Quality and Compliance in Remote Australia – a Remote Accord Issues Paper

The Aged Care Workforce Remote Accord was formed based on the belief that every community—including those in remote and very remote areas of Australia—has an equal right to accessible, high quality aged care services. This issues paper discusses the importance of a culturally and contextually specific approach to quality and compliance in remote Australia, and discusses the need for guidelines to support assessors and service providers.

Key Recommendations:

- Implement context-specific assessments to ensure the Standards are being appropriately interpreted in remote settings
- Develop a Guide for remote service providers and regulators, outlining key tasks and strategies service providers may adopt, and providing examples of the kinds of evidence services may use to demonstrate their compliance
- In thin markets such as those in remote and very remote areas, the focus of regulation needs to be on organisational development, capability building and service improvement rather than competition, with support provided where standards aren’t being met

Standards need to meet community priorities

In acknowledging the fundamental principle that residents in remote and very remote service settings deserve the same level of care and attention as their metropolitan counterparts, we deeply appreciate the significance of regulatory requirements that strive to uphold these essential standards.

The current Aged Care Standards, though well-intentioned, have predominantly been developed with a focus on the dynamics of competitive metropolitan facilities. For instance, the standards emphasise access to a wide range of medical services, which may be readily available in urban settings, but prove to be a challenge in remote areas due to limited infrastructure and resources. Moreover, while the Standards make reference to the importance of honouring cultural values, this can be confusing and contradictory when cultural practices, community involvement, and maintaining connections to Country are difficult to prioritise from a compliance, safety, and funding perspective. For example, remote service provision often includes a range of activities and outdoor
spaces that may not ordinarily fit within the expectations of the standards, such as outdoor fire pits and the cooking of traditional foods over fire.

By not accommodating these unique aspects of remote Australian life and culture, the Aged Care Standards inadvertently contribute to a lack of culturally sensitive and appropriate care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders in remote Australia.

The administrative burden is high in remote Australia

The application of the Standards to remote and very remote service providers has presented significant challenges, contributing to an administrative burden that threatens the sustainability of aged care services in these regions. Remote service providers face the same administrative demands as their metropolitan counterparts, despite having fewer resources at their disposal. Without addressing these disparities, the sustainability of aged care in remote areas is at risk, potentially leading to reduced access and compromised quality of care for older people in these communities.

Anecdotally, the inflexible application of the Standards is a high contributing factor in staff distress and burnout. Staff in remote areas of Australia are often motivated by altruistic and community-oriented morals and goals, and can be heavily discouraged by an inflexible application of the Standards which doesn’t recognise the cultural and contextual sensitivity of their work.

Further, the administrative burden imposed on remote aged care providers to adhere to the Aged Care Standards can inadvertently discourage the engagement of local workforces, who may face challenges related to literacy, numeracy, and access to formal training. The complex paperwork, reporting requirements, employee screening requirements, and documentation procedures demanded by the Standards disproportionately affects local workers who are more likely to have limited formal education or experience difficulties with written communication. This situation not only hinders their ability to actively contribute but also undermines the value of their invaluable cultural knowledge and community connections. Additionally, the reliance on formal training programs can pose difficulties for Indigenous workers who might encounter geographical barriers and limited access to educational resources. Further, the inadvertent preference of assessors towards electronic care and medication management systems may be beyond the reach or affordability for many smaller remote services. As a result, the administrative demands of the Standards might unintentionally exclude the very individuals who possess a deep understanding of cultural needs and could provide meaningful support to Indigenous Elders in remote areas.

In thin markets, such as those prevalent in remote and very remote areas, the regulatory focus needs to shift from competition to organisational development, capability building and service
improvement. While competition can drive quality in metropolitan settings, remote areas require a different approach. Instead of punitive measures for services who may be struggling, there should be a proactive effort to provide support and guidance to service providers who are striving to meet the standards in a unique service context. This support-oriented regulatory approach acknowledges the unique challenges faced by remote service providers and works towards building their capacity to provide culturally appropriate and sustainable aged care.

**Context-based assessments benefit everybody**

The inherent differences in context, resources, and governance constraints that remote services face demand a more tailored and context-specific approach to assessment. Currently, there is little room for deviation from the standardised interpretation and administration of the Aged Care Standards, even when the cultural and community contexts of remote settings necessitate it.

Remote and very remote service providers are dedicated to meeting the Aged Care Standards, often grappling with limited resources and logistical challenges. However, applying these standards in such distinct settings requires a nuanced understanding of the unique circumstances these communities face and the different ways in which the criteria for each standard can be met.

To address this issue, the development of a comprehensive guide tailored specifically for remote service providers and regulators is essential. This guide should outline key tasks and strategies that remote service providers can adopt to meet the Aged Care Standards effectively within their service context. The guide should provide concrete examples of the kinds of evidence these services can use to demonstrate their compliance. The guide could also outline a more nuanced approach to the audit process; for example, interviews with service users who are Indigenous needs to occur with the support of trusted people, and recommending assessors spend time working in remote contexts to better understand them before being assigned as an assessing team. In remote Australia there are also instances where staff members may be relatives of clients, which creates tension within the audit process; a guide would serve as a crucial resource in navigating the challenges of delivering quality aged care within remote and very remote settings. The Remote Accord recommends the development of such a guide as a matter of priority.