya, Anastasia Uricher

Wami Kata Old Folks Home, Kaunitz Yeung Architecture

Yutjuwala Djiwarr Aged Care, Kaunitz Yeung Architecture

Kaltukatjara Docker River Aged Care, Kaunitz Yeung Architecture

Nganampa Ngura Mutitjulu-nya, Anastasia Uricher

Page 47

Wayne Quilliam

Pages 54–55

Rumbalara Elders Facility, Baldasso Cortese

Rumbalara Elders Facility, Baldasso Cortese

Yutjuwala Djiwarr Flexible Aged Care, Brett Boardman

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Contributors

This appendix lists the wide range of groups and organisations who have generously contributed their time, insights and experience to the development of this resource.

Governance groups, peak bodies and government agencies

- Department of Health, Disability and Ageing
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing and Aged Care Council
- First Nations Aged Care Governance Group, Department of Health, Disability and Ageing
- Aged Care Council of Elders, Department of Health, Disability and Ageing
- National Aged Care Advisory Council, Department of Health, Disability and Ageing
- Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission
- Dementia Australia

Stolen Generations organisations

- The Healing Foundation and its Stolen Generations Reference Group
- Kinchela Boys Home Aboriginal Corporation
- Central Australian Aboriginal Congress
- Coota Girls Aboriginal Corporation
- Kimberly Stolen Generations Aboriginal Corporation
- WA Stolen Generations Aboriginal Corporation

Aged care home providers

- Aboriginal Community Elders Services
- Australian Regional and Remote Community Services
- Gilgandra Lifestyles
- Hope Vale Aged Care Hostel
- Juniper – A Uniting Church Company
- Lake Tyers Health and Children Services
- Mutkin Residential and Community Aged Care
- Nareeba Moopi Moopi Pa Residential Aged Care
- Pinangba – Uniting Care
- Purple House
- Residency by Dillons Narragin
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative
- Thamurrurr Development Corporation
- Umoona Aged Care Aboriginal Corporation
- Wami Kata Old Folks Home
- Winnam Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation
- Yaandina Community Services
- Yura Yungi Medical Service Aboriginal Corporation

